

‘Local Film Subjects’: Suburban Cinema, 1895–1910

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A plaque affixed in 1996 to an ordinary house on Park Road in Chipping Barnet, a northerly suburb of London, commemorated the filming of ‘the first British Moving Picture here in February 1895’ by Birt Acres, ‘Inventor and Pioneer Cameraman’. Another plaque on an ordinary house in another North London suburb, Muswell Hill, remembers the nearby film studio and laboratories built in 1898 by Robert W. Paul, ‘Inventor, Cinematographer, Producer and Exhibitor’. On a theatre in Walton-on-Thames is a plaque that reads: ‘From 1899–1924 this building formed part of the original studios of Cecil Hepworth whose *Rescued by Rover* was made here.’ In May 2017 two plaques were unveiled at the sites of early film studios in Walthamstow. To my knowledge these are the only plaques in suburban London that commemorate the first years of English cinema. There should be many more.

London cinema was suburban from the start. Early English film production was cosmopolitan and internationalist but also local. Robert Paul in Muswell Hill and Cecil Hepworth in Walton-on-Thames were embedded in those districts, not only as residents and employers but

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also as producers of images of their suburban environs. They were, in all respects, local filmmakers. This chapter takes Robert Paul as an initiator and exemplar of cinema's interaction with the city's suburbs in the first years of studio production.

Paul's 1907 catalogue promised to supply 'Local Film Subjects'. This meant that any customers who had taken film subjects in their own locality could send the negative to his laboratories and have the film developed. Paul also offered to send out operators to 'any part of the world' to take subjects on behalf of customers (Paul 1907, 2). He had been catering to customer requests of this kind since at least April 23rd 1898, when in *The Era* (23) he advertised 'Special Pictures Taken to Order at my New Laboratory, Muswell Hill'. Under the heading 'Local (British) Films', his 1902 catalogue makes a point of recommending locally made films to a broader clientele: 'A large number of local pictures have been taken in all parts of Great Britain, and can be printed to order. Many of these are of use apart from local interest' (Paul 1902, last page).

I here take 'Local Film Subjects' to mean something different, that is, *subjects taken by him and that were local to him*. While I like the idea that the new studio and film works in North London were a hub of world-wide image circulation, in this chapter I will read them, rather, as a hub of localised image-making. I am suggesting that we might read other internationally known centres of image production—Ealing, Islington, Twickenham, Shepperton, Elstree—in a similar way.

Before moving to Muswell Hill, Paul's locality was East Central London, with offices at Hatton Garden and factories at Leather Lane and Saffron Hill. Lists published by Paul in 1897 (see Herbert 1996, 27–35) include a few subjects taken within reach of these premises (Blackfriars Bridge, Tower Bridge, Petticoat Lane Market, the docks at Southwark), and in February 1898 he filmed a clog-dancing competition in nearby Bow. In effect, however, the centrality of his location made London as a whole his locality. From Hatton Garden and from the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square, where he exhibited his films, his reach stretched wide across the city.

The locations of films in Paul's 1897 lists also include Lambeth, London Zoo, Hampstead Heath and Herne Hill. An advertisement in *The Era* (26 March, 1898, 27), referred to 'Panoramas of London Streets &c', without being specific. A catalogue dated August 1898, quoted by film historian John Barnes, lists five films that would fit that

description: ‘Piccadilly Circus’, ‘Westminster’, ‘Outside the Paragon’, ‘Outside the Oxford’ and ‘Panorama of Holborn’ (Barnes 1996c, 185). The Paragon Theatre (now the Genesis Cinema) was on the Mile End Road and the Oxford Music Hall was at the junction of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. Paul showed films in these and in several other theatres, as well as at the Alhambra. I would guess that, following a practice established by the Lumière *Cinématographe*, Paul made films of the outside of these theatres in order to show those films inside. In an immediate sense, then, these film subjects were ‘local’.

