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CHAPTER 3

Fixed-site cinemas and the first film renters

María A. Vélez-Serna

In the space of a few years after 1907 the film trade in the UK and in Scotland was transformed completely. By this point, travelling exhibitors had reached all corners of the country with their bioscope projectors, showing films in fairgrounds, halls and private houses. The most successful amongst these had started to consolidate their trade by leasing sites for longer periods, but these were still temporary shows, based on an artisanal business model. By the start of the First World War, moving picture exhibition had turned into an industry that employed thousands of people in over four hundred venues. The growth was gradual, but, once the first cinemas proved their viability the expansion accelerated. This period of rapid change has been thought of as ‘second birth’ or ‘distinguishing birth’, as the moment in which cinema emerged as a distinct cultural form rather than as a component within the mixed programme in music hall, fairground or parlour entertainment.¹ The establishment of moving pictures as a fixed-site, permanent show transformed their relationship with audiences, rewarded new styles of showmanship and required a complete overhaul of the distribution system. In Scotland, this process was fast-paced but organic, retaining a connection to earlier practices. At the same time, it required the development of new structures and, in particular, the emergence of a regional film distribution sector.

As explained in Chapter 2, the first permanent cinemas opened in halls that had been in use by travelling showmen for seasonal shows, and many fairground entertainers made the transition to permanent cinema owners. Across the UK, Vanessa Toulmin estimates that over ten per cent of fairground cinema operators ended up opening permanent cinemas.² Most of the better-known Scottish fairground exhibitors did so, sometimes with remarkable success. Amongst the other types of film exhibitors the transition had already started with the growing duration of seasonal shows. By 1911 William Walker had opened the Coliseum cinema in Aberdeen, Peter Feathers was running the Stobswell in Dundee and Robert Calder

was about to take a job managing a Fraserburgh venue. In the space of six years up to the start of the First World War, however, permanent cinema venues opened at an average rate of almost two a week across Scotland. The travelling exhibitors' pioneering role was thus quickly superseded by a new wave of cinema entrepreneurs coming into the business from a variety of backgrounds, as Trevor Griffiths explains in Chapter 5 below.

Owing to the unstable nature of an emerging business and the abundance of short-lived venues, the numbers we have for this expansion are not precise. In a widely cited article, published just before the outbreak of war, Frank W. Ogden Smith estimated that Britain had seven thousand film theatres, with a combined capital of around £13 million.³ However, only about half as many venues are listed in the 1915 edition of the *Bioscope Annual*, including four hundred in Scotland, while the *Kinematograph Year Book* offers 553 Scottish venues for the same year, including many that only showed films at most once a week. So any number between four and five hundred can be taken as a reference point, while remembering that it is not comprehensive. In his article about London 'penny gaffs', Jon Burrows has shown how the licensing and trade figures underestimated or deliberately played down the number of these humble shop-front venues in the capital, leading to the historiographical myth that Britain somehow skipped the nickelodeon phase.⁴ But even if penny cinemas were not a feature in Scotland, the nickelodeon or shop-front show was not the only precedent or a necessary step towards fixed-site cinemas – particularly not outside the main cities.

The expansion of permanent film exhibition in Scotland must be understood in the context of a very uneven geographical distribution of the population, which was concentrated along the central belt (on the axis connecting Glasgow and Edinburgh), the West coast south of the river Clyde, and the East coast from Fife to Inverness. As Chapter 4 will show, an important feature of Scottish demographics was the abundance of smaller towns, with settlements of two to ten thousand people accounting for twenty-one per cent of the population in 1911. The four main cities of Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh and Aberdeen were home to twenty-seven per cent of Scots, making Scotland more urban than the United States, but less than England. The tenfold growth of Glasgow between 1801 and 1901 had transformed it into an industrial metropolis, and a likely setting for an enthusiasm for cinema that became a common reference in the city's lore.

The rapid expansion of permanent, dedicated places of film exhibition in the UK around 1910–11 has been called the 'cinema boom', but this risks making it sound more sudden than it was. In the Scottish cities,

permanent exhibition developed quickly but organically, as a change in the patterns of use of existing places of entertainment, before it moved into new and purpose-built spaces. As discussed in Chapter 2, the first stage of the process was simply a slower itinerancy, as travelling companies extended their leases of large public halls that had proved successful. In Edinburgh, the Modern Marvel company held increasingly long engagements at the Queen's Hall, as had the B.B. Pictures at Glasgow's Wellington Palace. In several venues throughout the country, the winter season of 1907–8 did not draw to a close, and regular cinema shows ran through the year for the first time. By the end of the summer, there were five film-only shows operating in Glasgow, three in public halls and two in music halls.⁵ Only four years later, Glasgow had more than seventy dedicated cinema venues, including the first purpose-built cinema which opened in 1910. The expansion of cinema exhibition was fast, but it was also tentative and incremental. Cautious businesspeople committed to full-time film shows only once they were certain that public demand would support them. This situation is at a remove from the high-risk, 'get-rich-quick' image that emerged later in relation to cinema investment.

