

Berwick Silents

How the Cinema Came to Town

The history of early cinema in big cities is relatively well-documented. The manner in which moving pictures were introduced to smaller towns and rural areas is less familiar. The remoteness of Berwick-upon-Tweed from major urban centres makes it an interesting example of the way in which the new medium of film permeated the country at large during the era of silent cinema, from 1895 to 1930.

Leaving to one side the complex debates about which nations and which individuals deserve the most credit for launching the cinema before the public, one date which has particular significance is 28 December 1895: on this day in Paris the Lumière brothers held the first public screening using their Cinématographe, a device which was able both to film and to project moving pictures. The Lumières swiftly exploited the sensation caused by their invention by holding demonstrations not just in France but in the major cities of Europe and beyond. On 20 February 1896 it was seen for the first time in London at the Polytechnic Institution in Regent Street, and shortly afterwards it began an extended run at the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square which lasted for well over a year. The Cinématographe went on to tour the country (and the world) but principally in major cities. It appeared in Edinburgh for a fortnight from 1 June 1896, and made two return visits in July and September. Similar demonstrations were given in Newcastle's Empire Theatre in June, August and October of 1896.¹

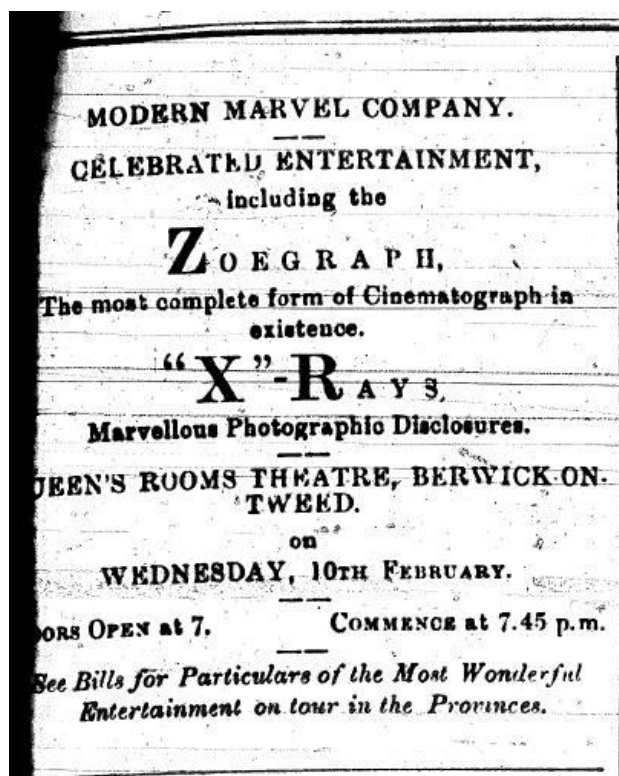
Outside the major centres of entertainment, the arrival of film shows depended on their introduction into the programmes of the travelling showmen who would make occasional visits to smaller towns such as Berwick. There was already a tradition of itinerant lecturers who would illustrate their talks with magic lantern shows and "limelight views". Another of the most popular forms of entertainment was the variety show, offering a mixed programme of music, song and dance, comedians, acrobats, jugglers and animal acts. The short formats of early films fitted easily into these types of show, and from the latter part of 1896 travelling entertainers and fairground proprietors began to incorporate film projections into their programmes.² One of the early showmen to seize the opportunities offered by the new medium was T.J. West, who had developed a career in theatrical management, for many years taking touring shows around Scotland, the north of England, and further afield. In the mid-1890s West appears to have

set up the Modern Marvel Company for the specific purpose of presenting new scientific inventions in the guise of entertainment.

Berwick's first filmshows

The first documented presentation of moving pictures in Berwick-upon-Tweed took place on Wednesday 10 February 1897, at the Queen's Rooms in Hide Hill. The advertisement declared that the Modern Marvel Company offered "the Most Wonderful Entertainment on tour in the Provinces", and the programme's two featured highlights were the Zoegraph and X-Rays.³ The Zoegraph is described as "the most complete form of Cinematograph in existence", but apart from its brief promotion by West's company during 1897 it is otherwise undocumented. It may have been a version of the Theatrograph, R.W. Paul's British rival to the Lumière projector, or else one of the numerous parallel inventions which were swiftly developed in Britain during 1896 as the popularity of the new medium became apparent.

Regrettably the Berwick newspapers did not report on the event to leave us a record of what the film programme contained and how it was received by the audience (nor indeed what was done with the X-rays). However a few weeks later the Modern Marvel Company took its inventions to the Town Hall in St Andrews and a local newspaper did give a brief report of the event: "The zoegraph depicted a series of marvellous animated photographs, and the illustrations by means of the 'X' rays were also particularly good. Not the least interesting was Mr West's short illustrated lecture on 'Dr Nansen and the Fram', attractively told, and, the programme being supplemented by views of a miscellaneous character, the interest of the audience was never allowed to flag, and they expressed themselves delighted."⁴ This makes it clear that the format of West's programme at this stage was in the field of popular science, incorporating an account of the Norwegian explorer Nansen's recently reported 3-year expedition to attempt to reach the North Pole.



The first screening of moving pictures in Berwick was announced in this advertisement in the Berwick Advertiser, 5 February 1897.

One other account of a programme by the Modern Marvel Company has survived, albeit from some months later by which time the content had no doubt been to some extent altered. The 16-year old Enid Robinson kept a diary in which she recorded that for a Christmas treat she was taken to see the Modern Marvel Company's "Cinematograph" at the Mechanics' Institute in Darlington, on 18 December 1897:

"It is a wonderful invention by which a thousand or more photographs are thrown on to a screen by means of an oxy-hydrogen lantern with such rapidity as to give the appearance of movement of the figures.

The first view was one of the best. First you saw a station with a few porters walking about and talking and a French cook walking up and down with this dog, which wagged its tail, and looked round till you would have thought you were looking at a real dog and man! Then a train appears in the distance on the right hand side. It comes nearer, nearer, nearer until it stops in the station. All is as large as life.