John Barnes also mentions a film taken at Trafalgar Square and a film of snow being shovelled in a West End thoroughfare (Barnes 1996a, 250; Barnes 1996b, 229). Most of Paul’s central London subjects were familiar from picture postcards of the landmarks, monuments and sights of tourist London. Paul was fully aware of the city’s visitor attractions. In 1896 (25 April, 17) *The Era* commented: ‘For some time Mr. Paul has been “taking notes” of the London streets, and vivid reproductions of interesting places and incidents have been most acceptably added to the entertainment at the Alhambra.’ In 1901 Paul published ‘What to photograph in London’, a brochure for tourists that *The Process Engraver’s Monthly* (volume 8, 254) described thus: ‘In the space of a postcard it gives the things a visitor in a hurry should photograph, with particulars as to best time of day, whether time or instantaneous exposure is preferable, permits to use a camera, etc.’¹

The panoramic vision of London offered in Paul’s early cinematic output followed a model established by the Lumières, documenting the world around through scenic *vues*. Paul very soon introduced variety to the programme through fiction:

After the show had been running at the Alhambra for a month, Mr. Moul, the manager, suggested that I should make a short comedy in order to put a few laughs into the programme of scenic and interest films I was showing. Accordingly we took some of the theatre scenery up on the roof and built it up in the full glare of the spring sunshine. We also took some of the actors with us. (quoted in Wood 1947, 102)

The resulting setting for *The Soldier’s Courtship* (1896), depicting a woodland glade in a park, was topographically unspecific, but another early fiction that was at one time attributed to Paul evinces a stronger sense of place. *Footpads* shows a night-time robbery against

a background depicting a clearly recognisable Ludgate Circus. This film may not, as was once thought, date from 1896, but this is still one of the earliest film sets to represent an exact location in London. The attribution to Paul has now become very doubtful; had it been by him, the proximity of Ludgate Circus to Paul's premises in Hatton Garden and Saffron Hill would have made this (for me) a satisfyingly 'local' film subject. To compensate, however, we have the several local subjects that Paul definitely did film in and around Muswell Hill.

When, in 1898, Paul set up his studio at the Newton Avenue Works, midway between Muswell Hill and New Southgate, it was not with a view to documenting this vicinity on film. His object was grander: he meant to revolutionise English filmmaking through the production of fictional film subjects. An advertisement from October 1898 made explicit that intent:

The public have been surfeited with Trains, Trams, and 'Buses, and, beyond a few scenes whose humour is too French in nature to please English audiences, the capacity of animated pictures for producing BREATHLESS SENSATION, LAUGHTER AND TEARS has hardly been realised. The DAY IS PAST when anything in the way of Animated Pictures will do for an audience. Exhibitors and Managers have been asking for something New, Distinctive, Telling, and Effective; but, beyond the occasional presentation of Topical Scenes, their demands have not been met. ALL THIS IS CHANGED, for, during the past Summer a Staff of Artists and Photographers have been at work in the North of London, with the object of Producing a series of Animated Photographs (Eighty in Number), each of which tells a tale, whether Comic, Pathetic, or Dramatic; and presents it with such clearness, brilliancy and telling effect that the attention of the beholders should be rivetted. (*The Era*, 8 October, 1898, 27)

In this same advertisement Paul gives some sample titles—'The Servant Difficulty', 'The Nursery Scene', 'Come Along, Do!', 'In the Queen's Name'—and promises 'clever and natural acting' and no expense spared, 'with Specially-made Dresses and Backgrounds'. From the surviving fragment of *Come Along, Do!* (1898), as well as the descriptions of 'Comic Pictures' and 'Dramatic Scenes' given in his 1902 catalogue, we can see that this first phase of innovation through fiction continued in the line of *The Soldier's Courtship*, presenting contemporary subjects in everyday settings. Georges Sadoul described 'In the Queen's Name', i.e. *The Arrest of a Deserter*, as 'perhaps the first example in English cinema

of the “social” realism that would later be so influential internationally, especially on Pathé and Vitagraph productions, and then on Griffith’ (Sadoul 1947, 144 [my translation]).

Paul’s reference to specially made backgrounds is the only indication he gives of a difference made by the use of a studio. Comparisons can be drawn between Paul’s early studio productions and those of Georges Méliès, who built his studio in 1897 as a laboratory for the creation of unreal and imaginary places. As Ian Christie has observed (2004, 164ff.), by 1901 Paul was rivalling Mélièsian modes of inventiveness, with a section in his catalogue devoted to ‘Novel Trick and Effects Films’, but his dominant mode circa 1898 was social realism, mostly comic but sometimes pathetic, and the spaces created in his studio were, in the main, humble interiors.

