

Pioneers of Early Cinema: 5

Robert W Paul (1869-1943)

The story of Robert W Paul illustrates how just one incident can change the course of someone's life and of history. Paul was an electrical engineer with a workshop in Hatton Garden, London. In 1894 he was approached by two Greek entrepreneurs who wanted him to manufacture duplicates of the [Edison](#) Kinetoscopes they were already operating. Since the machine was not patented in Britain, Paul was free to do so and he made several, which he also sold to other showmen. However, not being licensed Edison operators, Paul's customers were unable to obtain films to show on the machines.

Paul applied his mind to the development of a camera so that he could supply films. In this, he collaborated with the photographer [Birt Acres](#) [Link to 5.3.44] who showed him provisional designs in February 1895. Within a month, they had a workable camera which Acres used to shoot the first film made in Britain, [Incident at Clovelly Cottage](#). The camera was based on [Marey's Chronophotographe](#) but using 35mm sprocketed film for the Kinetoscope. Paul immediately wrote to Edison, offering to supply films for the [Kinetoscope](#). Edison rejected the offer but two of the films that Acres made for Paul in 1895 were shown at the first public showing of Edison's Vitascope in New York on 23 April 1896.

Paul and Acres entered into a ten year business agreement in March 1895; it lasted just six weeks as the two partners fell out, possibly because Acres had patented in his own name a camera similar to the one they had developed together. Acrimony between the two lasted for years. Paul worked on improving his camera, incorporating a maltese cross mechanism to give intermittent motion to the film. He also developed a projector which he called the [Theatrograph](#). A public demonstration of the projector was given at the Finsbury Technical College on 20 February 1896, the same day that Felicien Trewey gave a preview of the [Lumière Cinématographe](#) at the Polytechnic Institution.

Almost immediately, entrepreneurial showmen seized on the moving picture novelty though many expected it to last only a few weeks. Paul was hired to give regular shows at the Egyptian Hall, London from 19 March 1896. He began showing films on 25 March at the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties in Leicester Square, across from the Empire Theatre, where Trewey was already screening Lumière films. Paul's engagement at the Alhambra was originally for two weeks but it lasted two years.

In June 1896, Paul filmed the finish of the Derby at Epsom, won by the Prince of Wales' horse Persimmon. He processed the film overnight and screened it the next day to enthusiastic audiences which packed the Alhambra. He thus produced one of the first news films.

With sales of his cameras and projectors booming, Paul was kept busy. He spent evenings driving from one London music hall to another in a one-horse brougham, rewinding films during the journey, so that he could supervise the quality of projection. All his hard work paid off - between March 1896 and March 1897 he made a profit of over £12,000 on an initial capital of £1,000.

As well as manufacturing equipment, Paul was turning into a film producer. Like many other early film-makers he at first concentrated on actuality films, such as the Derby and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession in 1897. But as early as April 1896, he had made a short comedy *The Soldier's Courtship*; in 1898 he constructed Britain's first film studio at Muswell Hill in North London and, over the summer, produced eighty short dramatic films. He was also pioneer of what was then termed 'trick photography', early special effects.

Paul's production company was at its peak between 1900 and 1905 but gradually he became disenchanted with the business. At that period, films were sold outright to showmen and cinema operators; the now-standard practice of renting prints and earning royalties on cinema admissions came a few years later. Competition amongst producers was such that prints were sent to exhibitors on approval; many just showed the films and sent them back without payment. Eventually, this practice was stopped but by 1910 Paul decided that his film business had become too much of a financial risk. He closed it down, destroyed his stock of negatives and thereafter concentrated on his electrical engineering work. His company was amalgamated with the Cambridge Engineering Company. In 1913, Paul donated a number of his early machines to the Science Museum and they became the basis of the [Cinematography](#) collection.

Further reading

Robert W Paul *Kinematographic Experiences* (*SMPTE Journal*, Vol 27, November 1936)

John Barnes *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England 1894 – 1901. Five volumes* (University of Exeter Press, 1996 – 1998).

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