Then the porters suddenly wake into action. The stationmaster walks along with his coat-tails blowing in the wind and his flag in his hand..."⁵

T.J. West's career as a cinema impresario continued until his death in 1916, and in the early 1900s he became a major figure in the establishment of cinema in Australia and New Zealand. Thanks to him Berwick had the opportunity to see the new medium of film within 12 months of its first public appearances in Britain.⁶

It was a further nine months before the next film presentation in Berwick, and on this occasion the venue was the Corn Exchange. "On Thursday 25 November 1897 at 8 o'clock Mr Lindon Travers F.R.G.S. will give his well-known Entertainment, What I Saw in South Africa: Song, Scene, and Story, 16,000 Miles by Land and Sea. 100 colossal pictures. Talking machine, reproducing the voices of the natives. All can hear it at the same time, perfected Kinematographe, moving pictures, perfectly steady."⁷ The format was clearly in the tradition of the illustrated lecture, though Lindon Travers was known in his earlier career as a bass-baritone singer who performed in touring music-hall entertainments. For this event the *Berwick Advertiser* did provide a record:

"LINDON TRAVERS IN BERWICK. Last night Lindon Travers (Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society) the famous traveller and raconteur gave his new lecture-entertainment on 'What I saw in South Africa' to an appreciative audience. Mr Lindon Travers who has recently returned from South Africa, where he interviewed many of the most interesting personages [... and] made a capital collection of photographs to

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illustrate the facts which he narrated, maintained the rapt and close attention of his hearers from beginning to end as he described all that he saw [... on] his voyage to Cape Town, his tour through [...] Colony, the Transvaal and other countries. Lindon Travers possesses great powers as a lecturer, with an attractive style which enlists the sympathies of his audience. He showed himself to be well up in his subject, and to be a keen observer. Additional enjoyment was imparted to the entertainment by the animated photographs and by the kinematograph and the talking machine." ⁸

Interest in touring filmshows was now gathering pace, and in the early months of 1898 there were three further visits to Berwick. On 19-20 January, Slade's Electro Photo Marvel came to the Queen's Rooms for three performances of "animated pictures" among which the advertised attraction was film of the London Diamond Jubilee Procession.⁹ This had taken place in June 1897 as the highlight of celebrations for the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession; troops from all parts of the Empire took part in the processions and thousands of people lined the 6-mile route. The development of moving pictures meant that for the first time people living far from the capital could obtain a realistic impression of a great national event.

In mid-March 1898, Lindon Travers made a return visit to Berwick bringing another travel-lecture called "America in a Merry Key", with his Kinematograph, "larger than life".¹⁰

Then, in mid-April, Lumsden's Great Cinematographic Exhibition brought a further selection of films of the 1897 Jubilee Procession, and after the presentation of this show in Berwick it was taken on for further performances in Horncliffe, Lowick, and Ayton.¹¹

One notable feature of all three of these events is that they also featured musical and variety acts as part of the programme, framing the novelty of film projection within the more established format of the touring music-hall. Over the next couple of years Berwick seems to have had only a few opportunities to grow more familiar with moving pictures, and their occasional visits offered both mixed entertainment films and contemporary news items, such as scenes from South Africa where the Boer War had assumed growing international importance. It is likely that there were also some displays of 'animated pictures' among the entertainments at local fairs at this period, such as the May Fair in Berwick, but these have gone unreported.

Travelling showmen

In September 1901 Berwick received its first visit from one of the other major touring companies, Scott's Cinematograph. Thomas James Scott was born in Newcastle in the late 1850s, and after early employment as a 'brass finisher' and a magazine proprietor he became by 1891 a Magic Lantern exhibitor.¹² Early in 1898, like T.J. West and the Modern Marvel Company, he had established Scott's Cinematograph and was touring it around various towns and cities of Scotland and northern England.¹³ By 1901 one of the special characteristics that he promoted in his shows was the screening of films of local interest to local people. This type of film is best known today through the extraordinary preservation of the work of the Blackburn-based Mitchell & Kenyon, who developed a major business of filming scenes of ordinary life, often in the streets or the workplace, and screening them, sometimes within hours of the filming, for local audiences who might easily recognise themselves or their friends in what they saw. Thomas Scott's programme in Berwick offered "Local Living Pictures" including scenes of a reception for the Berwick Volunteers, the congregation leaving the Parish Church, the return of the Belford Volunteers - and many others.¹⁴ Earlier in the year Scott had taken film of Lord Armstrong's funeral procession to Rothbury where "many present recognised themselves or their neighbours in the funeral procession".¹⁵ At Alyth in Perthshire in October 1901 Scott's show won special enthusiasm for his film of "the presentation of war medals ceremony at Perth last Saturday".¹⁶ Sadly none of Scott's early topical films of local areas appears to have survived, and the earliest known film footage of Berwick dates from 1911.

Thomas Scott's career as a travelling cinema showman continued for a further decade until, around 1913, he set up a permanent picture house in Peebles. With his sons he went on to establish and run other cinemas in Dunbar, North Berwick, Penicuik, Linlithgow, Galashiels, and Kilbirnie.¹⁷

Another popular travelling show which began to incorporate film projection in its performances was Poole's Myriorama. During the 19th century the Poole family had developed a distinctive form of entertainment in which the audience watched a series of panoramas, or dioramas, of real or imaginary scenes painted on canvas sheets moved on rollers, usually with a musical accompaniment and sometimes with a lecturer to describe the views displayed. By the 1880s there were five Poole brothers involved in managing shows of this kind, and Charles W. Poole coined the title of Myriorama as the family's brand name. Sometimes the scenes which they depicted were based on the latest international events, particularly the exploits of the army in different parts of the British Empire. These alongside more picturesque or exotically entertaining scenes broadened the appeal of the shows to adults

as well as children. The arrival of the cinematograph posed an obvious threat to the survival of the Myriorama, and the Pooles met it immediately by including film projections among their traditional displays - thereby extending the popularity of their shows until the 1920s.¹⁸

One of these modernised Myrioramas came to Berwick's Corn Exchange for a week in August 1903, and a review in the *Berwick Journal* acknowledged both its delights and its liabilities:

