

Beyond “The Exhibition Strait-Jacket”: How British Amateur Film Clubs Created an Alternative Distribution and Exhibition Network, 1923-1933

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The independent cinema, able to take a more varied selection of films loosely known as repertory, was able to exist tenuously only in London... While film societies and a few cinemas were testing the possibility of minority audiences, the exhibition strait-jacket of the large circuits was generally accepted as the only possible structure.¹

The prevailing view of 1920s British film distribution and exhibition has remained static for many years: a burgeoning post-1909 exhibition sector of over eight hundred small private investors and local business owners becoming increasingly dominated by fifty-three registered exhibition companies by 1927, and with one third of all films supplied to those exhibitors by three American-owned distribution companies.² As Low's epigraph indicates, the growing American influence saw independent exhibitors and smaller cinema circuits being incorporated into larger exhibition circuits which, from 1921, began opening so-called super-cinemas in sites such as Brighton, Cardiff, London, and Glasgow.³ The late 1920s' formation of two vertically integrated companies that controlled production, distribution and exhibition (Gaumont-British Picture Corporation and Associated British Picture Corporation) appeared to lock mainstream British distribution and exhibition into a binary between the capitalist Hollywood model and the largely London-based independent repertory circuit Low references above. As this article will demonstrate, this binary overlooks another burgeoning film network that, by the late 1920s, distributed short films, features, travelogues, and

newsreels to local and regional audiences across the United Kingdom; a network that also experimented with different models of exhibition spaces and programming. The efforts of the British amateur film movement to create and sustain a viable alternative distribution and exhibition route for their productions offer an important and overlooked ‘third option’ between those mainstream and independent cinema routes of the 1920s and 1930s. Analysing the history of the British amateur movement in this period demonstrates how and why it shifted from the desire to share mainstream exhibition spaces to the development of an independent, community-led and regional approach to distribution and exhibition free from the constraints of commercial enterprise.

Studies of moving image exhibition and distribution have tended to favour commercial modes of filmmaking at the expense of what is often collectively termed the ‘non-theatrical’, a term that can include amateur, educational and instructional films.⁴ The distinction between the ‘theatrical’ and ‘non-theatrical’ has suggested that “theatres are the natural home for movies,” with a generally standardised experience in terms of “image, sound, seating and over-priced refreshments.”⁵ The amateur networks discussed through this article offer a contrast, where filmmaking societies and individuals collaborated to build local, regional and national structures that varied considerably in terms of site, size, programme, audience, and technical ability; rather than a standardised experience. It remains an alternative space of film exhibition largely unaccounted for in current understandings of early British exhibition and distribution practices.⁶ Richard Abel has argued that the lack of research conducted into the distribution of early cinema, particularly non-theatrical, is linked to a shortage of source material and information being “too scattered and, consequently, too difficult to discern.”⁷ This finding is echoed in Jennifer Horne’s work on the distribution and exhibition of non-theatrical films in US public libraries during the later silent era which questions how such “off-the-grid, yet fundamentally public” screenings can be factored into

our understanding of exhibition and spectatorship largely reliant upon evidence typically associated with a “*theatrical* film history.”⁸

Part of the reason for this continued lacuna may be the initial intellectual pairing of amateur film and home movie as a single interrelated entity. The focus on the ‘home’ movie (or home mode) tended to encapsulate production, distribution and exhibition in one domestic space: home movie exhibition as “an important family event” where the family member acts as filmmaker, projectionist and narrator.⁹ Other scholars have underlined that emphasis on the home mode: Mark Neumann and Janna Jones discuss the “minimal amount of contextual information” available for amateur film holdings in film archives, noting that “the extent that amateur films circulated beyond small clusters of family and friends is usually unknown.”¹⁰ Amateur film scholarship has teased apart those two modes to offer a deeper understanding of amateur film production as a related but distinct practice from the home movie, even for lone filmmakers who operated outside the burgeoning amateur networks of the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ Ryan Shand has argued that cine-club productions that pushed beyond the home movie / family viewing context “occupied an ambiguous position between public and domestic exhibition strategies... not making films for their own private use... [and not] seeking to engage with an avant-garde subculture.”¹² His focus on the ‘community mode’ for such films and filmmakers sees it as “defined by the ambivalent exhibition space it occupies *between* the home and mass modes” and includes annual competitions, touring filmmakers, and “more locally based civic filmmakers who rented town halls or other available exhibition spaces.”¹³

Along with other British amateur film scholars Shand tends to focus more on the types of films being produced by British amateurs, the locations they were shot in, the different cine-clubs that emerged, and the national competitions and awards that highlighted certain films.¹⁴ Such scholarship offers only a partial picture of the distribution and exhibition networks that existed and aided these community filmmakers, in part due to the lack of

concrete evidence of the ongoing sharing and interchange so essential to the growing amateur film field. As we demonstrate through this article, the creation of such amateur distribution and exhibition practices would ultimately free amateurs from the restrictions suggested by that binary of the mainstream film industry or the independent Film Society model which retained some links to professional activity via its focus on other national film industries or British documentary filmmakers.

[insert Figure 1: Advertisement for *The Era*'s Amateur Film Contest award show (*The Era*, Dec 9, 1931).]

