

# ENGLAND'S EARLIEST FILM STUDIOS

Bill Barnes

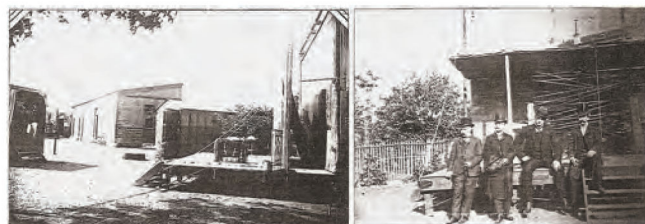
**THE WORLD'S FIRST FILM STUDIO**, Thomas A. Edison's 'The Black Maria' of New Jersey, USA, designed by William L. Dickson, began construction in early December 1892, several years before a cinematograph film had ever been projected. It was of course for the production of films for the 'Kinetoscope', a 'peepshow' viewing device.

Whereas this studio has been widely publicised and photographed in all its different phases of development, it is not generally known that Dickson also constructed a purpose-built film studio in England, of which there is no known illustration. One of the first to be built in this country, it was erected in the spring of 1898 in the Embankment Gardens, adjacent to the Hotel Cecil, whose main entrance was in the Strand, with its rear aspect overlooking the River Thames. The exact spot has never been determined. (Fig. 1.)



1. A postcard of c.1902 showing the probable site of the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company's open-air stage film studio erected in the spring of 1898, adjacent to the Hotel Cecil. The exact spot is unknown.

It was a simple affair, an open-air stage with an open front and a back on which a pictorial backcloth could be displayed, the whole mounted on a semi-circular track so it could be revolved to receive maximum sunlight. It was very similar, it is believed, to that which the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company's affiliated company built at Courbevoie in France (fig. 2).

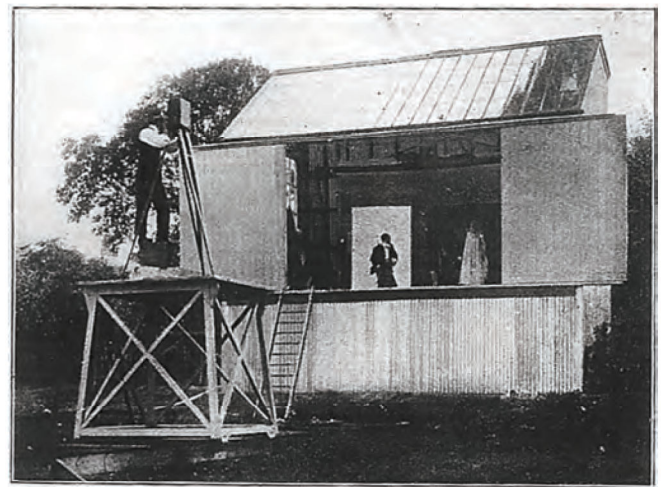


2. Two aspects of the outdoor studio at Courbevoie outside Paris, thought to be similar to the one in the Embankment Gardens adjacent to the Hotel Cecil (courtesy of Paul Spehr).

It is not known how many films were made using this set-up before it was used to film scenes from Max Beerbohm Tree's production of *King John* at His Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket. The actors were bussed from the theatre to the Hotel Cecil, where they assembled until called to appear on the open-air stage close by. The costumes and scenery from the original theatrical production were used, and the scenes shot with the large 'Mutograph' camera.

About the same time, Robert Paul had built a purpose-built film studio in Sydney Road, Muswell Hill, New Southgate, north London, early in 1898. A far more advanced and elaborate affair, this was sometimes claimed as the first real studio in England (fig. 3).

However, the British Mutoscope and Biograph Co. had moved into their spacious newly built premises in Great Windmill Street,

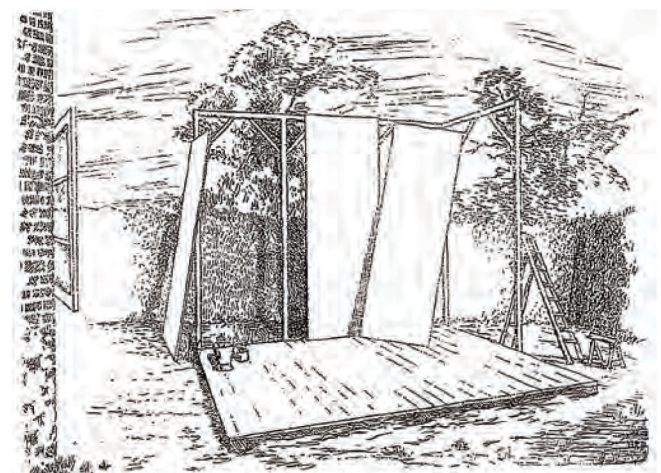


3. R.W. Paul's film studio at Sydney Road, Muswell Hill, New Southgate, London, c.1898-9. From an illustration published in F.A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures*, London 1912 (Barnes Archive).

off Piccadilly Circus, in 1897, which may have contained a film-studio for filming subjects for their 'Mutoscopes', especially those of a risqué nature. Its exterior survives today, much as it looked then.

Before any of these more elaborate affairs, the first English film studios, if they can be called by that name, were very simple makeshift set-ups comprising a single backcloth against a wall or other support, as used by the first film-makers such as Birt Acres – or Robert Paul, on the roof of the Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square, where he shot 'The Soldier's Courtship'.

