

FILM MAKING AT ESHER

By Irene Cobb

At the back of the City Arms public house on Portsmouth Road, only recently demolished, there once stood an interesting building. At the beginning of the century, a Mr. Grant, of Grant's Cottages, built a glass roofed dance hall here called "The Pavilion" – an attractive domed building, rather like a miniature Crystal Palace, gaily decorated inside with coloured streamers. For several years The Pavilion prospered; dancing was taught, dances were held regularly and people came from miles away to attend. Later however, the Orleans Arms opened a hall and several other halls were opened and attendance fell away. So in 1914, a film company called M.L.B. took over the premises. The initials were those of the proprietors, R. Mitcheson, T.W. Lloyd and Warwick Buckland. The glass roofed building was excellent for a studio as the lighting in the very early days of film production was not as highly developed as it later became. This small company produced a number of silent films, one of which was called "A Park Lane Scandal", and written by the popular novelist "Rita".



In 1914, Broadwest Films took over the studio. Broadwest was a really large and important group of film pioneers and producers, among whom were William Barker, Cecil Hepworth and Walter West, all of whom had been in the film business from its earliest days. Hepworth had worked for Robert W. Paul, the pioneer at his first British film studio at Southgate in 1896.

Broadwest built onto the studio dressing rooms for the stars and converted an adjacent cottage into a dark room for film processing. These dressing rooms have only recently been demolished. Between 1914 and 1918 a number of popular films were made here at Esher, adaptations from “daring” novels of the day. These included films of Nat Gould’s Racing life, and society novels with titles such as “The Woman Who Did”, “Burnt Wings”, and part of “Coming Through The Rye” – made by Hepworth, shot on Littleworth Common with Alma Taylor and Stuart Rome in the star parts, as also was “A Peep Behind The Scenes”. Some of the Esher people were “extras” and the latter film was shown at the Esher Village Hall – now the County Library – which was used as a cinema on Saturdays until about 1929, showing Tom Mix and Chaplin films to children, of whom I was one, and naturally there was great excitement in Esher.

Popular stage stars were regularly coming to Esher to appear in the films – Alma Taylor, Henry Ainley, Matheson Lang, Stewart Rome, Lilian Braithwaite, Ronald Colman, Gerald Amis, Maggie Albanesi, Violet Hopson and Ivy Close - Broadwest’s two stars – and Chrissie White – Hepworth’s star – are only a few. Many of them used to visit the City Arms, run by Mr. and Mrs. Scott, and kept in the Scott family for 100 years. The City Arms was mentioned by Lord Macauley as the ale house into which he sheltered when a terrible storm overtook him on his return to his Ditton Marsh house after visiting friends at Esher.

Sometimes shots for films were made in the bar of the City Arms and they were always borrowing china, pictures and plants as props. Broadwest continued until 1919 to make films such as “A Munition Girl’s Romance”, “A Turf Conspiracy”, “A Gamble for Love”, with stars such as Ronald Colman and Violet Hopson, but in 1919 The Pavilion was taken over by Master Films Ltd. This company continued with films such as “A Peep Behind The Scenes”, “Footprints In The Snow”, “Darby And Joan”, until eventually they built other premises and left the studio to gradually decay. Mr. and Mrs. Scott had it pulled down, leaving only the dressing rooms.

A decade later the population of Esher were not as interested in films. During the early thirties, a film company submitted plans to Esher Council to buy Esher Place and build a studio there with homes for the stars which would, they said, “be a Hollywood within a few miles of London”, which they proposed to call “Esherwood”. A contemporary newspaper wrote, “Dear little Esher, that very quiet and very select little village is shocked today”. An old resident, aged 85, a butcher, whose family had served meat to Queen Marie Amelie at Claremont when the Orleans were exiled from France, took a quite different view. He said, “I remember when in 1859 a number of very bright French people came to Esher and brightened up the village considerably, and if the Council would allow the studio to be built, it would be a good thing for the young men of the village”. He added, “I remember when Marie Lloyd came to Esher, as she often did – how she livened all of us up and made us feel younger, and how we welcomed her”.

However, the residents and most of the Council were not in favour of the idea. A number of petitions of protest were drawn up, and the proposal, which ran into six sheets of paper, was refused, so the hopes of the local girls who saw themselves as Esher Greta Garbos, faded away.