Discussions of amateur distribution and exhibition have begun to emerge in recent scholarship, commonly linked to single or annual events such as institution-led competitions or festivals, with examples occurring across different national contexts.¹⁵ Outside of those special events, the evidence of independent approaches to amateur film distribution and exhibition offers only tantalising hints: the American Amateur Cinema League (ACL) helped organise, connect and publicise activities of amateur clubs including the creation of a “motion picture film exchange among League Members” based around a library of award-winning films and individual film ‘Swaps’.¹⁶ Equally, the 1930s Spanish and Catalan amateur movement included film festivals alongside film clubs and touring educational programmes; the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinematography (established 1925) organised screenings across the Soviet Union; while there was a demonstrable expansion in New York amateur movie parties from private to public exhibition venues.¹⁷ By delineating the different paths the UK amateur clubs went down, and the shifting connections made between the amateur and mainstream industries of the 1920s-30s, the article suggests a model of historical analysis that could be applicable in other national contexts. Some circumstances are UK-specific, including the impact of the 1927 Cinematograph Act on exhibition; some, such as the division between professional and amateur through the use of non-inflammable ‘sub-

standard' film stocks, and the introduction of sound to the mainstream film industry (a development that eluded most amateurs until the middle of the century), are universal issues that will have affected amateur distribution and exhibition in other nations.

Finding traces of the distribution and exhibition of British amateur films presents a more significant challenge than tracing parallel developments in the commercial cinema, where distribution and exhibition networks are regularly discussed in trade journals and press reports. The appearance of British amateur films in such sources is more limited, restricted to brief notices in amateur and trade publications or the occasional listing or report in local newspapers. Even then, such articles favour films that have either taken part in amateur film competitions or those drawing attention from the press for some added gimmick or novel venture, rather than covering the full range of amateur work being produced and seen. To address this gap we have assembled a broad patchwork of available evidence gathered across various journals and amateur publications of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Commercial trade-focused titles such as *The Era*, *Kinematograph Weekly* or *Picturegoer* did offer occasional columns written by individuals involved with the amateur movement such as Peter Le Neve Foster and Marjorie Lowell-Burgess; while more niche commentary can be found in the journals *Home Movies and Home Talkies* or the *IAC Bulletin*, which had closer associations to amateur institutions such as the British Association of Amateur Cinematographers (BAAC) or the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC). Augmenting these centralised sources were occasional reports in local and regional newspapers on specific events or screenings held by amateur clubs.

Based on existing work on the British amateur movement, and statements within these journals, our analysis focuses on collected articles and reports from a ten-year period, covering 1923-1933. This was a period when many long-running British amateur film clubs, institutions and filmmakers were first active, and our collation of different sources reveals a

further groundswell of writing about amateur production, distribution and exhibition between 1928 and 1933. We were thus able to build up a partial account of what different amateur cine societies were screening in their weekly, fortnightly or monthly meetings. While inconsistent, this data covers cine clubs from across the country: for some it includes the dates and times of each screening, key organisers, special guest speakers, and a list of films screened; for others, often just a list of films or a brief comment about a meeting. While acknowledging the partial nature of that data, it allows us to construct an initial picture of British amateur distribution and exhibition practices in this period and reveal the shifting nature of the relationships between the mainstream and the amateur. Distribution and exhibition clearly functioned as a more significant part of the British amateur filmmaking community than has traditionally been addressed, and these aspects of amateur practice were crucially shaped via a series of external developments in technology, legislation and the commercial industry. Ultimately, those developments led to a creation of a community-led exhibition strategy based on local halls, meeting rooms, and amateur-only competitions.

Despite narrowing our focus to this example from British amateur history, we very much see this work as part of an ongoing dialogue with Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez's call for a "new conception of amateur cinema as a distinct film culture with its own modes of production, distribution, and exhibition".¹⁸ While amateur cinema scholars have tended to prioritise the former, our case study of the British amateur film movement aims to offer a starting point that would allow other national amateur scholarship to continue to develop the latter two elements. It does this not only by offering an alternative account of the nascent beginnings of the amateur film movement in Britain, but also by bringing the mainstream industry into this discussion, providing an insight to the complexities surrounding the relationship between the 'professional' and the 'amateur' which was not as clearly defined in the silent era as in subsequent years. We track these historical developments across four distinct phases: one, the

establishment of an amateur mode of distribution and exhibition that interacted with mainstream exhibitors; two, the role of legislation and technology that worked to sequester amateur from commercial cinema; three, the emergence of original spaces and structures within individual cine-clubs and nascent institutions; four, a consideration of how these nascent networks, technology and mainstream cinema collided via the creation of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers as a locus of amateur distribution.

Mirroring the Mainstream

There were three methods of distribution [to cinemas]—(1) by every member becoming a canvasser, which led to confusion; (2) by employing one member to undertake the task, which was too much for one person; (3) by seeking the aid of a local renter to perform the duty.¹⁹

In 1928, at the first national amateur cine conference in Torquay, Miss Ruth Tonge of the Manchester Film Society raised a concern central to many of the new amateur filmmaking clubs: how to get their finished productions into mainstream cinemas. This conference, which included representatives from the Devon Amateur Film Society, the Manchester Film Society, the London, Newcastle and Sheffield branches of the Amateur Cinematograph Association (ACA), and the British Empire Film Institute, was so invested in debating mainstream distribution and exhibition that much of its second day was given over to sessions on the topic. Tonge's main proposal, as indicated in the quotation above, was that amateur clubs should work with small independent renters to secure exhibition slots at local cinemas, seeing any financial gain as a means only to cover the costs of production. Given the dominant understanding of amateur cinema is often led by a focus more on 'amateur' rather than 'cinema', and the attendant notions of un-professional, hobbyist or leisure, the initial

period of British amateur productions and its dealings with mainstream exhibition challenges elements of that discourse.

