

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London
Unit of Assessment: 32
Title of case study: Robert Paul and the Origins of British Cinema
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 – 2019
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 - December 2020
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study describes the re-discovery of lost films by Robert Paul, Britain's most important early film pioneer and thus an important part of the country's national heritage. Three exhibitions are also described which served to educate and inform the public about the importance of Paul, at the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford (the country's most important media museum), in Tottenham (near where Paul lived and worked) and in the London Metropolitan Archive (which has a previously under-used silent film collection in its media holding). A widely disseminated graphic novel was produced in partnership with the Nerve Centre, a small company who have identified new business opportunities to pursue as a consequence of this work, and the noted graphic artist ILYA (who has also changed his approach as a consequence of this project). Christie's research also facilitated Lipton Plant Architects design of a new building, 'The Light House', as a permanent tribute to Paul in Muswell Hill, close to the location of Paul's original studio.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Over the past twenty years Ian Christie has uncovered the definitive story of the unique individual Robert Paul and his role in British and world history, the films he produced, and the technical innovations he made as a celebrated engineer in his own right. This research culminated in the 2019 monograph <i>Robert Paul and the Origins of British Cinema</i> which won the prestigious US Theatre Library Association's Richard Wall Memorial Award for 2019.</p> <p>Paul's career started through replicating Edison's Kinetoscope in London in 1894. In 1896, his 'Animatograph' projector was launched and ran nightly for a further two years at Leicester Square, London. His innovations included the first film made in Britain (1895), printed titling on-screen, the illustrated film catalogue, many special effects and techniques such as the first two-shot film in <i>Come Along, Do!</i> (1898) and the first edited narratives in film, including one, <i>Scrooge</i> (1901), which was the earliest surviving screen adaptation of Dickens, and <i>Derby</i> in 1896, which showed the Prince of Wales' horse Persimmon winning the famous race. At the time, the public had never been able to witness real-life animated events without being there themselves; this was truly ground-breaking.</p> <p>Paul established one of the world's first film studios in Muswell Hill, North London, in 1898 which produced 800 films. Most of these have been lost. Those that remain were largely forgotten about. The research was more difficult because Paul did not leave an archive of personal or business papers. The British Film Institute holds only a partial collection of his sales catalogues, and the German Bundesarchiv has a small collection of correspondence from the 1930s. All other material was gathered by Prof Christie from public records, newspapers and periodicals in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Extensive contextual research was undertaken on the early electrical industry, on moving-picture development in the 1890s, on the growth of cinema between 1896-1910, on Paul's contribution to defence during the First World War, and to medical research.</p> <p>Christie compiled the first modern collection of Paul's 70 extant films in a DVD produced by the British Film Institute (BFI) in 2006 and has continued to identify further films since this date.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>Ian Christie, <i>Robert Paul and the Origins of British Cinema</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).</p>

RW Paul – The Collected Films 1895-1908, DVD; Catalogue number BFIVD642; 2006.

Animatograph! an exhibition about the life of Paul, featuring many of his original instruments. Bruce Castle, Tottenham, from 04/19-07/19.

Animatograph! an exhibition about the life of Paul, featuring many of his original instruments. The London Metropolitan Archives from 10/19-11/19.

Forgotten Showman exhibition at the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford from 12/19 to 03/20; 08/20-11/20; and 12/20-02/21.

Grants: A Paul Mellon Centre for British Art Senior Fellowship(2013-2014); An Australian National University fellowship (2014) funded research in Canberra and Sydney.

4. Details of the impact

In a *Guardian* piece lamenting Britain's lack of concern with its film history, Peter Domankiewicz highlights the efforts of Christie to uncover and remember Robert Paul's role in this, on the 150th anniversary of his birth. [1a]]

Early silent film (typically classified as being from ~1895-1929) is rare. Of the >10,000 films that were released by major studios in this period, the US Library of Congress estimates only 14% survive. These films offer historians a unique opportunity to see real-life, real-time historical figures, settings and details as well as providing insights into attitudes about (at the time) current events and at times can provide crucial evidence to correct the historical record. [1c]

(Re)Discovery of Robert Paul films: Paul created hundreds of films but most have been lost. In the census period for impact, by piecing together clues from Paul's remaining source material and early film catalogues Christie has successfully located and identified two full films by Paul, *The Pocket Boxers* (1903) in the British Pathé collection, and *Bloodhounds Tracking a Convict* (1903) in the Norwegian National Film Archive. He has also identified a fragment of Paul's *The Burning House* (1909) in the Huntley Archive.

