

Pioneers of the Early Cinema: 10

James A Williamson (1855-1933)

Born in Kirkaldy, Fife and brought up in Edinburgh, James Williamson moved to London in 1868, where he was apprenticed to a pharmacist. In 1877, he bought his own pharmacy in Eastry, Kent, remaining there until 1886 when he and his young family moved to Hove in Sussex. Williamson was a keen amateur photographer, selling photographic chemicals and equipment at his shop, and like [George Albert Smith](#) he was a member of the Hove Camera Club.

Williamson's interest in moving pictures began in 1896 when, he told a local reporter, 'I purchased a machine...and I spent a lot of time and trouble in adapting it both for taking and projecting on a screen.' At first, Williamson concentrated on giving film shows locally with a programme consisting mainly of films by George Albert Smith (to whom Williamson supplied chemicals), supplemented by a few of his own. By 1898, he had expanded his film production sufficiently to issue his first catalogue and to move to premises that could accommodate both his film-making and the film-processing facilities that could service both his own and clients' needs.

Williamson's early films were mainly one-minute comedies of the 'naughty boy' type, pioneered by the [Lumière](#) film *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* but he also filmed local scenes, such as the Hove coastguards at cutlass drill. He tried his hand at trick films too: in *The Clown Barber* (1898) the clown barber lops off the head of his customer, puts it on the sideboard to finish shaving and replaces the head on the customer's shoulders, who then gets up and leaves.

But Williamson's main contribution to cinema took the new medium beyond the single-shot static-camera form which mimicked standard 'proscenium arch' theatre presentations. In 1899, George Albert Smith had inserted a shot into the middle of another in his film *A Kiss in the Tunnel*. In his 1900 film, *Attack on a China Mission*, which was a staged reconstruction of an incident that had occurred during the Boxer rebellion of that year, Williamson went further by assembling four shots which not only developed the narrative in time but presented the audience with different perspectives on the action.

In 1902, Williamson built a studio and processing works in Hove where he continued to turn out comedies and dramas of increasing sophistication both in acting style, which was more 'realistic' than theatrical - and in filmic construction. By comparison with other film-makers, however, his output was not large. From 1902 Williamson's films were available in America, where, it is claimed, they influenced film-makers towards narrative construction built from a number of shots.

Like some of the other early film pioneers, such as [Robert W Paul](#), Williamson grew uncomfortable as film production became more of an industrialised business. By 1908, he had relinquished his production activities to other directors and in 1910 sold his Hove studio to [Charles Urban](#) and his Natural Color Kinematograph Company. Williamson moved to London, where he continued to run a film processing business and set up an entirely new venture - the manufacture of film equipment. In this, Williamson was joined by his son, Colin (1887-1976) who trained as an engineer.

For many years, the [Williamson Kinematograph Company](#) made a range of 'Topical' cameras as well as film processing and printing equipment. It also became involved in the development of aerial photography, producing specialised cameras for aerial reconnaissance during both World Wars.

Further reading

John Barnes *The Beginning of the Cinema in England 1894 – 1901* (University of Exeter press 1996 1998)

Rachael Low and Roger Manvell *The History of the British Film: 1896 - 1906* (Allen and Unwin, UK, 1973)

Martin Sopocy *James Williamson in Hove* (in *The Hove Pioneers and the Arrival of Cinema*, Brighton University, 1996)