"Variety is the keynote of Messrs Poole's Diorama entertainment, and is exactly what one would expect in a tour round the world.... All the capitals of Europe are visited in about half an hour. Interposed from time to time were cannonades and explosions and fires.... The Polar regions, the Indian Empire, elephants in procession, the tea-gardens of China, the relief of Ladysmith, the Fifth Cataract, the Pan-American Exhibition - and Sir Francis Drake on Plymouth Hoe.... Too many 'effects' - bombardments, explosions, eruptions... The oxygen in the room was limited, and the explosions made the atmosphere very thick towards the end of the evening." As well as the acrobats, singers, and performing dogs which featured in the show, "there is a very distinct cinematograph, whose moving pictures, even though they may not be all new, never fail to interest and amuse."¹⁹

From 1902 onwards, film entertainments in Berwick gradually became more frequent during the winter months, with return visits from Poole's, Scott's, and Lindon Travers. In 1904 the advertisements for some cinema performances included for the first time the titles of some specific films in the programme rather than just the general attraction of "animated pictures". At a performance at the Drill Hall in Duns (1st March 1904), T.J. West's Modern Marvel Syndicate presented three films from the French Pathé company (all made by one of Pathé's principal directors, Lucien Nonguet), including *Puss in Boots (Le Chat botté)*, 1903.²⁰ In October 1904, the MacGregor Henderson company brought to Berwick "the gorgeous coloured pantomime *Ali Baba*", described as "the most beautiful film ever exhibited". *Ali Baba* was another Pathé production, from 1902, made by the prolific Ferdinand Zecca (who also contributed to *Le Chat botté*), and the 8-minute film was hand-coloured by a process of stencilling to intensify its effect.²¹ (Both *Ali Baba* and *Le Chat botté* are films which have survived, and they can sometimes be found freely available for viewing on the internet.)

In April 1905, the work of another British film pioneer, Alfred J. West, made the first of several appearances in Berwick, under the title "Our Navy and Our Army". Alfred West (no relation of T.J. West above) belonged to a family of photographers in Gosport, and he began his long-running series of naval

and military films in 1898, soon finding appreciative audiences for them among the royal family as well as the wider public. Reviewing the performance, the *Berwick Journal* described it as "the best cinematograph shown in Berwick".²² West's programmes of patriotic films continued to tour the country until the advent of the First World War, when they were used in Berwick to assist the recruitment drive for the armed forces.²³

Venues

Until 1909, the visiting filmshows in Berwick appeared either at the Queen's Rooms or, more often, at the Corn Exchange. (Although the Corn Exchange may have been the preferred venue, during one of the short seasons it was announced by the promoter, W.C.T. Burns, that "owing to the difficulty of properly darkening the Corn Exchange in the afternoons, the Saturday matinees have had to be cancelled".²⁴) However, in November 1909 a new venue was announced, the Central Picture Hall, seemingly intended to serve as a dedicated auditorium for showing films. It was situated at 53 Hide Hill (thus lying between the Queen's Rooms and Silver Street).²⁵ The initial advertisements declared: "The [Central Picture Hall] will be opened as a Picture Palace on November 22nd. After extensive alterations -- A most up-to-date Series of Cinematograph Pictures will be shown, together with vocal and other variety turns. Don't forget the date. Twice nightly at 7 and 9. Prices of admission 2d, 3d, and 6d. Tom Gilbert, Manager."²⁶ The *Berwick Journal* then reported: "The Garage Hall which has been acquired by the Central Picture Coy., with Mr Tom Gilbert as manager, was opened as the Central Picture Hall on Monday night.... At both exhibitions on Monday night the audiences were numerous."²⁷

The series of programmes at the Central Picture Hall ran from late November 1909 until early March 1910 (during which time there was apparently no competition from the previous two venues). However, when film programmes resumed in the autumn of 1910, they were once again at the Queen's Rooms and then at the Corn Exchange (which confirmed its role by adding the label of "Picture Palace" to its name).²⁸ No further advertisements appeared for films at the Central Picture Hall, and by April 1911 manager Tom Gilbert was working for the "Berwick Picture Co" at the Corn Exchange.²⁹

There is evidence of just one further use of the Central Picture Hall for film projection, unusually in the month of July 1911, and for a special occasion. An advertisement in the *Berwick Journal* (below) now described it as the Electric Theatre, Central Hall, and it announced that Grand Star Pictures would present a week of performances from Monday 10 July at which they would show film of the Berwick May Fair, as well as the Coronation

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procession in London (George V was crowned on 22 June 1911).³⁰ The film of the May Fair is the earliest known film of Berwick that survives; it includes scenes of the horse judging in The Parade, and a procession down Hide Hill. (A copy of the film is held by Berwick Record Office.)

From the autumn of 1911 until spring 1914, film performances were re-established in the Queen's Rooms, as the Hounsell company put on extended seasons each year between September and early May. These were the years during which cinema became an established form of popular entertainment; the number of films shown increased, and the length of the principal films shown was gradually extended to bring in the idea of the 'feature film' which has prevailed ever since. In January 1913 Berwick audiences were able to see *La Reine Élisabeth* (1912) featuring Sarah Bernhardt as Elizabeth I, a four-reel film which would have run for about 45 minutes.³¹ In October of that year, the Italian film *Quo vadis?* (1912) reached Berwick, not only the most spectacular film yet seen but one which had a running time of around 2 hours.³² It was followed in November by a French production of *Les Misérables* (1913), whose rendering of Hugo's novel lasted for about 2 hours 45 minutes.³³ These blockbusters were very much the exception and not the rule, but they indicate how far film programmes had evolved from the earlier formats of multiple items lasting just a few minutes each.³⁴