He also directly supported the positive identification of Paul films located by others. Christie's help was 'vital' for the identification of Paul films at the Swedish Film Institute, *The Fatal Hand* (1907), *A Collier's Life* (1904) *Short-Sighted Sammy or the Stolen Spectacles* (1905). [2a] *A Collier's Life* is particularly significant and has been heralded as 'the birth of British documentary film'. [2b]

Christie's research on Paul has also added greatly to the BFI's data and knowledge on this important figure in our film history. Films have been identified, correctly catalogued and restored. The BFI has benefitted from Christie's research in collections in Italy, Norway, Australia and the USA, where Christie has identified many new titles. Thanks to Christie, the BFI are gradually adding to the national collection by acquiring copies of these films through the inter-archival exchange process. As well as the films outlined above, these include *The Soldier's Courtship*, *Fun on the Clothesline*, and *The Dreamer's Dance*. All of these are being made available for all through a recent project to digitise the whole of the BFI's collection of Victorian film on [BFI Player](#). These films are a vital part of British, and world, cultural history, and this work includes a rich section dedicated to Paul, enabled by Christie's research. The legacy of Ian's work in the context of the newly accessible films, and particularly his book, will be profound both for film history and for the BFI's remit to preserve, make accessible and understandable the film heritage of this nation. This work will return Robert Paul to the pantheon of pioneer filmmakers and turn of the century London to the history books as a crucible of film invention. [1b]

At the National Science and Media Museum, Christie also identified 18 Paul titles which had been thought lost. [3]

Popularising Robert Paul: Christie's work has had an enormous impact popularising the memory of Paul to audiences in Britain and abroad, with considerable knock-on effects on artists, museums, community organisations and business.

Christie designed *Animatograph!* an exhibition about the life of Paul, featuring many of his original instruments. This was displayed at Bruce Castle, Tottenham, near Paul's film studio in Muswell Hill, between 04/19 and 07/19, and subsequently at the London Metropolitan Archives between 10/19 and 11/19. A major redesigned and expanded version called *Forgotten Showman* was held at the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford between 12/19 and 03/20 (viewed by over 30,000 people) and again between 08/20 and 11/20 and between 12/20 and 02/21 (the extensions being due to Covid as well as popularity). [3] *Forgotten Showman* was described by the reviewer in the *Museums Journal* as 'one of the best exhibitions I've seen in a while, being both daring in its execution and true to its subject matter'. [4]

Visitor comments across all 3 exhibitions express the common sentiment that Paul, despite being such an important figure, was unknown to them prior to the exhibition:

The exhibition had significant impacts on all three venues. For the London Metropolitan Archives it attracted increased attention' to its archival collections related to Paul and silent film generally, and also expanded its audience for the films available to watch on site in the LMA Mediatheque. [6a] Bruce Castle also gained new audiences as a result, and the exhibition raised their profile significantly. Visitor feedback was overwhelmingly positive and visitors actively participated in associated events to learn more. Its success was such that as a result the museum are currently planning new, more permanent displays to better mark the significance of the local area to British and world cinema history, including the acquisition of new items for our collections. [6b]

The exhibition at the National Science and Media Museum enabled staff to make innovative and better use of the range of their collections and develop new skills and techniques for showing film, including original, combustible, film fragments. The exhibition enabled them to showcase items donated by Paul himself which had not been on general display for some time. Paul's eclectic career not just as a filmmaker but as an inventor meant it was one of the few exhibitions where they had been able to draw directly from multiple Science Museum Group collections to support the narrative including their 'Electricity and Magnetism', 'Mathematics', and 'Therapeutics' Collections. The popularity of the social history aspects was also important for a science museum keen to attract new audiences. [3]

A central innovation for the exhibitions and supporting activities was the creation of 12,000 copies of a comic, *Time Traveller: Robert Paul and the invention of cinema* (2019). Christie wrote the story in collaboration with renowned artist ILYA, who developed the panels. Expanded versions of the panels formed a major feature in all three exhibitions. [7] At Bruce Castle, the interactive design and content of the graphic panels alongside original films and equipment had great community impact and the layering of different learning styles encouraged engagement in the exhibition. The comic was especially important in this regard, proving 'n invaluable and accessible heritage resource which was relevant and appealing, especially to the 12-16 years' age group, a particularly hard-to-reach audience in the heritage sector' [6b]