In the 1920s, many industry commentators saw the work of the amateur in *simpatico* with the mainstream British film industry, rather than an adjunct or threat to it. A 1927 discussion in *Kinematograph Weekly* about the potential impact of amateur filmmaking on the commercial interests of the film industry noted that the movement was “a good thing for the kinema from all points of view [as it] shows a lively interest, is likely to be productive of new talent, and if not abused by the local exhibitor, a source of real box-office interest to him.”²⁰ The stress falls on the link between amateur production as a source for talent and its connection to exhibition, where amateur films could be useful for the cinema owner – but only in small doses, as that would offer less of a threat to potential revenue streams. As Heather Norris-Nicholson has noted:

The possibility that nascent cine societies might produce filmmakers whose home-grown talent could boost a flagging British cinema also helped to raise the profile of early amateur activity. A film watching audience, more critically informed about film interpretation through familiarisation with cinematic developments elsewhere in Europe and practical first-hand experience of making and showing their own material could, some enthusiasts claimed, help to sustain and enhance a British cinema industry.²¹

That idea of a critically informed audience is often linked to the development of influential private member clubs such as The Film Society, established in 1925 by Ivor Montagu and Hugh Miller. It quickly became an alternative exhibition space to the mainstream London cinemas, screening imported or less-commercial films for their membership. By focusing on a private club model that offered educational lectures, exhibitions, and artistically unusual

film screenings for a “restricted membership” such societies “were vulnerable to attack as elitist bodies, and often regarded as places where cinema was “worshipped” by an intellectual clique.”²² The amateur cine societies that appeared in the 1920s offered an arguably more democratic and open model than The Film Society, interested in discussing and producing all types of film. Where the first amateur cine clubs depart from the Film Society model was this initial interest in breaking into mainstream exhibition and distribution over the introduction of a viable independent- or community-led alternative to the commercial cinema. If trade commentators saw the amateur film movement as a potential home-grown contributor to mainstream British cinema, then mainstream exhibition was seen as important for amateur filmmakers hoping to make their mark.

This is clear through the activities of several of the larger cine societies formed in the 1920s. The Cambridge Kinema Club was founded in 1923 by Peter Le Neve Foster and became the breeding ground for a group of undergraduates who would go on to “bring a more cultivated approach into commercial production.”²³ Alongside the kind of film appreciation and discussion associated with the Film Society, the Cambridge Kinema Club was working on its own amateur films as early as 1924. Le Neve Foster had already produced *The Watchdogs of Wilmslow* (1922-3), but his second film *The Witch’s Fiddle* (1924) was the first from the newly formed society.²⁴ A later comment from Le Neve Foster suggests that both films were exhibited in Wilmslow Picture Palace, a mainstream exhibition site, although he notes the films were “entirely amateur – including the photography.”²⁵

Le Neve Foster was not alone in his ambition, with a clear increase in the discussion of amateur filmmakers in film journals in the late 1920s, and the number of new cine clubs, with an estimate of “about 50 amateur film societies in England” in 1927.²⁶ July 1926 saw the inauguration of the London Amateur Cinematograph Association (ACA), which operated at “the centre of a network of affiliated societies” including ACAs in Sheffield, Newcastle,

Leeds, Birmingham and Bristol, and other film clubs such as the Manchester Film Society, the Stockport Amateur Cine Players' Club, and Thanet.²⁷ After leaving Cambridge, Peter Le Neve Foster had a key role in establishing the Manchester Film Society, the club that proposed building stronger relationships with local and regional cinema exhibition sites at the 1928 conference. In September 1927, the group had publicly screened its films *The Wizard of Alderley Edge* (1927), Foster's earlier *The Watchdogs of Wilmslow*, and *From Pigsty to Palace* (c.1927). *Kinematograph Weekly* felt this screening challenged sceptics who believed amateur work had lower "entertainment and artistic values."²⁸ A month later, the Reading Amateur Dramatic Society screened its film *The Flower Garden* (1927) at the local Vaudeville Theatre, Reading. The film was "two-thousand feet in length [with] no studio sets... [and] a dozen or so amateur actors... a hundred supers constituted the crowd."²⁹ Produced with help from professional camera operators, the producers hoped to distribute it to venues around the south of England "to encourage amateurs in this country to play some part in British film production."³⁰

The desire to screen amateur films in a cinema site is never discussed in these reports as a fiduciary one, more an honest passion for filmmaking and the desire to show their films to a larger theatrical audience. This is underlined by the number of amateur films from this period for which any profits from public screenings were donated to local charities (minus any expenses). The Devon Amateur Film Production Society produced *Pott's Pride* (1927-1928) to be shown "in Devon kinemas on behalf of local charities," with interested exhibitors encouraged to "write directly to the producers" to book the film.³¹ In November 1928 amateur film *The Toilers* (Hammer, 1928) was first shown at the Empire Palace, Mexborough, with other screenings "at a large number of kinemas in aid of the funds of the brigade" and proceeds were split between Montagu Hospital and St. John Ambulance.³² Thanet ACA produced the feature-length *The Secret of the Tunnel* (1929-30), screenings of

which “attracted so many people that Thanet were able to give a large sum to charity.”³³ Even those films made without the prospect of charitable donations did so with the intention of securing enough returns merely to cover production cost – often achieved through appealing to the interests of local audiences. The Manchester Film Society targeted local exhibitors with its 1928 film *The Black Bear*. First shown at a private screening the society’s hope was “of being able to secure sufficient local bookings to cover the major part of the outlay.”³⁴ The Society was also eager to give “Manchester audiences an opportunity of seeing Manchester’s local productions.”³⁵ That link between the local amateur production and the local audience underpinned the success of amateur filmmaker Ronald Gow at the Altrincham Picture House: *The Man Who Changed His Mind* (1928), with its links to the local Boy Scout organisation, was a success at the venue in 1928, while *The Glittering Sword* (1929) premiered there in December 1929.³⁶ As Peter Le Neve Foster commented on Gow’s film, “a picture taken locally will nearly always pull... because it is local.”³⁷

[Figure 2: Extract from a feature in *Film Weekly*, Feb 8, 1930, regarding the demand for tickets to see Apex Motion Picture’s 9.5mm production *Shadows of Limehouse* at a public screening.]