In an influential article, Nicholas Hiley's analysis of company registrations in the UK between 1909 and 1914 arrived at the conclusion that the building of cinemas during those years was fuelled by speculative capital rather than by increased demand.⁶ This narrative has been contested by Jon Burrows and Richard Brown, who argue that the over-capitalised, risky ventures described by Hiley were exceptional. Instead, they show that the cinema boom was driven by 'small-time businesspersons' who were relatively risk-averse.⁷ Board of Trade records show a large number of small private companies or unincorporated partnerships which conducted the bulk of the trade, especially outside major cities. This description seems to fit the Scottish situation better, according to the annual company registration figures published in *The Scotsman*. In Scotland, the number of joint-stock companies registered during a year with the purpose of either building or 'carrying on' a permanent film show peaked in 1913 at fifty-two, and the median capital of these private companies was around £3,000, which was roughly the cost of erecting a purpose-built cinema. Trevor Griffiths's more systematic analysis of shareholders' lists for forty-six cinema companies established in Scotland from 1909 to 1914 reveals that most investors and board members were not previously connected with the entertainment business. The lists were, according to Griffiths, 'dominated by a professional and commercial middle class attuned to the emergence of new investment opportunities'.⁸ In an economy subject to

marked cyclical fluctuations in activity, with a depressed housing market, investment in cinema ventures was a sound option. The piecemeal nature of the move to purpose-built venues is evidence of a cautious approach which at first tried to minimise sunk costs, that is, costs that cannot be recovered, by adapting existing venues, drawing on the proven success of temporary exhibition in the same spaces, and maintaining facilities for live entertainment – stages and dressing rooms – in case cinema proved to be a passing fad. While there was investment in new buildings, many companies were constituted to lease or take over existing venues such as skating rinks and public halls, most often places where a show was already being run. In fact, the largest of the early Scottish companies, the B.B. Pictures Ltd, registered in 1910, produced a brochure with photographs of the halls it controlled, stating:

It will be seen that the policy of the management has been to secure the use of existing halls – test them, if successful, retain them, if not, abandon them.

This policy is intended to continue, as it is believed to be more prudent than to erect buildings, which, if unsuccessful, might become a permanent loss of revenue.⁹

The first hall taken over by the B.B. Pictures' director, James Joseph Bennell, had been the Wellington Palace in Glasgow. This was a music hall dating from 1874, located on a side street in the Gorbals, a densely populated working-class area just south of the city centre. The large hall, seating two thousand, was across from a biscuit factory and not far from two schools and had lately been used by the Good Templars, a temperance organisation that put on Saturday concerts as an alternative to the pub. In the East End of the city, George Green, who managed the Vinegarhill fairground site, had been showing films in another old music hall, the Whitevale Theatre. Just down the road, George Urie Scott refurbished the Annfield Halls, located in the back court behind a row of shops. Not too far from there, the Bridgeton Town Hall, with accommodation for a thousand patrons, had been taken over by Margaret and George Laird and renamed the Star Palace. All these venues charged similarly low prices – generally 2d for adults, 1d for children and in some cases 4d for better seats. However, they were not akin to New York nickelodeons; not only were they larger venues but they were also running two longer shows a night rather than a continuous rotation of a short programme, as, unlike the nickelodeons, they depended less on audience turnover than on volume. Furthermore, these were places with a history in the neighbourhood, either as entertainment or civic venues, where election speeches were given and temperance meetings were held. Their reconfiguration as

permanent sites of moving picture entertainment could sustain some of these associations.

As cinema took over existing venues like drill halls and public halls, it displaced the multiple functions of a community venue to make way for a commercial but permanent entertainment offer, or replaced another commercial entertainment use such as a skating rink or a music hall. The displacement effect was stronger in the East End than in other parts of the city, suggesting that the expansion of cinema did not always necessarily bring a widening of local entertainment options for working-class neighbourhoods. It is also coherent with observations made by J.A. Lindstrom in Chicago, who argued that nickelodeons were located not simply in immigrant or working-class neighbourhoods but especially in 'zones in transition', either areas with mixed land use, where immigrant housing was combined with commercial and industrial use, or newly developed areas where 'satellite loops' (local retail centres) were appearing.¹⁰ In Glasgow, this seems to be the case in Maryhill, in the north of the city, and in Cathcart in the south, for instance: picture theatres appeared in seemingly more 'well-heeled' districts as their working-class audiences moved up the social ladder.

In contrast with the situation in other parts of Britain, in Scotland purpose-built cinemas were only a fraction of exhibition venues before the war. It was unusual for the first cinema in a medium-sized town to be purpose-built. The infrastructure left behind by a half-century of temperance campaigning, by an abundance of drill halls, and by the realignment of the Scottish Presbyterian churches which created a superfluity of church buildings, provided the first homes for moving pictures. In addition to this, the decline in popular interest in roller skating also left a scattering of large, adaptable buildings already associated with commercialised leisure. Companies needed a much smaller capital to install some lights on the façade of the local hall, pavilion or skating rink and rename it an Electric Theatre. In Scotland, then, the first wave of expansion of fixed-site exhibition, from 1909 to 1912, was characterised by the permanent lease of premises already used for entertainment, and thus favoured larger spaces rather than the cramped conditions associated with the nickelodeon model. Between one-quarter and one-third of the permanent exhibition venues operating by 1912 were existing halls, with an average capacity of over eight hundred seats. Only around one in every six venues was purpose-built, although substantial alterations might have been carried out. Purpose-built venues tended to be slightly larger than halls, but converted skating rinks surpassed both with average capacities of over a thousand seats each. Theatres, variety theatres and music halls, which could switch