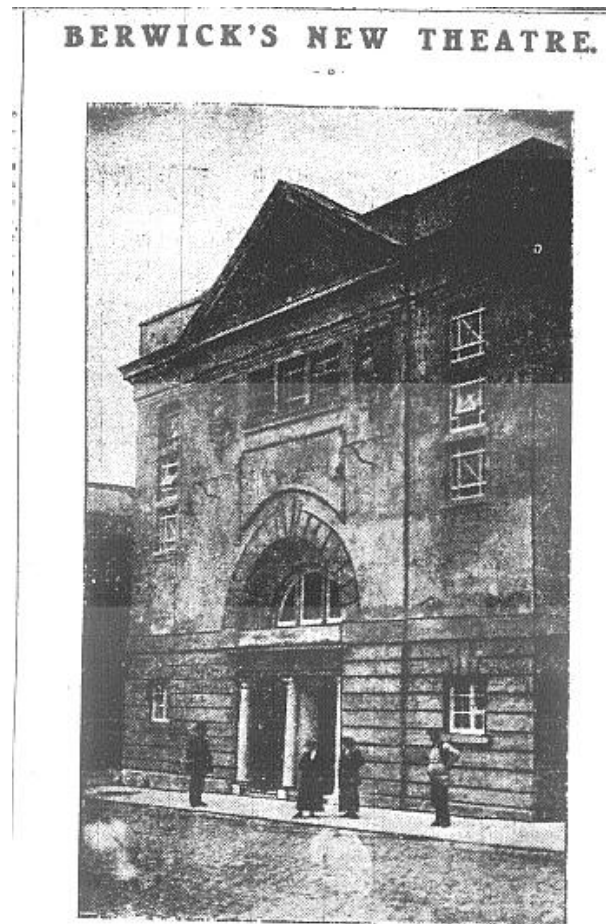
The Playhouse

Established popularity for the cinema brought forth a demand for dedicated premises in which to present films to their best advantage. A wave of early 'picture palaces' appeared around the country during the years leading up to the First World War;³⁵ and in May 1913 it was announced that a permanent cinema was to be built on a site in Sandgate.³⁶ The Playhouse opened for business a year later on 22 May 1914, under the ownership of a company called Pictureland (Berwick) Limited, in which there were a number of local shareholders. The manager was Walter Taylor, an experienced cinema manager from Yorkshire.³⁷



The local papers reported approvingly of the new building's design and decor. "Externally, the 'Playhouse' enhances the appearance of Sandgate; internally it is comfortable, well-lit, excellently ventilated. The seating accommodation is of city standard...."³⁸ "Three huge cement plaques, representing dolphins, mouths agape, adorn the front of the walls.... The whole scheme of decoration in the hall is after the style of Wedgwood, blue and white... Gold and crimson curtains..."³⁹

Now films could be shown all year round on six nights a week (with the occasional variation of vaudeville shows) in a theatre which could accommodate over 1000 people - an astonishing figure when one surveys the limited dimensions of the site today. The launch of the Playhouse sought to emphasise the respectability and high quality of its presentations - with lady attendants in Quaker uniforms, a front-of house commissioner, and a house orchestra - to allay concerns that picture-shows were unwholesomely associated with fairgrounds and the music-hall.⁴⁰ The opening programme was headed by *The House of Temperley*, a quality British production adapted from a novel by Conan Doyle. Thereafter the programmes, which would usually have included a medium-length feature accompanied by a mixture of short comedy films and documentary or news items, were changed twice a week. Films were sourced from Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Denmark and USA. Among the more unexpected attractions which the earliest Playhouse audiences saw were examples of "talking pictures" (which were achieved by playing synchronised gramophone recordings alongside the films) and also colour films (most notably the British production *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1914) which was a 50-minute feature filmed in the short-lived Kinemacolor system.⁴¹



The photo is a reproduction of "The Playhouse," the new theatre which has been erected in Sandgate, Berwick.. Our photo is by Mr J. Nowson, New East Farm.

This early photograph from the Berwick Advertiser (5 June 1914) shows the original design of the front of the Playhouse, with doorway pillars, windows, and a pediment and parapet.

Cinema in the First World War ⁴²

Within three months of the opening of the Playhouse, the nation was at war with Germany, and cinema managers were quick to see the opportunities which it gave them to establish a new and patriotic relationship with the public. Just three days after the declaration of war, the *Berwick Advertiser* reported on the Playhouse: "The up-to-date and businesslike methods of the manager, Mr Taylor, are shown by the fact that on the screen every night he publishes the latest war news. Great enthusiasm has prevailed at every performance during the week. The orchestra rendered nightly 'Rule Britannia' and 'God Save the King', and the audience joined in the singing, while cheers were given when a photograph of the King appeared on the screen."⁴³

Three weeks later, a further report reveals in more detail what drew people to the cinema: "Pictures dealing with the war were shown in abundance on Monday night.... Pictures of the different class of vessels in the British Navy proved of much interest. Photos of the most prominent personages in the war were also shown. The performances on Wednesday night were in aid of the local war relief fund, and at both 'houses' the place was filled to overflowing.... At each performance the latest war telegrams are shown, but it is the intention of Mr T[a]ylor, the Manager, to exhibit shortly actual films of the War."⁴⁴

Compared with the dry text and limited photography that appeared in newspapers and official pamphlets, images on the cinema screen must have brought a startling immediacy to news of the war, even if early film footage was largely limited to the home front because cameramen were initially banned from filming at the front line. When in mid-December 1914 the German navy bombarded Scarborough, Whitby, and Hartlepool, causing many deaths and casualties, the Playhouse was able to screen a news film, *The East Coast Raid*, within a fortnight of the event.⁴⁵

The programming of fiction films also shifted swiftly in favour of military subjects in the closing months of 1914, and words such as "honour", "battle" and "supremacy" appeared regularly among the advertised titles. And by the end of the year and early 1915, one of the most popular subjects featured was stories about German spies.

As the war advanced, and the real news of casualties affected more and more people personally, the number of films at the Playhouse which made explicit reference to the war diminished, and a greater emphasis upon comedies appeared in its advertisements. One of the great cultural phenomena of the war years was the rise to worldwide fame of Charlie

Chaplin, and his name first appeared in Berwick programmes in April 1915 in his Keystone comedies *The Property Man* and *The Masquerader*.⁴⁶ Thereafter his films became a regular feature of programmes - at least when the cinema could get hold of them amid intense national competition for copies. Mabel Normand, Fatty Arbuckle, and the now largely forgotten British character Pimple, were other regular comic favourites.

The war itself however continued to draw an audience when some exceptional representation of it was on offer. One of the most notable productions was *The Battle of the Somme*, a 75-minute official documentary which, even though its content was carefully managed to avoid the demoralisation of its audiences, showed unprecedented scenes of the battlefield and trenches, troop encampments and the medical stations, including images of dead and wounded soldiers.⁴⁷ It was filmed in late June and early July 1916, and first shown in London on 10 August.⁴⁸ Over the next two months, with the endorsement of the prime minister, Lloyd George, it was shown around the country (while the battle itself still continued) and it is reckoned that 20 million people in Britain saw it. It came to The Playhouse for a week at the start of October, and demand was such that it was brought back again in December.⁴⁹ In March 1917, Berwick also saw the follow-up documentary, *The Battle of the Ancre*, which showed for the first time the use of tanks, and which enjoyed comparable success around the country.⁵⁰ Evidently presentations such as these were capable of reaching all classes of British society, and by the end of the war, film was recognised as being one of the chief means of conveying information and shaping opinion.