By 1929 it was possible for an established amateur group such as the Manchester Film Society to report that *The Black Bear* was “being handled by Ben C. Gibbs, Ltd.” with American distribution rights being pursued by Film Arts Guild of New York.³⁸ Other mainstream distribution companies acquired amateur productions: the Cambridge University Cinematograph Society film *Aunt Matilda’s Nephew* was “taken up” by Butcher’s Film Service, while New Era Films Ltd. secured Gow’s films for “their educational list”.³⁹ *The Black Bear*, *Aunt Matilda’s Nephew*, *The Man Who Changed His Mind* and *The Glittering Sword* featured in a 1930 *Picturegoer* list (compiled by Peter Le Neve Foster) of amateur films which had performed well when exhibited in local theatres. In addition to many of the

titles listed above, it also included Foster's *Why Dogs Leave Home* (1929) and *The Emperor's Sapphire* (1929) from Stockport Amateur Cine Players Club.⁴⁰ Through the end of the 1920s, many established amateur filmmakers and clubs were motivated to achieve a modicum of success comparable to that of the mainstream industry. While noting that "comparatively few people realise their ambition," Le Neve Foster recognised that the "ultimate aim of the vast majority of people who join an amateur film society is to play in a film which will be shown at the local picture house, so that all their friends and relations can see them strutting their little hour on the silver sheet."⁴¹ Yet despite Le Neve Foster's optimism it was already clear by 1929 that the gap between the amateur and the professional filmmaker was growing, a division fostered by government policy and new technologies that would force most amateur filmmakers to look elsewhere for audiences.

Cinema Legislation and the New 'Standard'

[Bristol Amateur Film Society] is now split into two groups – one group intends to concentrate on the production of films on standard stock in order to show their efforts in cinemas, while the other group will work on sub-standard stock in the production of artistic films and for their own experiment and amusement.⁴²

In the earliest years of the British amateur movement many of the cine clubs were filming exclusively in 35mm. Indeed, the majority of Le Neve Foster's *Picturegoer* film list were filmed in 35mm, with only *The Emperor's Sapphire* identified as being made and shown in 16mm. Using the same film stock as commercial cinemas facilitated the mainstream exhibition of amateur films from Le Neve Foster, Gow and others, and emphasises not only how expensive this amateur film hobby could be but also why clubs were eager for cinema exhibition to cover their production costs. As the number of amateur filmmaking clubs across

the country began to rise, so too did the number of films being made on smaller, more affordable, and inflammable gauges such as 16mm or 9.5mm, commonly described as ‘sub-standard’. With no mainstream cinemas offering projection for smaller gauges, and those gauges not being designed for large screen projection, it is tempting to see the creation of an alternative distribution and exhibition practice as one of technological necessity rather than choice.

The roots of the amateur’s shift from a mainstream to a community-led exhibition strategy do not lie solely in these sub-standard film gauges but are related to concerns over new legislation. The 1928 Torquay conference which debated exhibition strategies was specifically concerned with the new Film Act and rules around quota regulations and film duties. As *Kinematograph Weekly* reported, the “entire amateur movement seems to be unanimous in its desire to see the removal of the kinematograph film duties so far as the amateur is concerned.”⁴³ The 1927 Cinematograph Act stated that any 35mm film exhibited to the public was liable for registration charges and duties imposed upon commercial forms of filmmaking, with no proviso or exclusion for amateur films produced on 35mm.⁴⁴ While such duties could be absorbed by larger commercial companies, the passing of the Cinematograph Act just as amateur clubs were making inroads into mainstream exhibition, and gaining some degree of respect, meant that “an amateur society which wished to rent its own films had to spend as much money in license and registration as it would cost to make a short film.”⁴⁵ The brief period where 35mm dominated amateur film production and its related desire to exist in the same exhibition spaces as commercial cinema, was effectively ended by this legislation.

While some amateur clubs continued to produce 35mm films, by the early 1930s most reports on filmmakers, clubs and individual films shows a shift to 9.5mm and 16mm, those sub-standard safety films that circumvented the restrictions imposed upon exhibition by the

Cinematograph Act. Using sub-standard gauges allowed films to be screened in venues free from legislation such as social clubs or town halls, and the concurrent reduction in frame size meant that they were more suited to those smaller screening spaces, and less suitable for mainstream theatres. Parallel to the treatment of amateur communities in other countries, the use of smaller gauges may have allowed for the “massive distribution of amateur film” but clubs were “simultaneously cut off from meaningful intervention into public culture by professional sales and distribution companies.”⁴⁶ Increasingly “cut off from distribution or exhibition outlets that would offer more commercial possibilities”⁴⁷, distanced from the local exhibitors and audiences they wanted to speak to, and removed from the orbit of the professional industry it often imitated, Britain’s amateur film clubs had to reorient their ideas around national distribution and exhibition towards a more community-led model.