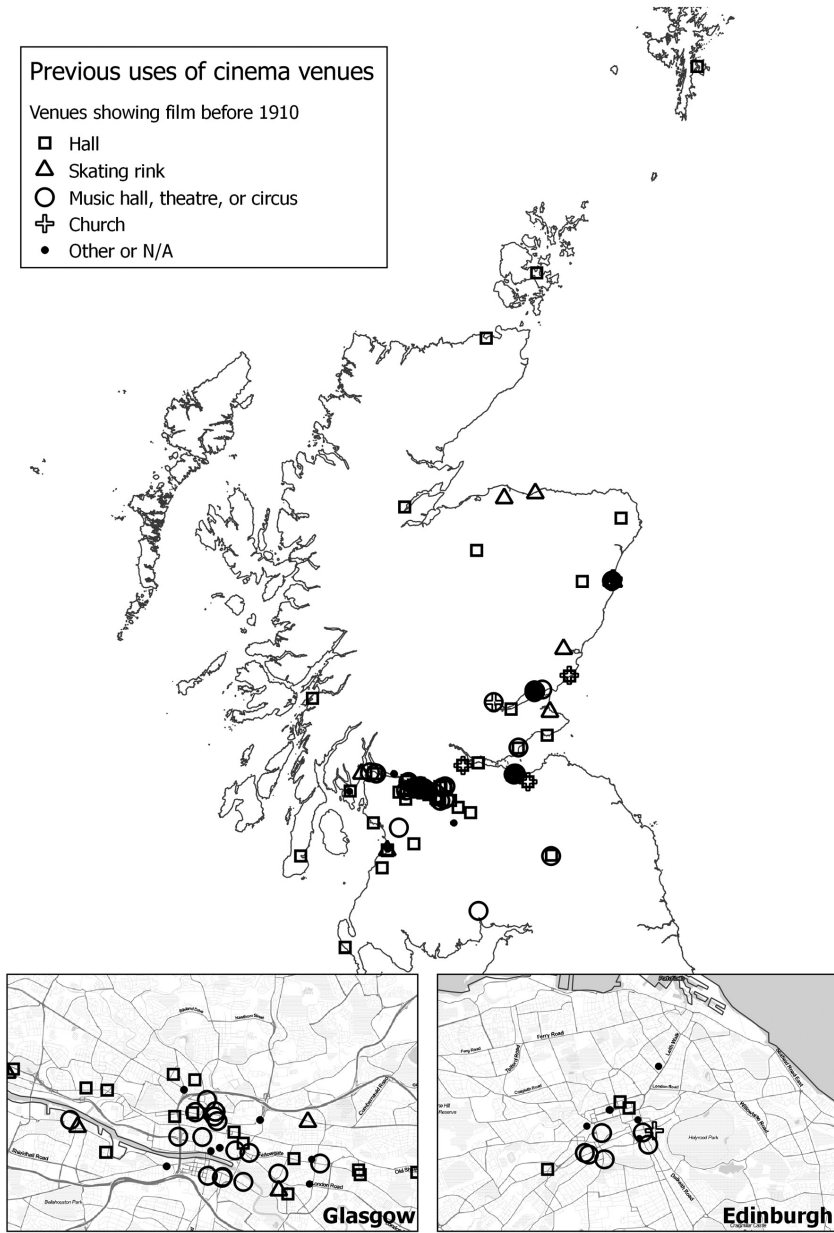


Figure 3.1 Previous uses of cinema venues operating before 1910.