Another contribution of the cinema to the war effort was involuntary: in May 1916 the government introduced an Entertainment Tax which applied to cinemas and theatres. Until then, ticket prices at the Playhouse had remained the same since its opening, ranging from 2 pence for the "Pit" to 1 shilling for a seat in the Balcony (and half price for children). The new tax raised the price of admission to the Pit to 2½d and for the Balcony to 1s 2d - thereby placing the heaviest penalty proportionately on the cheapest seats. The Playhouse labelled it a "War Tax" but it continued in force well beyond the end of the war, and it contributed to an overall decline in cinema attendance for several years.⁵¹

At least the Playhouse was not one of the 700 British cinemas which had closed by 1918, even though it may have struggled to find new films to fill its programmes and its press advertisements had become noticeably smaller and more tentative.⁵² By the last year of the war, the British and European film industries were in disarray, and American companies had asserted their dominance over film distribution. The Playhouse's programmes reflected this

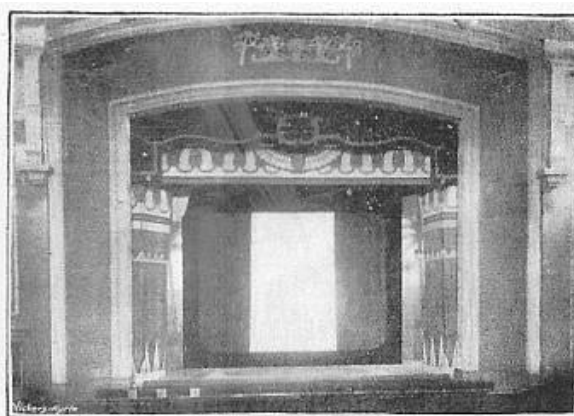
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with over three-quarters of its features coming from the United States, and the emphasis for attracting war-weary audiences was on escapist adventures and the allure of new stars such as William S. Hart and Tom Mix, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Most of all it was Charlie Chaplin who became a mainstay of programming during the war years and after, and his classic two-reelers were shown and reshowed at the Playhouse many times over.

The 1920s

The 1920s were the heyday of silent cinema, and there was a plentiful supply of films of all levels of quality. Although the Queen's Rooms still occasionally offered its own film performances, the Playhouse continued to be Berwick's main home for cinema and it maintained a regular pattern of programming, Monday to Saturday, with continuous performances in the evenings and a Saturday matinee. There were normally two programmes each week, changing on Monday and Thursday, but occasionally there would be a special programme (in

later parlance maybe an 'arthouse' film) presented on a Wednesday for one day only. American films were now dominant in the English-speaking world and provided most of the entertainments shown in Berwick. This was however not without some resistance, and in the early 1920s it is not unusual to find individual films being highlighted as "British productions" with British subjects or locations. Although European film production had lost its pre-war share of the market, some continental films of recognised distinction continued to find an occasional place in the Playhouse's programmes. The Swedish films, *The Phantom Carriage* (Victor Sjöström, 1921) and *Erotikon* (Mauritz Stiller, 1920), both came to Berwick in February 1923; the French spectacular *Michel Strogoff* (Victor Tourjansky, 1926) was seen in 1927; and two of Carl Theodor Dreyer's early works, *The Parson's Widow* (1920) and *The Master of the House* (1925), also had showings. It is also interesting to note that some of the stars who were given the largest typeface in advertisements are names that are little remembered today: Alla Nazimova, the celebrated Russian stage actress who had moved



DAINTY AND COMFORTABLE.

Continuous Performances Nightly,
:: and on Saturday Afternoons. ::

This advertisement for the Playhouse in the early 1920s gives an idea of its interior design

to Hollywood in 1917, and Sessue Hayakawa, the Japanese actor who overcame racial prejudices to become hugely popular in the 1910s and 1920s, both featured prominently in Berwick's film adverts, alongside the regular mention of Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton. On the other hand, when a short romantic film of 1922, *The Letters*, reached Berwick, the Playhouse was able to promote it by pointing out, "With Hugh Miller, Berwick's own screen actor".⁵³ (Hugh Miller (1889-1976) was born in Berwick-upon-Tweed. His career in British cinema extended from the 1920s until 1962, when he had a small part in *Lawrence of Arabia*.)

The chance preservation of a running order sheet for The Playhouse in 1924 gives a sample of how a programme was composed.

Programme: Thursday to Saturday 28th to 30th August 1924		
First Circuit		Second Circuit
6.30 - 6.40	"Autumn" (Nature study)	8.30 - 8.40
6.40 - 7.55	"Wembley"	8.40 - 9.55
7.55 - 8.00	Latest News	9.55 - 10.00
8.00 - 8.10	"Colonel Meezaller" (Cartoon)	10.00 - 10.10
8.10 - 8.18	Miss Hall of Tweedmouth	10.10 - 10.18
8.18 - 8.25	"Aesops Fables" (Cartoon)	10.18 - 10.25

The main feature "Wembley" seems to have been "The Wembley Exhibition", a British Pathé 5-reel documentary released on 8 August 1924.⁵⁴

The Theatre

Some serious competition for the Playhouse appeared in 1928 when Berwick's second cinema opened for business. As its name suggested, The Theatre, at the upper end of Hide Hill, was designed to allow both film and stage performances (like the Playhouse), and it also incorporated a café. It opened at the start of February 1928, and it was described as follows:

"The whole building is in Greek design and constructed in artificial stone. On the front on Hide Hill there is an entrance loggia, the four square columns of which are faced with terrazza work.... The area [i.e. stalls] of the Theatre ... seats 754, tip-up seats being provided.... The stage measures 26 feet by 54 feet in width.... The stage is fitted with every modern equipment for lighting effects, special limelight galleries being provided. The projection from the cinema apparatus is from the rear of the curtain, the apparatus itself being in a fireproof building outside the theatre, and can be cut off

immediately by means of a steel shutter in the event of an outbreak of fire. A further safeguard against fire is the asbestos curtain which is fixed in heavy steel frames and works in specially constructed steel sockets, completely cutting off the stage from the area. In front of the stage is the well for the orchestra. The balcony seats 271, the total seating accommodation of the theatre being 1025. Here plush-covered, tip-up seats in deep rose shade are provided. The colour design of the theatre walls is buff and green with gold touches."⁵⁵