The shift to studio production facilitated the creation of cinematic, rather than theatrical, tricks and effects, but a more striking difference, to my mind, is that filming in the studio also led, eventually, to filming outside of the studio, in its immediate vicinity. Paul had made fictions in real locations before: *Up the River* (1896), a ‘Scene on the River Thames, showing the rescue of a child from drowning’, is a drama staged on a stretch of the Thames west of London; *A Wayfarer Compelled Partially to Disrobe* (1897) was filmed on open ground in front of some low-rise buildings, in a park probably. By the time Paul remade *The Soldier’s Courtship* as *Tommy Atkins in the Park*, in the summer of 1898, the park setting was probably the four-acre grounds of Paul’s new premises in North London. A pair of films from around 1899, *The Bricklayer and His Mate* and *Thrilling Fight on a Scaffold*, clearly use the premises as a location, since the catalogue shows images of the same building under construction as illustrations for both, and the description for the latter begins as follows: ‘Bricklayers, labourers and carpenters are seen busily engaged on different portions of the building of PAUL’S ANIMATOGRAPH WORKS.’

Two other films in the 1902 catalogue appear, from the accompanying illustrations, to draw on the studio’s vicinity for their locations: the street in *A Lively Dispute* (1898) and the church in *A Gretna Green Wedding* (1899) both look local. (The church could be St James’s on Friern Barnet Lane and the house is of a type common near the studio, but I have yet to find the actual house.) It is, however, from 1903 onwards that we can clearly see Paul’s fiction films move from the studio onto the surrounding streets. Seven of the surviving films show streets

near the studio: *An Extraordinary Cab Accident* (1903), *Mr. Pecksniff Fetches the Doctor* (1904), *Buy Your Own Cherries* (1904), *A Victim of Misfortune* (1905), *The Medium Exposed* (1906), *The ‘?’ Motorist* (1906) and *The Fatal Hand* (1907). On the evidence of illustrations in the 1907 catalogue three now-lost films are local (*A Little Bit of Cloth*, *Blind Man’s Bluff* and *Bill Sikes Up-to-Date*), and from the descriptions of other fictions it is clear that several more were shot outside of the studio, almost certainly in the nearby streets.

This is not an unfamiliar pattern. The same thing happened in the suburbs of Paris, on a smaller scale with Méliès in Montreuil, on a much vaster scale with Pathé in Vincennes (see Lack 2018). The progressive installation of studios for film production in London’s inner and outer suburbs—Walton-on-Thames (1899), East Dulwich (1899), Mitcham (1901), Croydon (1904), Ealing (1904), Walthamstow (1910), Merton Park (1912), Twickenham (1913) and Whetstone (1913)—led naturally to the presentation on screen of those suburbs, because they furnished more natural and cheaper settings for fictions with contemporary, everyday subjects.

Robert Paul moved his facilities to the Muswell Hill area because he found there cheap land on which to build. His move coincided with the ongoing transformation of Muswell Hill from *recherché* rural retreat into a distinguished modern suburb. When he first came most of the land was occupied by bourgeois villas in spacious grounds. These were progressively bought up by entrepreneurs and built on, but by the time Paul’s studio and works were completed, around 1899, the suburb as we know it today was still being laid out. The details of its development are related by local historian Ken Gay in his chapter ‘The New Suburb Is Born’ (Gay 1999, 53–72). Muswell Hill’s distinctive aspect, ‘so varied in style and so picturesque in architecture’ (*The Alexandra Palace Magazine*, 1902, quoted in Long 1993, 60), was not yet apparent, and until 1902 or so it must have seemed more like a permanent building site than a desirable residential suburb for the well-to-do middle classes.

Paul’s four acres were not in these desirable parts, at the top of the hill, but down the northern slope towards New Southgate, in an area known as the Freehold, a working-class district of low-quality housing with a few basic shops, a school, two mission churches, several pubs and a sewage works. The Freehold was initially populated by workers who had built the nearby Alexandra Palace. As the architecturally distinctive and generally expensive suburb flourished at the top of the hill, the area

around the Freehold developed as a lower-class district, its inhabitants 'mainly artisans and casual labourers'.² The two exteriors of Paul's 1904 temperance film *Buy Your Own Cherries*, a pub and a mission church, both appear to have been taken in the Freehold, in which case the film would constitute a unique document of a district of which there is almost no photographic record from that time.

