

A QUERY – FILM TITLE SLIDES

David Robinson

In 2017 Nick Hiley published an innovative article on a group of text slides, dating from the last years of the 19th century, designed to be projected to introduce the animated films whose titles they announced (TML 13, December 2017, p. 7). It was no problem to do this. Early film projectors were still, in essence, elaborate mechanised slides placed on the front of a lantern and, if it were a biennial or triennial, it was simple to transfer to and from slide to film. This meant that the screen remained 'live' while the film, which probably ran no more than a minute, was changed. Nick Hiley's article revealed that the title slides were supplied, at a price, by the film companies themselves.

Too few such title slides have appeared to indicate how long their use continued before film-makers discovered how to shoot titles directly onto film. Nick's ten slides were British but he has not managed to trace any more in either museums or private collections since he bought them. There is, however, evidence of what may be the first use of such title slides, within the first year of projected motion pictures.

On 12 October 1896, the English inventor William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, who had earlier worked with Edison on developing motion pictures, was ready to launch his Biograph projector, with its magnificent 68mm films, at Hammerstein's Olympia Theatre in New York. His projectionist was the 24-year-old G.W. 'Billy' Bitzer, who was destined to become D.W. Griffith's gifted and legendary cinematographer.

In his posthumously published autobiography (*Billy Bitzer: His Story*, 1973) Bitzer recalled that he found himself in something of a

tangle in his post at the front of the Olympia's dress circle. He called the projector's housing 'the coffin':

"I had the coffin very slightly tipped forward with a piece of wood under it. I was afraid to tip it further lest its vibration topple it over into the orchestra seats below. There wasn't much space for bracing it anyway. I had a little magic lantern (stereopticon) which projected the title slides placed in front of the projector lower down at the side ... I had glass slides in my jacket pocket and had to keep shifting them from my right pocket to my left as the shown slides got pretty hot".

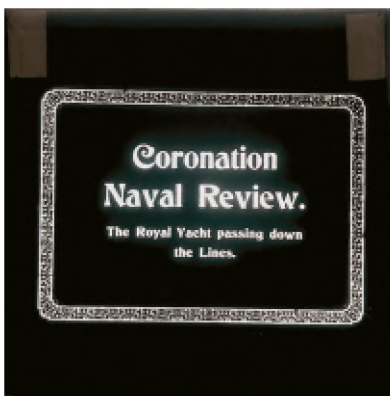
Not surprisingly, "there were a couple of fire pails filled with sand" ...

For lanternists the interest is to find film titles being projected individually from a lantern as early as 1896. Have any Society members encountered film title slides of this kind and vintage (not to be confused with the frequently found film 'trailer' advertising slides)?

Nick Hiley has sent us these examples that were not featured in his original TML article. So, MLS members, the search is now on!



Introduced a film from Bolton, c.1901



Introduced film of Edward VII's coronation celebrations in August 1902 – probably Hepworth & Co.'s film The Naval Review – Progress of the Royal Yacht



Introduced Mitchell and Kenyon's The Despatch Bearer, released in May 1900. This was a fictional film (the others in the Hiley are all non-fiction) and showed a British despatch bearer under attack by the Boers – although it was actually filmed just outside Blackburn. On the right is a still from the film, in the BFI collection.