Building a Community

Stuart Davies... well known as the manager of London’s ‘repertory’ cinema... pointed out that... professional ‘shorts’ are always available and are done very much better than amateur productions. If, however, one or two individual film makers with original ideas combine and produce unusual and intelligent films, there is a market waiting... [if] a club wants to make a photoplay to employ all its members, it should be done in the cheapest way, on sub-standard stock, solely because the remit is not likely to be up to what ordinary cinema exhibitors require.⁴⁸

This early 1930 address to the London ACA offered a clear message to amateur cine clubs: shooting on standard stock as a route into theatres, even independent or repertory screens, was rarely worth the expense. While noting 35mm avant-garde productions could find an audience via repertory groups in England, France, Germany and America, more commercial-

facing fare would struggle.⁴⁹ This advice came at a crucial point for the development of the amateur community in Britain during which cine clubs, and their membership, were steadily rising in number, establishing both an audience and a distribution and exhibition network outside the mainstream industry. The inclusion of non-professional gauges at the Royal Photographic Society annual exhibition in October 1930 was another step towards an amateur movement distancing itself from 35mm production and exhibition.⁵⁰ That same month Minehead Amateur Cine Players announced that their latest production would be made available on both 35mm and 9.5mm so the film could be screened in “ordinary halls or amateur film societies.”⁵¹ Though the ambition to stand shoulder to shoulder with the professional may have remained for a number of amateurs, the gradual shift away from mainstream exhibition signalled a concerted effort to form a distribution network within the community itself.

Through the late 1920s the London ACA had contributed to the formation of distribution and exhibition practices outside the mainstream through a network of both affiliated ACAs and non-affiliated clubs across the country.⁵² The ACA was also responsible for the publication of the first British journal devoted specifically to amateur film-making – a crucial nexus through which clubs were able to communicate and develop this new community. The early stages of this network arose from individual film club screenings of their own productions: there is evidence of this occurring from the mid-1920s through the early 1930s with the Manchester Film Society screenings mentioned above, regular member and public screenings held by ACAs in London, Newcastle and Hull, as well as the Jewish Amateur Film Society. As the restrictions imposed upon 35mm exhibition in theatres did not apply to the non-standard gauges shown in the club rooms, or other local halls, the amateur clubs were free to show these films to its members and invited members of the public. In 1933, the Wirral Film Society reached out to Birkenhead Town Council to discuss the

possibility of hosting a film show in the Assembly Room at Byrne Avenue Baths. The Town Clerk saw no objections to their plans, stating that “exhibition with non-inflammable film did not require a licence,” and therefore no regulation would be broken by “letting the hall for the amateur performance.”⁵³

Such spaces, therefore, became the focal point for the ongoing appreciation and development of the amateur movement. Regular club meetings blended film screenings with talks from its members and invited speakers, alongside group discussions and other activities including dances, fetes, day trips, and club competitions. Bristol Amateur Film Production Society screened their film *Queer Island* (1929) at a July 1929 dance and social held at Totterdown YMCA⁵⁴; while a 1930 Blackburn and District Amateur Film Society event at the YMCA hall, Limbrick, included a screening of their first production *Great Stuff This Love* (1929).⁵⁵ Not all clubs had their own meeting room: the Bristol society also rented Prince’s Restaurant, Bristol for a screening of films from that club and several others.⁵⁶ Although details are scarce in this period, there is a strong indication existing amateur clubs followed a similar model for running their own local and regional screening events. Some individual filmmakers did pursue different screening options: brothers Harold and Sidney Preston would screen films for friends and family in their home cinema as well as creating topical newsreels to show to employees of their family business under the name *Glengarry News*.⁵⁷

Outside of screening club films, there was also a shared desire for a distribution network by which each society could swap and screen different films. At the 1928 Torquay conference, Devon Film Society director Tom H. Tattershall discussed plans “for a mutual exchange of films between amateur film societies.”⁵⁸ In February 1929, the ACA suggested a “system of exchange” that could encourage screenings of “many examples of films made by the provincial groups,” the first of which was a film made by P. G. Peacock of Leeds ACA.⁵⁹ Terence Greenridge, another significant name in the London ACA, advertised that his film

Arise and Walk (1929) was available for hire.⁶⁰ Greenridge's promotional announcement implies the existence of a significant number of cine-clubs willing to screen new work and the possibility that a good film could travel round this nascent amateur regional network. This is reinforced by reports on the London ACA premiere of *Afterwards* (Greenridge and Pfeil, 1930) which then went on "general release to amateur societies"⁶¹; and the Birmingham ACA screening of Newcastle ACA film *Extinction* (A.H. Aherne, 1930) in November 1931.⁶²

Despite the late 1920s success of 9.5mm and 16mm formats across different clubs, Peter Le Neve Foster still questioned the ACA's reliance upon sub-standard film considering how "the technical and histrionic talent which it undoubtedly possesses" lends itself to the standard format.⁶³ Though Le Neve Foster continued to champion public theatrical exhibition as the goal for the amateur producer, the ACA was already aware of alternative methods of distribution and exhibition offered by the smaller gauges. It was the first organisation "to announce a definite affiliation scheme" incorporating provincial members and promoting interclub loans, and in 1928 announced a "Historian System... one of the most important things which has yet happened in the amateur film world."⁶⁴ The purpose of the new proposal was to create "a very complete record of all important events" such as the "opening of an important building, the launching of a new liner, or anything else of national interest" by creating copies of member's films to be housed at the ACA's headquarters.⁶⁵ Though the success of the scheme is uncertain, it represented the ACA's effort to organise its members and establish a film library of members' films for future reference and use.