The Theatre's opening feature was *The Flag Lieutenant* (1927), a British romantic military drama, and it was followed up by *Beau Geste* (1926), with Ronald Colman in the earliest adaptation of the adventure novel.⁵⁶ An early indicator of the success of the new venue was reported only a fortnight after its opening: several public houses in the vicinity of The Theatre complained of a substantial drop in takings, suggesting that cinema was providing a counter-attraction to drink.⁵⁷

Not all citizens were persuaded of the moral benefits of going to the cinema however, and in the same month that The Theatre opened, the annual debate between Coldstream Literary Society and the Wallace Green Literary Society considered the matter in a motion that "The cinema is a decided acquisition to modern life". The proponents stressed the educational benefits of the cinema with its ability to bring information from all parts of the world to its audience: one described it as "the poor man's university", and another welcomed the opportunity to hear the performance of good quality live music. It was also suggested that the Churches should embrace it by having the new Theatre open on Sundays to serve as a Sunday school for Berwick children. The critics found many threats in the new medium: the bad influence upon young people of films which dealt with "the sensational, the seamy, and the sensual" and showed examples of "villany [*sic*], treachery, gambling, drinking, and divorce"; health was put at risk by sitting in badly-ventilated picture-houses, especially on summer evenings when "men and women might be out on playing fields in the fresh air"; and children at school were unable to stay awake because they had been at the cinema the previous evening. A clergyman lamented the lack of effective censorship and concluded that "there was poison in the cinema and the home life suffered, the life of the community suffered, and the life of the nation suffered." Despite this ringing denunciation however, when the motion was put to the vote it was passed by 26 votes to 14. Cinema won the day.⁵⁸

The arrival of sound

Experiments to produce synchronised sound for films were taking place almost since the beginnings of cinema, and during the 1920s rival systems

came into practical use for a large number of short sound films. The first feature film with synchronised sound for talking as well as music was *The Jazz Singer*, released in America in 1927 and reaching London in September 1928. Its success, albeit using a sound-on-disc system rather than sound-on-film, convinced the film industry that talkies were the future, and by mid-1929 the major Hollywood studios were transferring all of their productions to sound. For small regional picture-houses however the transition to sound projection was a gradual process, and their programmes included a mixture of sound and silent films for quite some time, until the availability of sound films was sufficient to sustain a full programme.

The Jazz Singer came to Berwick's Playhouse in May 1929 - but it was shown only as a silent film.⁵⁹ In the following week however, The Theatre announced an "Enormous attraction - See and hear Talking and Singing Films at each performance". Their first sound film was "The Garbo Italian Marionettes", a short film of a musical puppet show, made for British Sound Film Productions.⁶⁰ This was followed by a number of other musical and comedy shorts, mostly British productions. In August 1929 The Theatre announced the advent of "The Real Talking Pictures" - though it is not clear whether this meant a technical improvement or simply the inclusion of feature-length sound films. At any rate *The Donovan Affair*, an American crime drama directed by Frank Capra, became "the First Big Talkie for Berwick".⁶¹ American sound productions continued to appear on the programme in subsequent weeks, though few of them qualified as 'complete' talkies.

The Playhouse recognised the challenge of its rival's sound films up the road, and when in September 1929 it opened under new management following redecoration, it addressed the issue with the advertising banner, "Our pictures do not talk - but our show will speak for itself".⁶² Once more its films became interspersed with performances by magicians and clairvoyants and other live shows. The Playhouse did not hold out for long however, and in November 1929 it announced the installation of a Western Electric sound system. Its first sound film was *The Singing Fool*, with Al Jolson in a musical follow-up to *The Jazz Singer* which Berwick filmgoers finally could hear.⁶³

Sound films sustained both cinemas for several decades thereafter, though both of them also continued to present live theatre performances. The Theatre closed as a functioning cinema at the start of 1969. The Playhouse survived in business until 2005, and the building was demolished at the end of 2010.⁶⁴

Notes and References

I am grateful to Berwick Record Office and Berwick Library for their assistance and resources. I am also indebted to Jim Walker, for evidence about the venues for early cinema in Berwick, and to Janet Ward and Jane Bowen, for information about Thomas Scott.

John Spiers

In the list below, the following abbreviations for newspapers are used:

BA *Berwick Advertiser*
BJ *Berwick Journal*

1. John Barnes. *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England 1894-1901: vol.1: 1894-1896*; revised & enlarged, ed. by Richard Maltby. Exeter: U. of Exeter Press, 1998. pp.106-107.
In Newcastle an earlier demonstration of moving pictures is reported to have taken place at the Palace Theatre of Varieties, Haymarket, on 26 March 1896, with performances continuing through the following week. The rival Empire Variety Theatre, in Newgate Street, also advertised cinematographic performances for 28 March 1896 and the following week. It is not clear which projection machines were being used here, and the Lumière Cinématographe probably did not appear in Newcastle until June. See Frank Manders, *Cinemas of Newcastle*; revised edition. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2005. pp.9-10.
2. Vanessa Toulmin. "Within the reach of all: travelling cinematograph shows on British fairgrounds 1896-1914", in *Travelling Cinema in Europe: sources and perspectives*; ed. by Martin Loiperdinger. Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, c2008. pp.19-33. In December 1896, Randall Williams introduced the cinematograph at travelling fairs which became a major venue for 'living pictures' in the period up to 1914.
3. BA 5 February 1897, p.1; BJ 4 February 1897, p.4.
4. *Dundee Courier*, Wednesday 7 April 1897, p.7, col.6.
5. "Enid's Christmases", in *Northern Echo*, 23 December 2010. The diary has been published as *The Secret Staithes Diary of Enid Lucy Pease Robinson*; selected and edited by James Hart. [Harrogate]: Historical Publishing, 2010.
6. Thomas James West (c1855-1916) became the business manager for Hague's Minstrels, a leading negro minstrel company which was based at St James's Hall in Liverpool; the company also toured around the country, including Scotland (*Dundee Courier*, 15 Nov. 1880. p.1 Advert, *Southern Reporter* (Selkirk), 25 Nov. 1880. p.1). West then moved into management of his own touring theatre companies which travelled widely, from Aberdeen to Guernsey (*Aberdeen Journal*, 26 Jan. 1886. p.1. Advert, *The Star (Guernsey)*, 16 July, 1887. p.2).
By his own account, he was among the first travelling showmen to take an interest in moving pictures: "I have been in touch with animated pictures ever since they were invented. I can remember the time when they were first produced in the old country - not so long ago, either. We used to take about six films, about 50ft in length, showing a train running on a line, or something of that sort, and run the whole lot off in about six minutes. And that used to be the star feature of a night's programme. The rest of the evening would be filled in with songs and lantern slides. But the public would turn up in crowds long before the doors opened. There was the novelty of the invention then. That was about all there was, and it was enough to make money rapidly with". (*Evening News (Sydney)*, 16 March 1906. p.2: Interview with Mr T.J. West.)
In December 1897, T.J. West's Modern Marvel Company began what turned out to be an annual engagement at the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh, initially combining the cinematograph with other optical novelties, such as the Analyticon which seems to have created some kind of 3D effect in images (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 28 Dec. 1897. p.2), but then specialising in the refinement of moving pictures. In 1905 he took