ILYA's artworks formed the entire basis of the design of Bradford's show, which also involved a further commission of bespoke artworks, a Top Trumps style game, wall displays and more. [7] These were not simply replicated from the comic but featured new graphics with new text to work with the new objects and interactive elements of the exhibition. The National Science and Media Museum had not previously worked with a graphic artist for an exhibition so this was an entirely original experience, but hugely beneficial. Using a visual method to present a story of the development of a visual medium was a perfect marriage and was more visually engaging, with the transfer of the tone and style of the comic providing a very different feel to the usual exhibition text. The audience evaluation told us that our target audiences wanted the combination of both illustration and text and of our

general visitors, at least three quarters referred to the illustrations, compared to less than half who read the text next to it. [3]

For the Museum, Mirroring the more playful text, we also displayed objects in ways we have not tried before, for example to demonstrate the rivalry between Robert Paul and the Lumiere Brothers and their respective projection equipment, we staged the two in a fake boxing ring 'facing off' against each other with illustrations provided by the artist ILYA. This enabled visitors to become more engaged with the drama and competitiveness of the time and challenge the traditional view of objects in glass cases to be found in Museums. [3] For ILYA, despite having worked with major companies such as DC Comics, this process had a significant impact and he has since developed similar work on the poet Chatterton for the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership. Having *Time Traveller* as a successful publication helps him make such things happen. [7]

The comic was widely distributed, including 2,000 copies sent to subscribers of the November 2019 issue of *Sight & Sound*, who described the comic as an example of inventive, lively thinking on how to present study of early cinema. Their reader feedback demonstrated that their coverage of early cinema is a key appeal for many readers, and material on relatively underexplored areas within early cinema is of crucial importance. Christie's comic, along with an article by him in the magazine itself, offered that sense of new discovery in an authoritative and clear way. Their readers look to us for coverage of cinema they don't get elsewhere, and here was a key example of a crucial figure in the development of cinema – and British cinema in particular – being presented in an engaging way. [8a] Another key audience for the comic were attendees at the Giornate del Cinema Muto (Pordenone Silent Film Festival, the world's oldest and largest archival silent film festival, now entering its 39th edition), with 250 copies presented to donors at the 2019 festival. Each year, over 1,000 people attend the festival, including archivists from the world's major archives, film conservators and restorers, academics and the public.

The comic was produced by the Nerve Centre, a small company employing 54 staff across Derry and Belfast, with three people working directly on the comic itself. It has published ten educational graphic novels since 2012, all related to twentieth-century Ireland. *Time Traveller* was a new direction for the company. The comic presented them with a new source of funding for their graphic novels, with a grant of £7,500 (or GBP7500) from Northern Ireland Screen.

A key attraction for the Nerve Centre was the opportunity to work closely with ILYA, an internationally celebrated artist, and to publish his work. The project has opened up new distribution outlets, especially the subscribers of *Sight and Sight Magazine*. [9]

North London: Christie's series of talks on Paul in North London significantly benefitted a range of local community and civic organisations, attracting new audiences, boosting their revenue, and enhancing a sense of local pride. [10a] Christie was further influential in the creation of what will be a permanent marker to Paul in Muswell Hill. Lipton Plant Architects were granted planning approval in 2019 for a new mixed-use building near Paul's former film studio which they called 'The Light House'. They wanted a specific creative brief that would be a bespoke, site-specific result that is recognisably original, intelligently resolved, aesthetic, enduring and valuable. The final design emulates a film projector, and takes inspiration from Paul's studio, which they learned about during their background research on the area. [10b]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1a. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/19/twenty-years-after-momi-who-cares-about-britains-film-history>

1b. Written statement.

1c. [Why We Need to Keep Searching for Lost Silent Films | History | Smithsonian Magazine](#)

2a. Email statement.

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- 2b. <http://ithankyouarthur.blogspot.com/2019/10/godfathers-day-happy-birthday-mr-paul.html>
3. Written statement and associated material.
4. Jamie Taylor, 'Reel-life pioneer', *Museums Journal*, November/December 2020, pp. 42-4.
- 5a. Visitor books from Bruce Castle and London Metropolitan Archives.
- 5b. <https://piecesofthepast.home.blog/2019/12/28/the-forgotten-showman-at-the-national-science-and-media-museum-why-cinematographer-robert-paul-should-be-remembered/>
- 6a. Email statement.
- 6b. Written statement.
7. Written statement.
- 8a. Written statement.
- 8b. Written statement.
9. Written statement.
- 10a. Written statements.
- 10b. Written statement.