The buildings we see in Paul's films have nothing of the distinction or quality associated with Muswell Hill today. Most are modest terraced houses of a type reproduced all around London and in the suburbs of other English cities. His suburban films are not, like those he made in the streets of Central London, 'vivid reproductions of interesting places'. There were, indeed, only two 'interesting places' near the studio, the Alexandra Palace and the London County Lunatic Asylum at Colney Hatch. Paul made some topical films in Alexandra Park, one of which at least (now lost) showed the Palace itself,³ but the opportunity provided to make landmark cinema in Muswell Hill was not really taken up by Paul. In *The Unfortunate Policeman* (1905) and *The Medium Exposed*, two of the surviving fiction films, the Palace can be seen, but just as a vague silhouette in the distance. A looming building in the recently discovered *The Fatal Hand* (1907) may also be Alexandra Palace.

The Fatal Hand features a lunatic who has escaped from a fictitious asylum, 'Broadhurst', rather than from the real and local Colney Hatch which, for obvious reasons, was not available as a location for filming. Nonetheless, its proximity may have informed the film *The '??' Motorist*, in which the delinquents are seen driving along Friern Barnet Road, where Colney Hatch Asylum was situated, before ascending into the clouds. Among the buildings they fly over is a passable representation of the Lunatic Asylum.

In the absence of any other distinguishing features, the places in Paul's films register as generic. Local spectators might be able to identify actual places, but the films' general British public would register only that the settings were suburban, and only then if the spectators knew what the burgeoning suburbs of England's major cities looked like. For international audiences, the distinction between suburban and urban would not be apparent. Overall, for most audiences in this period, the generic sufficed.

Paul's films themselves do not always make clear distinctions between the urban and the suburban. *Mr. Pecksniff Fetches the Doctor* opens with a man dressing hurriedly in a studio-made bedroom, then shows him leave

a real house on a real street before arriving at the studio-made exterior of a doctor's surgery. The real house (Robert Paul's own, on Colney Hatch Lane) is suburban, but the doctor's house is urban, a cartoonish rendering of a Harley-Street-type façade. *The Unfortunate Policeman* opens outside the shop of 'Moses Isacson [*sic*], Watchmaker and Jeweller', another cartoonish rendering of an urban façade (somewhat Hatton Garden-like). The chase initiated in this opening continues in the next five shots on five real suburban streets, including the same stretch of Colney Hatch Lane seen in *Mr. Pecksmith*, outside Paul's own house.

Each of these anonymous streets, each house, shop, pub, church and railway station, serves a simple narrative function, but when aggregated these places present us with a picture of a typical London suburb at a key moment in its development. If Muswell Hill railway station, as seen in *The Fatal Hand*, had been in operation since 1873, almost all other buildings seen in Paul's suburban films were no more than ten years old. Most were newly built—the climax of *The Fatal Hand* shows the escaped lunatic climb the scaffolding of a building still under construction. The first two shots of *The '?' Motorist* show the car driving along leafy lanes with no houses in sight, but these apparently rural roads have been surfaced, the kerbs laid out and the drainage already installed: these are streets onto which the suburb is about to expand.

The proximity of the rural is a significant feature of this topography. A scene set in the countryside could be shot in fields or lanes at little distance from the studio. Sometimes a film foregrounds the proximity of rural to suburban. An image in the 1907 catalogue illustrating *The Fakir and the Footpads* shows a signpost on a country lane pointing to Southgate, still a rural village, and Finchley, a developed suburb. The catalogue description of *A Little Bit of Cloth* (now lost) announces 'a real country scene with fine lady and gentleman walking in a lane', with as first illustration a gate by a field; the second illustration, however, shows the man in the hands of the police, being carried along Colney Hatch Lane, a thoroughfare with houses and shops. The films depict rural space at a point of transition to the urban. The catalogue description of *The Unfortunate Policeman* refers to 'a country road', but what we see in the film is an already built-up street, with a hoarding at the end advertising land available for further development. A later shot at the other end of the same street shows another estate agents' hoarding, a hoarding also visible in *The Medium Exposed*. The land behind that advertisement would be developed in the following decade.

The proximity of the rural to the suburban is fully thematised in *The '??' Motorist*. The opening shot of the film is now lost, surviving only as a production still. The catalogue describes a motorist and his lady at the 'gateway of a villa'. What we see in the still is a standard suburban house with a small front garden by a narrow pavement—a villa in the most modest sense of the word. After the two shots showing it on quasi-rural roads, the motor-car evades a pursuing policeman by driving up the front of a pub and into the clouds, travelling to the Sun and then onto the rings of Saturn. The climax shows the car back on earth, where it is suddenly transformed into a countryman's cart, its occupants becoming 'a smock-froked man and his wife' (see Fig. 1). The pursuers are surprised at the transformation but do not act as if the presence of country folk in a cart was itself incongruous.