his company to Australia and New Zealand which became one of his principal areas of operation in the following years. In 1907 he had several companies touring in Australia (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 Oct. 1907. p.10), and thereafter he established permanent picture houses both in Australia and in Britain (West's Picture Palaces, including one in Blyth - *Morpeth Herald*, 31 July 1909. p.9.).

In Australia West's Pictures also moved into film production, particularly on scientific and educational subjects. While West's headquarters remained in London (at 58 Dean Street, in the centre of a newly established film-makers' district), he made several further trips to Australia to supervise his expanding business interests there. (*The West Australian (Perth)*, 30 Sept. 1913. p.7.)

T.J. West died on 30 November 1916 at his home in Romford, Essex, aged 61.

7. *BA* 19 November 1897, advert.
8. *BA* 19 November 1897, p.5. Lindon Travers subsequently went on to manage the Olympia cinema in Newcastle, 1904-1907. His descendants include several figures who achieved fame on stage and in the cinema. He was the grandfather of Linden Travers (best-remembered for playing Mrs Todhunter in Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*) and of Bill Travers (who starred with his wife Virginia McKenna in *Born Free* and became an animal conservationist.) Lindon Travers was also the great-grandfather of the distinguished stage actress Penelope Wilton (whose roles include Isabel Crawley in the TV series *Downton Abbey*.)
9. *BA* 14 January 1898, advert.
10. *BA* 11 March 1898, advert.
11. *BA* 15 April 1898, advert.
12. Census 1891 (England). Scott was living in West Street, Belford.
13. E.g. *Dundee Courier*, 22 March 1898, p.6; *Arbroath Herald and Advertiser*, 10 November 1898, p.4; *Morpeth Herald*, 18 March 1899.
14. *Berwickshire News and General Advertiser*, 17 September 1901, p.2. Scott is promoted in this advertisement as "the Cinematograph King, direct from the London Hippodrome".
15. *Morpeth Herald*, 20 April 1901, p.5.
16. *Dundee Evening Post*, 24 October 1901, p.3.
17. Thomas Scott died in Dunbar in 1920 and was buried with his wife in Belford. *Sunday Post*, 23 May 1920, p.3; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 19 May 1920, p.2.
18. See Hudson John Powell, *Poole's Myriorama!: a story of travelling panorama showmen*. Bradford-on-Avon: ELSP, 2002.
In 2006, a century after the Myriorama was bringing its early films to Berwick, Genni Poole, great-grand-daughter of Charles W. Poole, launched Berwick Film Society which aimed to widen the range of films shown in the town.
19. *BJ* 20 August 1903: review "Myriorama at Berwick".
20. *BJ* 26 February 1904. The other named titles in the programme were *Napoleon (Épopée napoléonienne)* and *Don Quixote (Don Quichotte)*, both made in 1903.
21. *BJ* 21 October 1904, advert.
22. *BJ* 13 April 1905, review.
23. *BJ* 17 June 1915, advert.
24. *BJ* 9 September 1909, p.5.
25. *Kelly's Directory*, Berwick 1910: "Central Hall, 53 Hide Hill. Thomas Gilbert, manager; E. Arthur Mallett, sec."
26. *BJ* 11 November 1909, advert. Advertisements for the new venue continued to appear in subsequent weeks, and they reappeared in the next year until the first week of March 1910.
27. *BJ* 25 November 1909, p.5. The Alnwick & Berwick Garage & Cycle Co. Ltd opened around 1907 on the corner of Hide Hill and Silver Street. It seems to have extended below the old Salmon Inn Hall, where a Congregationalist church had been set up by Ralph Dodds (grocer, tea & coffee merchant) in the 1870s and 1880s. This is the

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- probable location of the Central Picture Hall; (demolished December 2015).
28. *BJ* 29 September 1910; *BJ* 24 November 1910; etc.
 29. *BA* 7 April 1911, advert.
 30. *BJ* 6 July 1911, advert. The surviving Berwick film (copy held by Berwick Record Office) lasts for just under 3 minutes, and it was filmed at the Berwick Fair which was held during the last week of May 1911. It consists of four sections: the opening of the fair, showing a procession of councillors and the stalls in Marygate; judging the best turned out horses in the Parade; a procession of the band, fairground floats, and decorated horses down Hide Hill; the presentation of prizes by the Mayoress at the Town Hall. (Report in *Berwick Advertiser*, 2 June 1911, p.4.)
 31. *BJ* 23 & 30 January 1913, adverts. As an added incentive: "First 3000 persons visiting will be presented with a beautifully printed booklet." But: "Enormous expense, raised prices."
 32. *BJ* 25 September 1913, etc.
 33. *BJ* 6 November 1913.
 34. During the period before the First World War, global film production was dominated by European companies, and this was reflected in the proportions of films released in Britain. For example, in 1909-1910 the number of identified film releases in GB shows the following provenances:

<u>Country of origin</u>	<u>1909</u>	<u>1910</u>
Denmark, Germany, etc.	5	4
France	40	36
GB	15	15
Italy	10	17
USA	30	20

In 1909, among the six largest releasing companies in Britain, three were French (Pathé, Gaumont, Lux), two were American (Vitagraph, Edison), and one was British (Hepworth). [Figures from Rachael Low: *History of the British Film: vol.3, 1914-1918*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1973. pp.54-55.]