The expansion of connections and links that we are sketching out as the foundations of this distribution network did not just look inwards to sharing the best British club films. Towards the end of 1929, the Amateur Cine League (ACL) in America presented the London ACA with a copy of their production of *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) in exchange for *Mrs Seagal's Cotillion* (1929), an ACA film presented to the ACL by A. E. Low (ACA

executive member) during a trip to America.⁶⁶ Nearly a year after the film's arrival in Britain, it was reported that *House of Usher* "had a large circulation" throughout the country, initially screening for the London ACA in October 1929, before making stops at clubs including Sheffield Amateur Film Club and Bromley Amateur Film Society.⁶⁷ Distributing international film in this way offers a parallel between the amateurs and the work of London's Film Society: the amateur network was able to promote wider access to the work of the international amateur community and support the broader study of film outside of the Film Society's metropolitan reach. When Le Neve Foster railed against import duties being imposed on films, and the restrictions on international exchanges these would cause, his claim that less access to the work of "foreign experimenters" could stymie "the development of serious amateur experimental work" offers an echo of Montagu and others in the Film Society.⁶⁸

During the period covered here the exchange of films had a North American and Australasian flavour. Peter Le Neve Foster reported a call from "the Hon. Secretary of the Auckland Amateur Motion Picture Club, New Zealand" who sought "copies of amateur films on standard size stock for distribution to amateur kinema clubs in New Zealand and Australia," with a shipping address provided for any British amateur who wished to share their efforts.⁶⁹ At the end of 1931, the Birmingham ACA sent their film *Ethel's Operation* (1931) to America, and received a number of American amateur films, including *Three Episodes* (1928). After premiering at a Birmingham ACA screening the films were distributed round a circuit that included Sheffield ACA, Bolton, Newcastle and three other unnamed clubs.⁷⁰ Three years later Bolton ACA made arrangements for the import of three films from the ACL "for distribution amongst clubs and groups" under the proviso that the expenses associated with importing films from abroad would be shared equally.⁷¹ The detailed proposal stated that the films would be "sent round with an enclosed dated itinerary"

and the expectation that each club would “post the films on to the next club in time for the stated date, and to bear the cost of the postage.”⁷² The statement of such terms by Bolton ACA makes it possible to see how the initial distribution networks worked iteratively between the late 1920s through 1933-34: a slow build-up of initiatives and connections across the community of clubs and filmmakers that worked to limit the financial burden imposed upon amateur imports, and relied upon individual goodwill. As such, the British amateur network appeared to have found a model for an organised circuit open to all amateur clubs in the country regardless of affiliation.

The demand for amateur films continued to grow in Britain through the early-1930s. Clubs could seek out the work of fellow filmmakers for their regular meetings and local screenings via published lists and announcements of groups such as Sheffield ACA, the Jewish Amateur Film Society or Bristol AFPS that were willing to loan their films.⁷³ These inter-club loans expanded film shows beyond their own productions, and the occasional accompanying library film, to the extent that full programmes could be comprised entirely of the work of other clubs. In October 1932, the Bournemouth Cine Exhibition, organised by Bournemouth Film Club (AKA Crystal Production), featured films from clubs in Bristol, Hull, Sheffield, Bolton and London.⁷⁴ As Le Neve Foster had noted in 1931, the sheer number of amateur club promoters seeking advice on how “to borrow films, to share experiences, triumphs and worries” with other clubs demonstrated that “[n]ever has the lack of a central co-ordinating body for amateur film makers been felt more keenly than at present.”⁷⁵ With the ACA organisation dissipating in the early 1930s, the gains made around this community-led initiative were seen to be in danger unless another central body could help stabilise it. In the process, the spectre of mainstream cinema threatened to overshadow the grassroots work that was already underway.

[Figure 3: Details of Selfridge’s Amateur Cine Exhibition published in *The Era*, June 29, 1932.]

New Institutions, Old Problems

The October 1932 Bournemouth event was organised in conjunction with the newly established British Association of Amateur Cinematographers (BAAC), an institution intended to bring together the amateur community in Britain. The creation of the BAAC came at a key point in the establishment of the distribution and exhibition network. Interest in British amateur film across different trade press publications was beginning to peak around 1932-33, when estimates put “no fewer than 200,000 amateur cine cameras... now in use in England.”⁷⁶ As well as the Le Neve Foster columns referenced above, *The Era* introduced a column dedicated to amateur film in February 1931 (initially written by Marjorie A. Lovell Burgess), with the publication of *Home Movies and Home Talkies* following in 1932. These publications all enhanced and promoted the exchanges between clubs indicated above, while BAAC hoped to expand the national work which the ACA had begun. In June 1932 the BAAC and *The Era* formalised their partnership, but they had been working together since the creation of the amateur Challenge Trophy competition in 1931. That competition was described as an opportunity for “the amateur cine movement in Great Britain [to stand] on its own merits [by] inviting judgement... although financially crippled and up against many difficulties... [amateurs] can feel that they have a definite contribution to make to art and progress.”⁷⁷ *The Era* linked its competition to art but also to exhibition numbers, stating if “the work of each amateur cine camera is seen by an average of fifty people we glimpse an unsuspected cinema audience of 10,000,000.”⁷⁸ The BAAC-*Era* partnership was announced just prior to the Amateur Cine Exhibition held at Selfridges in London in July 1932, an event

that showed a selection of films from across the UK⁷⁹; while the BAAC also supported and promoted screening events in Bournemouth, and a Bolton ACA screening of key films and a talk from Mr Z. Sonin of North London Cine Club.⁸⁰