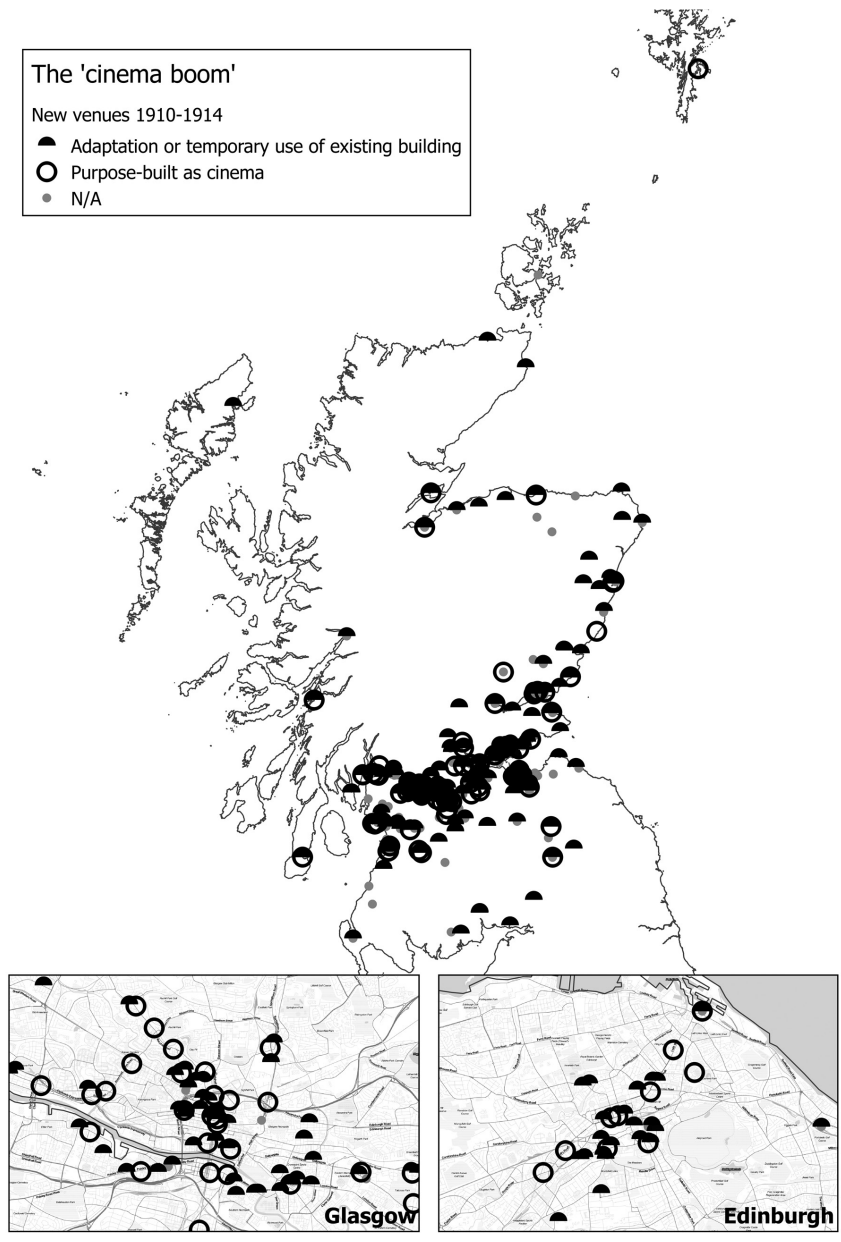


Figure 3.2 Adapted venues and new cinema construction, 1910–14.

back and forth between different types of entertainment following popular demand, were substantially larger, but fewer in number.

Like rural audiences, suburban working-class patrons were likely to encounter films in a neighbourhood hall reinvented as a picture palace from as early as 1908, while more affluent spectators had to wait longer for full-time, film-only venues. While there were many opportunities to see films in large city-centre venues like Hengler's Circus and the St Andrew's Halls, or music halls like the Britannia Panopticon, the cautious nature of investment in cinema development delayed the entrance of dedicated cinema venues into Glasgow's main commercial thoroughfares. J.J. Bennell might have been expressing a common cautious opinion when he recognised that he 'had pinned [his] faith to the working classes and the twice nightly house' because he 'had only a limited faith in pictures'.¹¹ On the other hand, new entrepreneurs were entering the field, and bringing with them new ideas about potential audiences. The West of Scotland Electric Theatres company was floated at the end of 1909 and opened its first venue, Glasgow's first purpose-built cinema, the Charing Cross Electric Theatre on Sauchiehall Street, in May 1910. Moving even closer to the entertainment centre of the city, the London-based national chain Provincial Cinematograph Theatres opened the Picture House further along Sauchiehall Street at the end of the year. Both venues ran a continuous programme and charged 6d for admission. After this point, many other purpose-built venues, with ever-more sumptuous lobbies and tea rooms, opened in the centre of Glasgow to cater for a more selective public.

Although the year with the most cinema openings before the war was 1912, fewer than a fifth of the 112 venues opening that year were in new buildings. The following year, with no more sites to repurpose, building activity picked up. More than forty purpose-built cinemas opened in Scotland in 1913. This was the tail end of the 1910–12 construction peak identified by Nicholas Hiley for the whole of Britain.¹² The new cinemas of 1913 included very few hall or skating rink conversions, but the average capacity did not increase significantly, because it was already relatively high. Scottish venues, as documented, tended to be larger than the UK average found by Hiley. A significant contribution to that difference came from the regular use of larger town halls (such as those in Bo'ness, Greenock, Kirkintilloch and Paisley), and the inclusion of some variety theatres licensed for cinema.

Coming from the respectable trade press, these figures could be hiding the existence of smaller, fly-by-night venues. However, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to argue that the expansion

Table 3.1. Cinema capacity in 1914 (Scottish venues in database: 601; venues with capacity data: 407)

	UK cinemas by size in 1914, from Hiley 1999	Scottish cinemas up to 1914/15	
<i>Seating capacity</i>	%	<i>Count</i>	%
1–500	28	72	17.7
501–800	35	140	34.4
801–1000	16	83	20.4
1001–2000	18	100	24.6
2000+	3	12	2.9
Total	100	407	100.0

Sources: Nicholas Hiley, “‘Let’s Go to the Pictures’: The British Cinema Audience in the 1920s and 1930s”, *Journal of Popular British Cinema* 2 (1999): 39–53 (p. 41); *Early Cinema in Scotland* database, from various sources including *Bioscope Annual* 1915; <http://earlycinema.gla.ac.uk/>, data retrieved 12 April 2016

of cinema in Scotland took place in larger venues, with existing civic architecture playing a key role. There was still a huge amount of variation between these venues. Just before the First World War, on any ordinary day in Glasgow it was possible to see animated pictures in a church, a wooden hut or an ornate concrete shell; for 1d or 1s; with or without a lecturer, an orchestra or a variety turn; in peripheral working-class neighbourhoods or in the more fashionable corners of the city centre. Throughout the country, metal sheds, drill halls, manses, markets, baths and billiard rooms were pressed into service. In the hands of entrepreneurial showpeople, these sheds became Picture Palaces, Electric Theatres and Picturedromes. By 1914, there were cinemas in more than 130 towns, including Fife mining villages and market towns in Aberdeenshire and the Borders, as well as the industrial central belt, and from Annan to Lerwick. The patterns and particularities of this development are examined in Chapter 4.

While the popularity of cinema amongst the industrial populations of Glasgow and Dundee has been widely recognised, the business models that allowed urban exhibition to thrive depended on a connection to local and broader circuits. Travelling exhibitors had used the routes of fair-ground and touring concerts, showing the same material to different audiences; fixed-site operators needed to offer a regular change of programme in order to ensure repeat custom. The fixed-site cinema is thus a different type of node in the emerging networks of film distribution, which were gradually crystallising as a separate business sector. Fixed-site venues required the development of the distribution trade, and of a regional

network that was able to supply films to a very diverse exhibition sector. In this system of relationships and infrastructure, small towns, suburban, and city-centre venues were interdependent, and connected through trade hubs at Glasgow and Edinburgh. The emergence of film distribution as a distinct trade created a new arena for Scottish entrepreneurs in the 1910s and 1920s.