Cecil Hepworth, in his autobiography *Came the Dawn*, mentions that he constructed an open-air studio in the garden of his house in Walton on Thames in 1899, and includes a rough sketch of it (fig. 4).



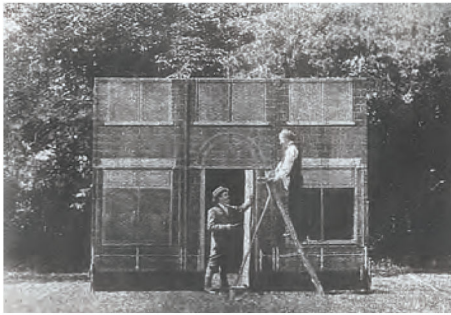
4. Cecil Hepworth's first studio, 1899, in the garden of his house at Walton-on-Thames, as sketched by himself (Hepworth Collection).

Will Barker, who founded the Autoscope Co., about 1900/01 at Stamford Hill, Stoke Newington, constructed an open stage studio at the same time he established his company.

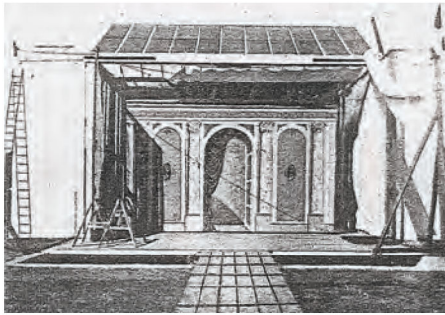
The Brighton School of film-makers were in the forefront of the production of 'made up' films, and both George Albert Smith and James Williamson built their own film studios: Smith in his premises at St Annes Well and Gardens, Hove, in 1900, and Williamson in 1902, also in Hove (figs. 5 and 6).

As films got longer and became more complex (the period of the one-reeler or 1,000 feet), film studios suitable for their production were needed in order to supply the growing demands of the increasing number of 'shop front' cinemas, or 'penny-gaffs' as they came to be called, which began appearing from about





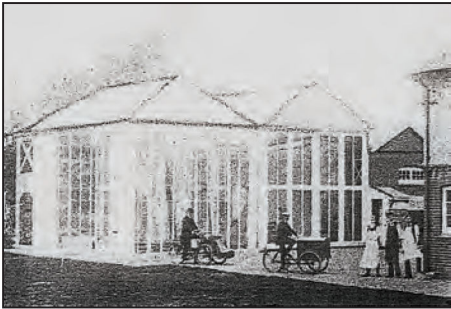
5. George Albert Smith supervising the erection of a single background piece of film scenery – the simple fair-weather set up used by early filmmakers before the introduction of glasshouse studios, c.1900 (Screen Archive South East).



6. James Williamson's studio of 1902, Hove, Brighton (Screen Archive South East).



7. George A. Smith's glasshouse studio with open front, in St Anne's Well and Gardens, 1902 (Screen Archive South East).



8. James Williamson's glasshouse film studio at Wilbury Works, Wilbury Road, Hove, 1904 (Screen Archive South East).



9. From Tallis's views of Regent Street 1838–1840 (detail). Note building No. 107, the future premises of The Biograph Studio (Barnes Archive).



10. No. 107 Regent Street, premises of the Biograph studio, identified here for the first time using the Tallis engraving for identification (GLC Collections).



11. The first studio in England to use electric light for 'moving pictures', opened by the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company at 107 Regent Street, London in 1902 (courtesy of Richard Brown and Barry Anthony).

1905 onwards in cities and towns up and down the country.

Hence producers like the Sheffield Photo Company, under its chief director Frank Mottershow, had converted from open-air stages to enclosed glasshouse studios in 1904. As did Hepworth in 1905 and Will Barker (who had located to Ealing Common) in 1907. The two leading members of the Brighton school also built glasshouse studios: George A. Smith as early as 1902 and James Williamson at his Wilbury Road works in Hove in 1904 (figs 7 and 8).

These glasshouse studios remained in use until they were eventually ousted by more substantial buildings using artificial lights.

The first studio to use electric light was the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company's studio at 107 Regent Street. This opened, surprisingly as early as 1902, for the express purpose of taking portrait photographs, supplying not only portraits of the general public but portraits of famous actors and actresses of the day, in the form of postcards. But, more importantly, here were filmed the subjects for use in their 'Kinora' moving-picture machines, a portable version of their mutoscopes. These were directed by a well-known actor of the time – James Welch (figs 9, 10, 11, 12). No. 107 also appears on the 'Grand Architectural Panorama of London' by G.C. Leighton, 1849, and is noted as containing a billiard room on its first floor, ideal for a small studio. (Copy in Barnes Archive.)

By 1905 The Biograph Studios had moved to 38 Dover Street and renamed The Dover Street Studios.

Reflecting on these primitive structures where these early films were turned, who could have imagined then what they would later become – the giant film studios of Denham, Pinewood, Elstree and Ealing, for instance. Or, for that matter, who could have forecast the rise and fall of that greatest of all centres of film-making – Hollywood. Similarly, who could have foreseen the total eclipse of conventional filming using flexible rolls of celluloid film, so rapidly displaced by an entirely new method of cinematography, that of digitography (or, if one prefers, electro-nography), which we see today.



12. The Biograph Studio postcard of James Welch, director of the films made for the British Mutoscope and Biograph Co., for use in their 'Kinora' Moving Picture Machines, c.1902 (Barnes Archive).

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