The response to this potential new amateur partnership was not completely positive, questioning the BAAC's underlying motivations and the emphasis placed on the journal's established "connection with the professional film world," despite coming at the end of a period which had legislatively and technologically demarcated the professional and amateur worlds.⁸¹ Despite the strengths of the community-led distribution and exhibition model, *The Era* pronounced that "the amateur cinematographer is doing better, more useful, and more lasting work than the film clubs and groups of the country... the truth is that neither numerically nor in importance do they [the film clubs] occupy that position."⁸² Given the importance of the amateur film club screening network, the BAAC-*Era* partnership seemed to return to a model where the contribution of the amateur was more important to the film industry than the amateur movement. This was only enhanced by hints in *The Era* that the BAAC had 'a big scheme in the air whereby the finest cine brains in the country are to be gathered together into one, powerful, film producing group. Then they will make the first national all-amateur film.'⁸³

The push back against the BAAC-*Era* desire for an increased engagement with the commercial and mainstream industry, and its apparent rejection of the role of established cine clubs, had a direct response: the creation of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC) in September 1932. The IAC existed alongside the BAAC for several years but grew to become the central organisation for British-based amateur filmmakers and clubs, not least due to its desire to build upon the established model and relationships introduced by the ACA, including the crucial role that distribution and exhibition played in drawing clubs together. This is clearest in the growth of exhibitions, competitions, screening events, and

film packages following the formation of the IAC, including the inaugural IAC competitions and the Scottish Amateur Film Festival at the end of 1933. The competitions became the engine that fuelled an expanded network of UK amateur distribution and exhibition, with winning films being compiled into an annual package shown across Britain and, in some instances, sent out internationally. The IAC's *IAC Bulletin* also worked to fill the gap as trade publications reduced their focus on amateur films and screenings, offering a regular slot where clubs could report on their productions, screenings, and events and promote films available on loan.

The IAC put this established network at the heart of its activities, allowing it to emphasise distribution and exhibition alongside the more common material around amateur film production. The Cine Social (later the Cine Fellowship) is one initiative that encapsulates that focus.⁸⁴ Membership of the Cine Social scheme included access to a list of 'free to hire' amateur film titles: this library started with twenty films (two 9.5mm, eighteen 16mm) and would expand out to several hundred films across the next few decades. The scheme was introduced to "promote pleasure in a hobby" but, crucially, "to assist in the sharing of that pleasure with others."⁸⁵ This sharing included people "who have already enthusiastically welcomed the idea of combining in small congenial groups for film-making and film-projection."⁸⁶ The growth of this library and its attempt to create a shared canon of the best amateur filmmaking is intrinsically linked with two interconnected ideas: first, that distribution and exhibition were as crucial to the amateur movement as film production; and second, that the same individuals shared responsibilities for those strands, rather than the separation of responsibilities found in the Fordist models of mainstream Hollywood and British production from the 1920s on.

[Figure 4: Advertisement for the annual Institute of Amateur Cinematographers film competition in *Home Movies and Home Talkies*, April 1933]

Conclusion

It is perhaps ironic that having begun as a group of individual clubs eager to engage with the mainstream industry, within a five-year period the British amateur filmmakers rejected a move towards the mainstream in favour of the embryonic distribution and exhibition sector they had built. That it was created out of necessity as a response to legislation and technological change does not diminish that network's ability to share local and regionally diverse filmmaking across a wide geographic area. In embracing the 'sub-standard' gauges, and leaving behind the somewhat restrictive practices of the mainstream industry, it opened up greater possibilities in the exchange of fictional work, travelogues, experimental films, trick photography, documentaries, nature films, newsreels and other modes of amateur and non-professional filmmaking. While early distribution efforts were often limited to inter-club loans and one-off screenings for club members, the introduction of the IAC Cine Social / Fellowship scheme in 1933 and annual touring programmes of IAC award-winning films began to establish more structured amateur networks in Britain. This achievement would not have been possible without the work of the individual ACAs and film clubs that initially constructed a network through which they could share and distribute their work, and the work of others. If the British amateur network shared some of the educational and appreciative purpose of the Film Society, it also drew on the commercial cinema's desire to entertain and put on a good show for the largest possible audience. From the 1930s on, similar organisations around the world would develop their own attempts to combine the study and appreciation of film with amateur productions: the 1927 formation of the Austrian amateur filmmaker association KdKÖ ('Klub der Kino-Amateure Österreichs')⁸⁷; the influential film club at Stockholm University (founded 1934) which screened non-commercial and films previously censored by government alongside those made by its

members⁸⁸; and a cinema department formed within the Foto-Clube Bandeirante in Brazil in 1946.⁸⁹

Our focus on the British amateur filmmaking clubs and institutions in the ten years between 1923 and 1933 and, within that, the specific developments around distribution and exhibition within the period 1927-1933 has allowed us to investigate how this movement operated, and how its overlapping activities were reported and discussed. Analysing the remaining patchwork of disparate traces can challenge existing binary understandings of the British exhibition sector at the time, as well as tease apart the relationships between the amateur and professional sectors. The result offers a clearer picture of the British amateur film world in a transitional moment and a challenge to include amateur film more centrally in understandings of the distribution and exhibition of films in Britain. Yet the examples of exchanges with American and New Zealand amateurs is a strong reminder that something might be lost if we consider the British amateur experience in isolation from other national amateur networks. Many of the same organisations involved in forming these national networks (ACA, BAAC, IAC) were responsible for selecting and sending British films to competitions held in other territories and made their own efforts to form international distribution networks. The IAC, for example, were responsible for the curation of seven films from different countries (Britain, Austria, Spain, Japan) into an 'IAC World Tour' package that went around Europe, India, Africa, North America, Australasia, and Japan between 1935 and 1939. These global endeavours raise a series of important questions regarding the relationship between British amateur organisations and their international counterparts: How were the British films received in non-UK exhibition contexts? How were films from other countries chosen for submission to British amateur contests? Developing and expanding the histories of country-specific amateur distribution and exhibition can only increase the chances to make clear the transnational connections and relationships that are only suggested

in our current work. We offer this initial historical analysis of the British amateur movement as a step towards building a stronger network of our own.