For the ‘first generation’ of cinema managers (those who came into the business before 1915 or so), obtaining good films to show was a challenge. Transformations in all sectors of the industry were casting a new role for exhibitors, one that was more clearly delineated and involved less multi-tasking. As Brown has explained:

The adjustment [to fixed-site cinemas] involved the abandonment of a highly personalised transactional model characterised by bespoke service, low replacement rates and long periods of time, with a much more dynamic but impersonal method, more appropriate for high replacement rates and short periods of use.¹³

At the core of this reconfiguration was the emergence of film renting. The ‘low replacement rates’ of the pre-boom era reflected the fact that exhibitors had invested significant amounts to buy the films directly from producers, and could not afford to replace them until they had extracted an equivalent value from a long tail of showings. Under the rental system, the ownership of film prints passed to the renter, and thus the weekly price paid by the exhibitor was lowered. This lower cost of film hire had a double effect: it made extended rural tours as a means of recovering costs unnecessary; and it reduced the entry barriers, enabling many more exhibitors to set up shop. This, in turn, exacerbated competition in urban areas. In 1913, Glasgow had eighty-five licensed venues, of which about fifty were full-time cinemas.¹⁴ Aberdeen and Dundee had at least twenty venues each, and Edinburgh more than forty.¹⁵ The pressures of competition between urban exhibitors set the conditions in which many of the future developments of the film trade took shape. Although the wide network of small-town cinemas was the ballast that stabilised the industry, the interests of those exhibitors were increasingly marginalised.

Competition between urban cinemas was fought on three battlefields: prices, amenities and up-to-dateness. Newly built venues could offer grander buildings, more comfortable seating and ancillary attractions such as tea rooms and fountains. But, as audiences became more selective and informed, being able to show the newest films soon became crucial. Exhibitors thought that if they did not have the latest film, and the opposition did, they would lose business. The ‘fallacy of first runs’,

as *The Bioscope* put it in 1910, was the reigning factor in the stratification of exhibition following the runs system. Given that a limited number of prints of any given film were available, these prints had to be leased to cinemas in a particular order. This ordering of venues as part of a distribution chain focused on the film's release date. Since most cinemas in the UK changed their programme twice a week, each half-week was one step in the distribution cascade. The 'first run' meant the first three days after release, when the film was showcased at the more prestigious venues; second-run were the venues that would get it after that, and so on. The price of hire was reduced for each subsequent run. The formalisation of this system translated geographic and socio-economic distance into a time lag: the smaller the town, and the cheaper the cinema, the older its films would be.

Plotting the release dates of the films in a sample of cinema programmes from January 1913, against the populations of the burghs where the same films were being exhibited, illustrates the nature of this lag. Figure 3.3 shows one dot for each film, with its release date as given in the trade press on the x axis and the population of the burgh where it was being shown on the y axis. Population is plotted on a logarithmic scale in order to emphasise the difference between small and medium towns, while the films shown in the four largest cities in the sample form the rows towards the top half of the graph. Although there is considerable spread, an elbow-shaped pattern is visible: the oldest films (towards the left-hand extreme of the graph) are mostly being shown in towns of under 25,000 inhabitants. In the towns with a population of under ten thousand, no film was mentioned that was less than two and a half months old by January 1913. On the contrary, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and some of the satellite burghs (Hamilton, Paisley), the oldest films date only from October. Of the forty-four urban cinemas in the sample, at least a dozen included brand-new releases in their programmes, although none seems to offer an all-new bill.¹⁶

Breaking these figures down into more detail reveals that provincial venues with access to newer films tended to be part of regional cinema chains. The traditional account of the development of the trade in Britain highlights the importance of large horizontally integrated exhibition companies operating as cinema circuits, following the model of the music-hall circuit. In this narrative, a few English companies established during the early years of the cinema boom became the financial bedrock of the British film trade, and gave rise to various attempts at vertical integration.¹⁷ Some of those UK-wide circuits had Scottish venues: Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Ltd (PCT) had Picture Houses on Edinburgh's Princes Street

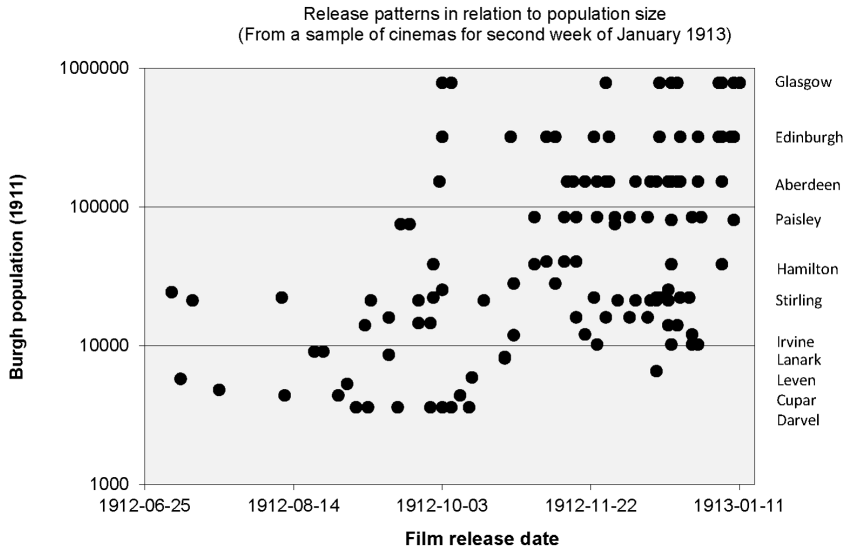


Figure 3.3 Release patterns for a sample of programmes showing in Scottish cinemas during second week of January 1913.