Through the 1910s, and particularly during and after the First World War, American film production became dominant. This was reflected in the identifiable titles (albeit not necessarily representative of all screenings) which were shown in Berwick in the period 1912-1919:

Percentages of films shown in Berwick, by origin

	<u>Europe</u>	<u>GB</u>	<u>USA</u>
1912	30%	13%	57%
1913	32%	15%	53%
1914	25%	19%	56%
1915	16%	30%	54%
1916	9%	43%	48%
1917	10%	30%	60%
1918	1%	21%	78%
1919	3%	17%	80%

Figures compiled from advertisements in *Berwick Advertiser/Berwick Journal*. See also Gerben Bakker: "The decline and fall of the European film industry: sunk costs, market size, and market structure, 1890-1927", in *Economic History Review*, new series, vol.58, no.2 (May 2005), pp.310-351.

35. Estimates of the number of British cinemas in these years are unreliable, but it has been calculated that by 1911 there were around 4000 picture houses, and by 1914 even more (*The Bioscope*). In 1914 Newcastle had 32 picture theatres and Edinburgh had 38 (*Kinematograph Year Book, 1915*).
36. *BJ* 8 May 1913, p.5.
37. *BJ* 28 May 1914, p.8. The *Berwick Journal* (11 June 1914, p.3) noted: "Mr Taylor is a Yorkshireman, hailing from Bradford, and he had more than a dozen years experience in Yorkshire and Lancashire before he went into cinema management at South Shields.... He is a keen amateur photographer, and an artist of no mean ability, as some of the pictures on the stair buildings of the Playhouse testify. Genial and tactful.... The Manager's son, Mr Wilfred Taylor, is the Operator. There are two cinema machines, the operating chamber being large and roomy."
38. *BJ* 28 May 1914, p.8.
39. *BA* 8 May 1914, p.6. It was recalled by John Thompson, son of the Playhouse projectionist in the 1960s, that when the cinema was bought by a company in the 1970s major alterations were carried out. The parapet and pillars were removed, the windows filled in, and the outside surfaces were rendered. Inside, a lowered ceiling was put in which spoiled the theatre's perfect acoustics. (In conversation: 27/3/2012)
40. *BA* 22 May 1914, p.2.
41. *BJ* 11 June 1914. Kinemacolor was a two-colour additive photographic process developed by the Brighton film-maker G.A.Smith. It used a rotating wheel with red and green filters in front of the camera lens to expose alternate frames of the film to one of the two colours. In 1908 Smith formed a company with Charles Urban to exploit the process commercially. It required the installation of special projectors in cinemas. One of the major films that was undertaken in Kinemacolor was *With Our King and Queen through India, or The Delhi Durbar* (1912), a record of the visit to India by George V, the newly crowned King and Emperor. Legal patent disputes contributed to the decline of the Kinemacolor system after 1914.
42. The section on cinema during the First World War first appeared in the *Newsletter / Friends of Berwick & District Museum and Archives* (no.82) June 2014.
43. *BA* 7 August 1914, p.2.
44. *BA* 28 August 1914.
45. *BJ* 24 December 1914, advert.
46. *BJ* 22 & 29 April 1915, adverts.
47. Michael Hammond. *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914-1918*. Exeter: U. of Exeter Press, 2006. pp.100-101.
The Battle of the Somme has been restored and issued on DVD; it can also be found on the internet/YouTube.
48. Rachael Low. *History of the British Film: vol.3, 1914-1918*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1973. pp.156-158.
49. *BA* 29 September 1916; 15 December 1916; adverts.
50. *BA* 9 March 1917, advert.
51. *BA* 12 May 1916, p.3: "The Entertainment Tax. The new tax upon entertainment admissions will come into force on 15th May. The 'tax tickets', which are in popular reel form, will be issued in Berwick to licensees by the Custom Officer (Mr Toohey)."
52. The figures for closures of cinemas by the end of the war are quoted by Rachael Low in *History of the British Film: vol.3, 1914-1918*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1973. p.108.
53. *BA* 2 March 1923.
54. The Playhouse running order sheet was found in a cupboard at an address in Sandgate which had previously been occupied by the Playhouse manager; the details were preserved in a photograph by Jim Walker. "The Wembley Exhibition" was a record of the vast British Empire Exhibition which opened at Wembley in April 1924 and ran for two summer seasons in 1924 and 1925, attracting millions of visitors. The film might be seen as an early example of the "event cinema" which has gained new

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- popularity in the 2000s with cinema relays of major events. It is described by Rachael Low in *History of the British Film: vol.4, 1918-1929*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1971. p.475.
55. *BA* 26 January 1928, p.7.
 56. *BA* 26 January 1928. *The Flag Lieutenant* was one of the British cinema's box-office successes in late 1927. In common with many major productions, a music score to accompany the film was prepared and distributed to cinemas. It consists of a piano part plus conductor's cues to bring in orchestral players. It is the subject of an article on contemporary practice in British film accompaniment by Neil Brand: "Distant trumpets: the score to *The Flag Lieutenant* and music of the British silent cinema", in *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*; ed. by Andrew Higson. Exeter: U. of Exeter Press, 2002. pp.208-224.
 57. *BA* 16 Feb 1928, p.5, col.1.
 58. *BA* 9 Feb 1928, p.5.
 59. *BJ* 2 May 1929, advert.
 60. *BJ* 9 May 1929, advert.
 61. *BA* 22 August 1929, advert. The soundtrack for *The Donovan Affair* was a sound-on-disc recording.
 62. *BJ* 19 September 1929, advert.
 63. *BA* 21 November 1929, advert.
 64. When The Playhouse closed, the sign above its doors said, "THE END. 1912-2005". Unfortunately the erroneous information, giving 1912 instead of 1914 as the opening date for the cinema, has been much photographed and also reproduced in print (e.g. *Berwick-upon-Tweed: Three Places, Two Nations, One Town*. (English Heritage, 2009) p.97.)