The scene was shot on Newton Avenue, a road that had been surfaced and kerbed but on which no houses had yet been built. In the



Fig. 1 The proximity of the rural and the suburban: A car turns into a countryman's cart in *The '??' Motorist* (1906)

background are houses on Sydney Road, the end of a newly built terrace, with to the left what looks like a field—a solitary horse is grazing there. The juxtaposition of rural and suburban is an apt setting for the transformation of car into cart and back again, but the setting itself is deceptive. At the edge of the field a fence is visible, and in another film from the same year, *The Medium Exposed*, we see the field again, with more of the fence and a view of what is to the left of the field: more housing. The field is in fact just a vacant lot, awaiting development.

The area in which Paul made his films has left its trace in the films themselves, but his filmmaking has left almost no trace in the area. Newton Avenue, the street on which the car in *The ‘?’ Motorist* is parked and down which it escapes, was created to give access to the film works and laboratories and was named by Paul after his enthusiasm for the great scientist. He also gave the name Newton to the house built for him on Sydney Road, to which the commemorative plaque is affixed. Paul stopped film production in 1910 and severed his connection with the district in 1920 when he moved to Holland Park. The works were taken over by the Cambridge Scientific Instrument Company, which remained on the site until 1975, at its peak employing about 750 people (see Heathfield 2001, 87). No original buildings remain, but the scientific instrument factory is still well remembered in the area. The film studio, on the other hand, is quite forgotten. The contrast with Cecil Hepworth’s studios in Walton-on-Thames is striking. Hepworth continued making films there until 1924, and film production was continued by others for decades, eventually ceasing with the closure of the Nettlefold Studios in 1961. A surviving building has become the Cecil Hepworth Playhouse, and a nearby street has been named Hepworth Way (see Warren 1995, 173–179; Hughes 2003, 63–76). No street name in Muswell Hill or New Southgate honours Robert W. Paul, and the plaque on his house is now entirely hidden by overgrowing wisteria. There is no street in Barnet named after Birt Acres, and the plaque on the house in front of which Acres made ‘the first British moving picture’ is, at time of writing, missing. For a while a local pub, The Banker’s Draft on Friern Barnet Road, featured as part of its décor many images and texts documenting the history of early filmmaking in the area, with substantial display panels devoted to Acres and Paul, but the pub closed down in 2013 and the display panels were sold off (they were bought by me).

For the present, the films alone are the site of memory. Among those that survive, those that show their locality have become useful

documents, not only for local historians but also for film historians, more and more of whom are focussed on cinema's relation to place. Historians of British cinema might usefully invert Paul's odd reference to 'Local (British) Films' and remember that British films are also always local. Most historians of London cinema already remember that, as well as being internationalist, national and urban, this cinema is also suburban. I hope to have shown that a localised reading of suburban representations changes them from generic to specific, and changes not just how we see such places on film but also how we see ourselves as viewers, because we are then positioned as local or not. That kind of positioning applies to the study of London cinema in general, but the suburban is particularly important because so much London cinema came out of suburban studios. That began with Paul and Hepworth and reached a pinnacle of sorts at the studios in Ealing. I have always thought that the study of Ealing films should begin on the streets of Ealing, Acton and Brentford. Going further I would argue that the study of cinema and the city should begin, as cinema did, in the suburbs, where film subjects are always, for the locals at least, local.⁴

NOTES

1. See: <http://www.thecinetourist.net/robert-paul-in-london-tour-guide-and-film-maker.html>.
2. British History Online: Friern Barnet: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol6/pp6-15>.
3. See *A Switchback Railway* (1898). John Barnes reproduces this catalogue description of the lost topical film, also from 1898: 'Striking panoramic picture of all the fun of the fair. Three or four swings, the Alexandra Palace, show booths, etc., pass across the picture, which is full of life and movement' (Barnes 1996c, 180). Paul filmed two airship flights at Alexandra Palace, in 1903 and 1905.
4. For more on Robert Paul in North London see 'My Local Filmmaker': <http://www.thecinetourist.net/my-local-filmmaker.html>.

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