and in Glasgow on Sauchiehall Street. These were large, well-appointed city-centre venues with first-run programmes that charged a minimum admission price of 6d. In contrast, Pringle's Picture Palaces, a company established in the North of England by Ralph Pringle, a travelling exhibitor, located its Glasgow and Edinburgh venues in working-class areas on the edges of the city centre. Converted from music halls and skating rinks, these venues charged 2d for admission and showed films that were a couple of weeks old. These two chains had been amongst the pioneers of fixed-site exhibition in Scotland: opening in 1907, Pringle's Queen Theatre was one of the first permanent cinemas in Glasgow, and PCT's Picture House offered continuous shows and new standards of luxury on a major city-centre street from 1910. However, their presence in Scotland remained limited, never reaching beyond the main cities; the Scottish venues were on the periphery of their circuits; and their film booking arrangements were co-ordinated centrally.

Burrows and Brown's article on the financial aspects of the cinema boom challenges the preponderance of the big circuits in the expansion of permanent exhibition, pointing out that, after a brief flourishing of highly capitalised company formation in 1908–9, the trade was dominated by smaller, private companies.¹⁸ The Scottish exhibition trade did not undergo such a dramatic spike in investment, as the largest circuits tended to expand only gradually and on the back of already thriving concerns. By

the start of the war, there were five Scottish companies that controlled six or more venues: B.B. Pictures, Green's, G.U. Scott, R.C. Buchanan and Bostock's. Between them, they controlled more than fifty cinemas, mostly in the central belt. In contrast, at least a hundred venues were owned by a company controlling only one cinema, while almost half of all venues in Scotland were coupled or part of a small local circuit.

Coupled venues, splitting hire costs and shuttling reels back and forth during the screenings, can be considered as the most basic case of horizontal integration in exhibition. There were many such cases around Scotland, such as Aberdeen Picture Palaces, a relatively small company that will make an appearance in later chapters, or R.V. Singleton's circuit based on Lanarkshire mining villages. Such modest arrangements depended on close geographical proximity, not only for change-overs but also because they often shared a manager. The exhibition trade north of the border was thus dominated by local companies from an early point. Rural circuits not centred upon a first-run metropolitan venue included companies like the Elite Entertainments Syndicate in Aberdeenshire (Huntly, Nairn, Keith and Buckie) and T.J. Scott's East Lothian circuit (Peebles, Dunbar, North Berwick, Linlithgow and Haddington). More powerful urban circuits capitalised on their connection to earlier forms of entertainment. R.C. Buchanan, for instance, was an actor and theatre owner who took over music halls and theatres in Edinburgh, Dundee, Motherwell and Coatbridge. E.H. Bostock was a very successful menagerie and circus showman from Buckinghamshire, who had started showing film as part of the variety entertainment at the Hamilton Hippodrome.¹⁹ By 1914, he controlled at least eight venues, mostly in old music halls or circuses, all within ten miles of Glasgow.

Control of eight venues marked the point at which it started to be more profitable for a circuit proprietor to buy films outright rather than hiring them from a renter. Once an exhibitor had made this shift, the logical next step was to recoup the cost of films further by hiring them out to other exhibitors. This was then a key moment in the emergence of local and regional film hiring practices that retained some autonomy for as long as films could be bought on the open market (that is, acquired as straightforward commodities, rather than as intellectual property where exploitation rights remained with the manufacturer). Controlling eight or more venues not only allowed exhibitors to counterbalance their expenditure on film, and to develop a lucrative renting side to their business, but it also increased their bargaining power in negotiating hire prices with the renters, and allowed them to present fairly new films even in suburban, low-priced venues. Once the link between exhibition and distribution was

established, the dominance of the companies that were large enough to capitalise on it was secure. This interdependence was the foundation for the temporary success of Scotland's pioneer cinema distributors, Green's Film Service and the B.B. Pictures.

Considered side by side, the cases of Green's Film Service and the B.B. Pictures encapsulate the forces and processes that shaped the development of local companies before the war. Although UK-wide chains had a dominant presence in the main cities, Green's and the B.B. Pictures were more prominent in certain towns and neighbourhoods, and their prominent branding means they figure highly in oral history accounts of cinema-going, especially in Glasgow. Much less known is their role as distributors, which started between 1910 and 1912 and was an indispensable factor in the Scottish cinema boom.²⁰ James Joseph Bennell of the B.B. Pictures, as mentioned above, had rented the Wellington Palace, in the south side of Glasgow, from the Good Templars in 1907. With a background in temperance lecturing in the North of England, he had toured with a hired bioscope and then with the Bradford-based company New Century Pictures. Working for that company, he visited Glasgow twice a year for public-hall engagements that grew steadily longer. When Bennell, with his 'limited faith in pictures', decided to expand his operations, he took leases on large halls in working-class areas in Glasgow, Dundee and other towns in the central belt of Scotland. (Interestingly, the two venues first leased in Edinburgh were not successful.) This low-cost strategy was a condition for the rapid expansion of the B.B. circuit (the initials were popularly understood to stand for 'Bright and Beautiful', though they may have started as the initials of Bennell's wife), which by 1910 controlled fourteen halls, eight of which were permanent. Shortly after starting the permanent operation of the Wellington Palace, Bennell's film supplier offered him for purchase a few films, which he used 'at shows [he] organized at [the Glasgow districts of] Govan, Kinning Park, Springburn, Kingston, Langside, Dixon, and Pollokshaws Public Halls'. After using the films for his own shows, he then obtained some further profit by hiring them on to other pioneer exhibitors, such as Bob Stewart and Thomas Haddon, who ran travelling shows.²¹

