

# Local History through Film

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Janet McBain

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Janet McBain was formerly Curator at the Scottish Screen Archive, National Library of Scotland.

## Introduction and History of Research

Moving images can be a valuable source of evidence for twentieth-century local history. Film can be taken as one source of evidence, with particular characteristics, which complements the written and oral record of our society. However, like any form of recorded knowledge it requires to be evaluated for its authenticity.

Film arguably offers a unique ability to reflect and illustrate people's lives and the events important to them, and perhaps this is its greatest attraction to a modern viewer: by capturing images in time, it seems not simply to represent things but make them present. The Scottish Screen Archive at the National Library of Scotland has been collecting film about Scotland since 1976 and through discovery of these historical films themselves has come some information about their provenance and the purpose behind them – who was making films and how were they distributed. However, the history of Scottish film production is still relatively obscure and certainly not as well researched as other British film histories.

The bulk of the collection in the Archive is non-fiction and made for a variety of purposes – teaching, entertainment, commercial reward, personal pleasure, propaganda. There are different genres of non-fiction film, all of which have the potential to offer evidence to the local historian.

## Local Cinema Newsreels

Several cinema proprietors and managers made local newsreels of events in the community served by their cinemas. Popular topics were festivals and gala days, sports meetings, excursions and outings and, in the aftermath of the World War I, the unveiling of war memorials and Armistice Day parades: any event that would attract crowds on to the streets. The cameraman would be instructed to get in as many faces in the crowd as possible. Shown a few days later in the local picture house these 'topicals' or local newsreels would draw in audiences eager to see if they could spot themselves on the silver screen. The Archive has some 500 of these local topical films commissioned by cinema managers (fig. 1). The heyday for this kind of production was in the interwar years when cinema going was in its ascendancy and there was competition for audiences amongst local cinemas. The films reflect on the social history of the communities the cinemas served, often providing a unique visual record of an event that may be described in the local paper but for which few photographs exist. For example, in the 1930s Walter Hinks, manager of the New Alex Cinema in Paisley, commissioned a number of films of excursions taken on the local festival day Sma' Shot Day, such as *Ferguslie Thread Works Outing to Braemar 1934*.

Figure 1. Frame enlargement from *Paisley Children's Happy Hunting Ground* (1929): a local topical film made for the New Alex Picture House. Scottish Screen Archive collection.



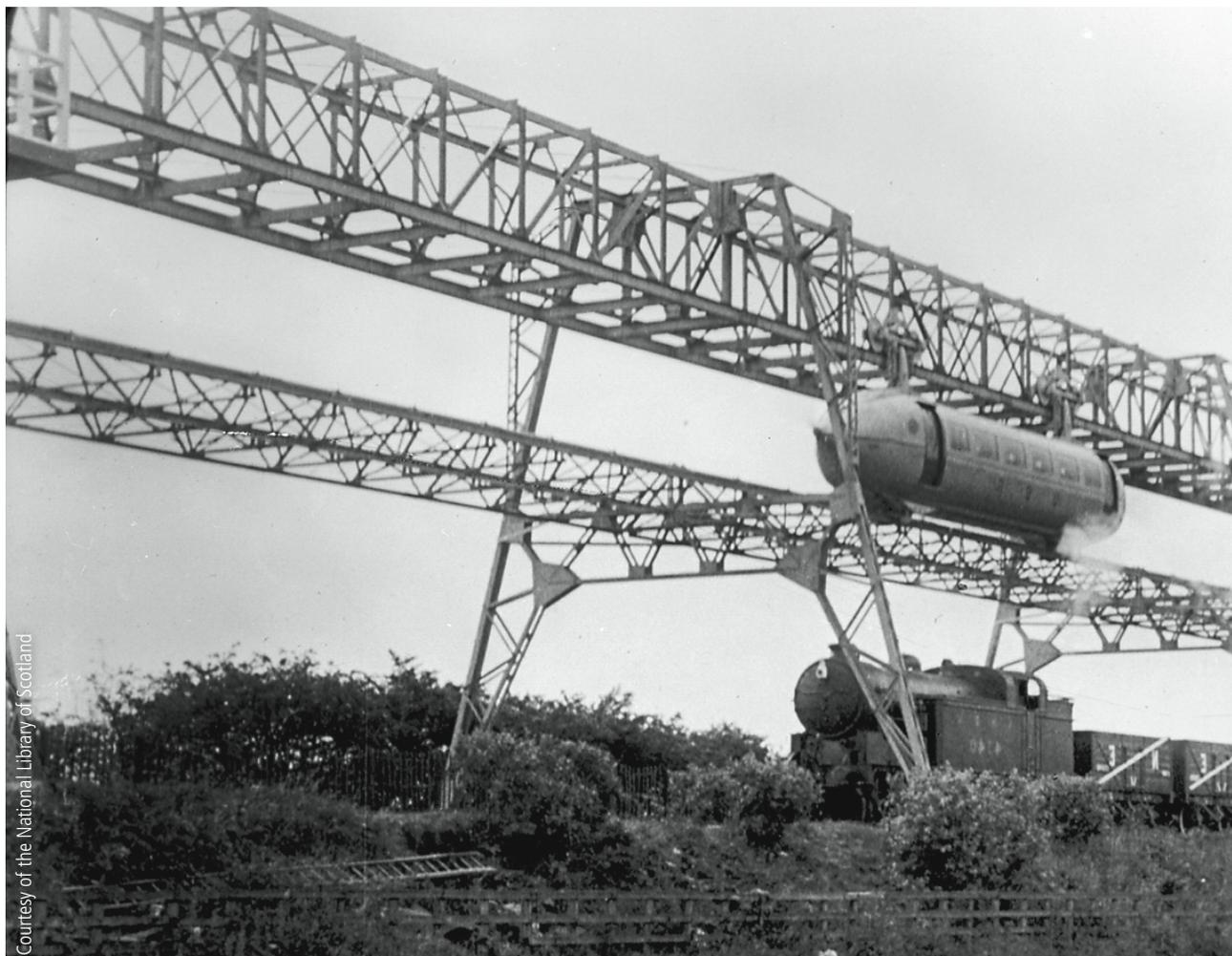
Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland

## Amateur Cinematography

Local history is reflected in the many amateur films in the Archive's collection, with cine enthusiasts filming their home village or town and events featuring their family, such as Sunday-school picnics, church processions, fancy-dress parades and other social occasions; films such as the Reverend George Allan's records of Port Glasgow's Princess Street Church events in the 1930s. In many cases the local history is almost incidental – the purpose of the film may be to record a family member's participation but a record of the event or locality is recorded nevertheless (fig. 2).

Other film-makers were aware of the value of recording for posterity and deliberately set out to film their community and the history that was unfolding in front of the camera. Unlike professional film-makers, the amateurs were there on the ground filming what might have seemed incidental and un-newsworthy to the professional but was of interest to the locality, for example Joe Griffiths's film of daily life in the mining village of Bothwellhaugh during the years before the clearing of the village in 1965 and its destruction to make way for the creation of Strathclyde Country Park (fig. 3).

Figure 2. Frame enlargement from James Anderson's *Bennie Rail Plane* (1929): an amateur film shot by a friend of the inventor George Bennie. Scottish Screen Archive collection.



Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland



Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland

Figure 3. Frame enlargement from *Bothwellhaugh Village Life 1962–1965* by Joe Griffiths. Scottish Screen Archive collection.

## Industrial Film

Business and particularly the manufacturing industry began to make use of motion-picture film soon after the practical development of cinema in 1895. Early films made for advertising and promotional purposes often followed the pattern of 'raw material to finished product' or the 'visit to so-and-so's works' and were intended primarily for the domestic market, though



Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland

Figure 4. Thames & Clyde Films on location in Martin Black's wire-rope works, Coatbridge, about 1946. Scottish Screen Archive collection.

not exclusively. Simple in technique as most of these are, they nevertheless present a valuable picture of industrial conditions and processes at the time (fig. 4). After World War II the use of film as a training medium for industry became increasingly important. Commercial companies were becoming more aware that film could be of practical use within their own organizations for training staff on production processes and sales and advertising techniques. Similarly manufacturers in particular recognized the opportunity of reaching a wide market for their products by sponsoring films made for showing in cinemas and at public events, such as *Romance of Engineering*, made for Wm Beardmore & Co. and screened at the 1938 Empire Exhibition in Glasgow.

### Educational Film

The production of films for classroom teaching flourished in Scotland from the 1930s onward. The nucleus of the classroom films in the Archive come from the Scottish Central Film Library, established in 1939 to distribute for non-theatrical use 16mm educational, factual interest and information films. The Library took over from individual education authorities the need to develop and maintain film

libraries themselves and took into distribution the films produced by the Scottish Educational Film Association, established in 1935, and later Educational Films of Scotland. The Library ceased film distribution in 1995. The value to the historian of these classroom teaching films is that they were made as instructional and information films, often capturing quite simply how things were done or what they looked like and without the 'spin' with which a professionally edited promotional film might seek to present the subject. *Making Chocolates*, filmed in the Birrell's sweetie factory, Glasgow, in 1954 shows the production line from start to finish and is typical of this kind of teaching film.

### Municipal Film

Local town councils used film to varying degrees, for dissemination of information to their citizens and for promoting to the outside world their town or region as an attractive place to live and work. In doing so they left a record of municipal life, aimed at and

reflecting local life as experienced by ordinary people. Greenock Corporation used the film *Greenock Plans Ahead* to inform the townspeople of the proposals to address the critical housing situation in the burgh in 1948. Glasgow Corporation was unique in Scotland in the extent to which it used the medium of film to reach its citizens. Between 1920 and 1978 more than 50 short films were made on topics such as child care and hospital services in the 1930s, how the city's water supply and tram network were run, redevelopment of the inner city in the 1960s and 1970s, and construction of new transport links for a modern-post-war city. The new town Corporations also promoted the quality of life for Glasgow's overspill with Cumbernauld and East Kilbride commissioning short cinema films in the 1970s.

## Conclusion

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There are over 15,000 historical titles in the Archive, mostly non-fiction, with many reflecting on the history of ordinary people and the communities across Scotland. To a large extent the value of these films for local history has yet to be fully realized and enjoyed by those communities. For many of the films there is only a basic catalogue description, based on the evidence that the archivist can cull from the images themselves, and without local knowledge these descriptions can be incomplete. There is, we are sure, a wealth of local history to be distilled from these films and indeed some gems to be rediscovered. The Scottish Screen Archive would welcome interest from local historians in researching the films in the Archive, bringing their specialist knowledge to bear to improve the catalogue and thereby ensuring that we can capture for future generations the fullest information about the localities that is contained therein.

## Further Reading

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### Online resources

- <http://ssa.nls.uk>  
The Scottish Screen Archive catalogue, illustrated with nearly 1000 complete films, is available online at the above address.
- [www.scotlandonscreen.org.uk](http://www.scotlandonscreen.org.uk)  
This website makes available clips from hundreds of Scottish Screen Archive films with associated teaching materials that can be downloaded for use in schools.