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The  Era
AMATEUR
FILM
CONTEST



**PRESENTATION OF AWARDS AND
EXHIBITION OF WINNING FILMS
TO-MORROW (THURSDAY) AT
7 FOR 7.30, IN**

**GAUMONT PRIVATE
THEATRE**

**FILM HOUSE,
WARDOUR STREET, W.1**

ADMISSION BY TICKET ONLY

Figure 1: Advertisement for *The Era*'s Amateur Film Contest award show (*The Era*, Dec 9, 1931, 6).



Mabel Poulton and John Stuart were among the audience at Apex Motion Pictures' public performance. Next to Miss Poulton is Louise Johnston, leading lady of "Shadows of Limehouse"

PUBLIC PAY *With the
Amateurs*
TO SEE "APEX" FILM
"Shadows of Limehouse"
 by CINECAMERA

Figure 2: Extract from *Film Weekly* article regarding the demand for tickets to see Apex Motion Picture's 9.5mm production *Shadows of Limehouse* at a public screening (*Film Weekly*, Feb 8, 1930, 24).

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Great AMATEUR

CINÉ EXHIBITION

OPENS JULY 4th

*This is the First Exhibition of
its kind held in Great Britain*

Note These Attractions!

- ★ All that the Amateur Cinematographer wants to know!
- ★ All the newest apparatus!
- ★ The pick of the best Amateur Films produced in various parts of the world!
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- ★ How to get the best results in shooting and projecting!
- ★ Complete Technical Service including how to make your own titles!
- ★ What it costs to run your own Cinematograph.
- ★ Home Talkies—too—the latest 16 mm. "Sound on Film."
- ★ Special display of Lighting Equipment for indoor work.
- ★ Many pieces of equipment will be shown here for the first time.
- ★ What others can do—You Can Do. Come and see the greatest show of Cinema Films all produced by Amateurs.

ADMISSION FREE—of course.
Palm Court, Fourth Floor

Also see the Final Auditions for the
"Gramophone Talent Week" Com-
petition and famous Gramophone
Artists demonstrating in space adjoining

Figure 3: Advertisement for Selfridge's Amateur Cine Exhibition (*The Era*, June 29, 1932, 18).

HOME MOVIES & HOME TALKIES 399

THE NATIONAL MOVIE-MAKING CONTEST

The contest officially opened Nov. 1st, 1932, and closes at midnight on Sept. 30th 1933.

SPONSORED BY THE

INSTITUTE OF AMATEUR CINEMATOGRAPHERS

AN INTERNATIONAL, NON-PROFIT MAKING INSTITUTION --- OPEN TO ALL AMATEUR CINEMATOGRAPHERS
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FOUR SOLID SILVER CHALLENGE TROPHIES VALUED OVER 100 GUINEAS

"Home Movies" Challenge Trophy. I.A.C. Scenario Challenge Trophy. British Photographic Manufacturers' Association Challenge Trophy. I.A.C. International Challenge Trophy.

Equipment Prizes of over £200

KINDLY PRESENTED BY THE FOLLOWING

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ VICTOR 16 mm. Cine Camera, Model 3. Complete through the kindness of Victor Anemograph Corp., U.S.A. Value 40 guineas. ■ J. H. DALLMEYER, LTD., London. 1 7/8 1.5 Dallmeyer Speed Lenses. Value 10 guineas. ■ BRITISH TALKATONE, LTD. Constructors Model Turntable. Value 10 guineas. ■ AMATEUR CINE SERVICE, Bromley. Choice of cine goods. Value 10 guineas. ■ A. L. SAWTREE, Sutton. Choice of cine goods. Value 5 guineas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ WHITE STAR LINE. Free Holiday for the best cruising picture taken on one of their Cruises. Value 25 guineas. ■ WALLACE HEATON, LTD. Book of 16 mm. Cine Library. Coupons. Value £10 ■ A. O. ROTH, Carlisle. Choice of Camera. Value 10 guineas. ■ STEDMANS CINE LABORATORY, Leeds. Free reversal processing for six months. ■ JOHN HIDDORLEY, Stockport. Choice of cine goods. Value 5 guineas.
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■ J. D. BROWN, Division. Choice of Cine Equipment. Value £10

Messrs. Loden Service, Leeds. Messrs. A. T. Chaplin, Ltd., Manchester. Messrs. Reynolds & Branson, Ltd., Leeds. Messrs. Josephine Fallofield, Ltd., London. Messrs. Photographic, Golders Green, Etc., etc.

Details of these and many others to be announced later. Come and see the Prizes at our Stand at the "DAILY MAIL" EXHIBITION, OLYMPIA, MARCH 29th - APRIL 29th.

TEN CLASSES:

A. Best Silent Film of Holiday, Travel, Cruise or Scenery.	F. The best scenario (any subject)
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I hereby apply for Membership of the above Institute. I enclose my name value £10.00

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Being next year's subscription. Send me the fee badge ("Home-Making" badge) please. (10/-)

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It is understood that this subscription makes me eligible to enter next National Home-Making Contest.

JOIN THE I.-A.-C.— MAKE THE PICTURE TELL THE STORY

Figure 4: Advertisement for the annual Institute of Amateur Cinematographers film competition (*Home Movies and Home Talkies*, Apr 1933, 399).

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