After this experiment, Bennell continued renting his films from the London company, Jury's, until 1909, under an agreement that allowed him to sub-let them. By then, Bennell's circuit had expanded sufficiently so that he decided to start buying the films outright.²² In order to secure a good selection of films, Bennell travelled to the London showrooms every other week, and opened an office in the capital in 1911. The business had been floated in 1910 as the B.B. Pictures Ltd. The prospectus

for the flotation valued the film library at almost £8000, and claimed the firm had over a hundred customers. The B.B. Pictures' rental side was indeed so successful that, in the first half of 1910, it was already generating more profit than the eight exhibition venues combined. Months later, the company had opened a branch office in Manchester, 'to secure some late bookings, which really were the only profitable ones – all the earlier income being absorbed to pay for the films'.²³ This suggests that a dependent relationship had been created between the circuit of cinemas and the renting business. Box office from the cinemas covered the costs of the film prints, but the profit was made in renting them. A clientele that included cinemas in Manchester, Wolverhampton, Sutton Coldfield and South Wales was unwittingly helping to subsidise the first-run films enjoyed by Scottish audiences in B.B. cinemas.²⁴ The economies of scale also worked to keep prices relatively low for other exhibitors renting from B.B., at prices from 10s to £5 per 1,000 feet of film for a week.²⁵

The B.B. Pictures' distribution business depended on an open-market model where films could be purchased outright, and made to pay over long stretches of time. It also depended on having privileged access to the manufacturers in London, mediating between them and individual Scottish cinema managers. These two conditions were eroded throughout the war years by the growth of exclusive dealing and the development of vertical integration, especially of American firms. Many manufacturers stopped selling films to independent renters, so their supply chain collapsed. The B.B. company held on, still offering 'cheap subjects to suit the smallest hall',²⁶ until 1917 when all the stock was sold to Argosy Films.

A comparable story is that of George Green and Green's Film Service. The Greens had arrived in Glasgow from Lancashire at the end of the nineteenth century as travelling showpeople, and since 1896 had been showing films in fairgrounds, at their carnival grounds in Glasgow's East End, and in a growing circuit of working-class venues.²⁷ As with B.B. Pictures, by the time the company controlled eight cinemas they calculated that it would be cheaper to buy films outright, and so Green's Film Service was launched in February 1912. By May 1915, when the Film Service moved to new premises in central Glasgow, *The Bioscope* claimed that the firm had 'over a hundred customers having complete programmes' and three motor cars to deliver the films to them.²⁸

The bulk of Green's trade was in open-market programmes. Through an office in London, they bought up to four prints of the most popular titles. While the industry moved towards longer films, Green's continued to supply cinemas that demanded shorter (two-reel) features, in particular so that they could be interspersed with live variety.²⁹ Green's own

cinemas, which tended to be in direct rivalry with the B.B. Pictures, had the first run of new film acquisitions. Over the years, Green's became well known as distributors of serials, and later on became booking agents for Nordisk and Triangle.³⁰ Towards the end of 1917 they acquired the rights for the sought-after new Mutual films, also known as the 'million dollar Chaplins'.³¹ Despite these hits, by 1919 the Film Service was faltering as changes in trade methods prevented regional renters from owning film prints for exploitation. Meanwhile, exhibition continued to thrive, and in 1927 Green's Playhouse opened in Glasgow as the largest cinema in Europe and proof of the strength of Scottish exhibition.³²

Apart from these firmly established renter-exhibitors, the trade was dominated by branches of London-based renters, and, later on, agents for the American producers. The first company to establish a branch in Scotland was Gaumont, which had offices at Glasgow's Trongate in 1908. Pathé, Jury's, Ideal and Barker were amongst the other companies with local representatives. Films were also marketed in Scotland by independent regional renters that were not cinema owners. These smaller concerns tended to concentrate on cheaper programmes of older films, arguing that newer films did not mean better films and that it might be better for a show to exploit tried-and-tested films that had been selected with a certain kind of audience in mind. The pioneer was William 'Prince' Bendon, who had started dealing films from his house in the south side of Glasgow in 1900, and established the Bendon Trading Company which mostly supplied music halls and theatres. United Films Ltd, established in December 1910 by ex-Bendon employee James Bowie, made a point in their advertisement: 'we are not showmen but are the best servants of showmen'.³³ Their attempt at vertical integration looked at production instead, and the story of their 1911 film *Rob Roy* is told later in this volume. Another spirited entrepreneur active around 1915 was Jack Carlton Baker, a maverick renter and local sales agent for the *Kinematograph Weekly*, who proclaimed his independence from the Renters' Association with the slogan: 'I mind my own business and give best value for money'.³⁴

All these companies created a very complex patchwork of film supply, a fully fledged regional trade that succeeded in maintaining a regular supply system catering for the diversity of Scottish venues and audiences. They accommodated Scottish particularities such as the wider prevalence of cine-variety, even as live performance was being abandoned by the trade as it moved towards further industrialisation. At a time when the intermixing of live variety with short films had been almost completely abandoned in London, the 1915 *Bioscope Annual* described thirty-six per cent of

Scottish cinemas as presenting ‘pictures and varieties’. Glasgow, Dundee, Ayr and the mining towns of North Lanarkshire and Linlithgowshire had a much higher proportion, with almost half of Glasgow’s venues incorporating live turns. A less flexible, more centralised system of film supply would have struggled to support the relative autonomy of local cinema managers to run their show competitively.³⁵

By 1915, the various backgrounds and trajectories of Scottish exhibitors and renters had produced a tangle of diverse and interconnected practices, and sustained all sorts of cinema spaces. You could find small and large venues, with fountains and palms in the foyer or hard wooden benches, charging 1d or 2s for the latest, glossiest Italian epic films accompanied by an orchestra, or an assemblage of Wild West shorts and slapstick comedies mixed with local entertainers and a singalong. If you lived in Glasgow, you could have that choice without even leaving the neighbourhood, as venues clustered together and competed with one another. Even as more top-down distribution models started to dominate, with the Hollywood majors promoting longer, more expensive films and mobilising people’s growing affection for particular ‘stars’, a large part of the cinema experience was determined locally.

In Scotland, like elsewhere, moving pictures were initially presented in spaces that were already associated with existing cultural practices, from the fairground to the church hall and from the music hall to the legitimate theatre. As the number of new and repurposed venues ballooned, choice (of venue, but increasingly of film) became a central promise of urban exhibition, allowing audiences to exercise distinction and aspiration through their cinema-going practice. This competition in the cities funded the development of a strong regional distribution sector, connected to London but creating autonomous networks. While distribution methods responded to the overabundance of cinemas in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and to changes in the global film trade, they were in part dependent on the ‘long tail’ of small-town exhibition, where the more socially inclusive and often multi-functional nature of exhibition venues provided a different context for cinema.

Notes

1. Gaudreault and Marion, ‘A Medium Is Always Born Twice . . .’.
2. Toulmin, “‘Within the Reach of All’: Travelling Cinematograph Shows in British Fairgrounds 1896–1914’, 31.
3. Frank W. Ogden Smith, ‘Picture Theatre Finance’, *Bioscope*, 4 June 1914, pp. 1008–9.

4. Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures: Film Exhibition in London during the Nickelodeon Era, 1906–1914'.
5. 'Round the Provinces', *Bioscope*, 2 October 1908. 'Round the Provinces' (p. 6) gives films shown at the Panopticon only. The reference to the number of shows is under 'Items of Interest' on p. 15.
6. Hiley, "'Nothing more than a 'craze'": Cinema Building in Britain from 1909 to 1914', 124.
7. Burrows and Brown, 'Financing the Edwardian Cinema Boom, 1909–1914', 17.
8. Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896–1950*, 41.
9. 'The Story of the B.B. Pictures', printed pamphlet. Glasgow, National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive, SSA5/7/135. With thanks to Dr Peter Walsh for providing me with a scanned copy.
10. Lindstrom, 'Where Development Has Just Begun: Nickelodeon Location, Moving Picture Audiences, and Neighbourhood Development in Chicago'.
11. J.J. Bennell, 'The Cult of the Cinema', *Bioscope*, 20 September 1917, p. xxii.
12. Hiley, "'Nothing more than a 'craze'": Cinema Building in Britain from 1909 to 1914', 119–21.
13. Brown, 'The Missing Link: Film Renters in Manchester, 1910–1920', 58.
14. Office of Public Works, 'List of premises licensed under the Cinematograph Act, 1909, and the Accommodation therein' (12 July 1913). Glasgow, Mitchell Library, Glasgow City Archives, D-OPW 61/5. This number was up from fifty-seven venues licensed in 1911 according to Oakley, *Fifty Years at the Pictures*, 7.
15. Low, *The History of the British Film 1906–1914*, 51.
16. This is consistent with the practices described by Burrows regarding cheap London cinemas, many of which obtained their programmes as a mixed package of very old and not so old films, from renters who, in turn, bought their stock in the second-hand market. Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures II: Indecency, Anarchy and Junk Film in London's "Nickelodeons", 1906–1914', 179.
17. Low, *The History of the British Film 1906–1914*, 20–2.
18. Burrows and Brown, 'Financing the Edwardian Cinema Boom, 1909–1914', 14.
19. 'E.H. Bostock', in *Who's Who in Glasgow in 1909*, *Glasgow Digital Library*. Available at <<http://gdl.cdli.strath.ac.uk/eyrwho/eyrwho0331.htm>> (last accessed 2 April 2012).
20. Vélez-Serna, 'Preview Screenings and the Spaces of an Emerging Local Cinema Trade in Scotland'.
21. J.J. Bennell, 'The B.B. Film Service From Start to Finish', *Bioscope*, 20 September 1917, pp. xvi–xvii.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Kissell, 'Cinema in the By-ways', 26.

25. 'Away up North', *Bioscope*, 9 March 1911, p. 41.
26. Advertisement, *Bioscope*, 1 April 1915, p. 18.
27. By the late 1920s, Green's controlled twenty-four cinemas in Scotland. McBain, 'Green's of Glasgow: "We Want 'U' In"', 56.
28. 'Scottish Renter's Rapid Rise', *Bioscope*, 29 April 1915, p. 459.
29. Advertisement, *Bioscope* (Scottish section), 11 January 1917, p. 181; Advert, *Entertainer* 4, no. 177, 17 February 1917, p. 8.
30. *Bioscope*, 26 July 1917, p. 348.
31. *Bioscope*, 29 November 1917, p. 97.
32. McBain, 'Green's of Glasgow: "We Want 'U' In"', 56.
33. Advertisement, The United Films Ltd, *Bioscope*, 15 December 1910, p. 56.
34. 'Trade Jottings', *Entertainer* 3, no. 123, 5 February 1916, p. 9.
35. A more detailed discussion of the cinema manager's role can be found in Vélez-Serna, 'Showmanship Skills and the Changing Role of the Exhibitor in 1910s Scotland'.