

Reconstructing the news: British newsreel documentation and the British Universities Newsreel Project

Nicholas Hiley and Luke McKernan

Newsreels as a subject of academic study in Britain owe much to Thorold Dickinson. The noted film editor and director of such classics as *Gaslight*, *The Arsenal Stadium Mystery*, *The Next of Kin* and *The Queen of Spades* became Britain's first Professor of Film in the 1960s at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London. Following two conferences for historians and film and television executives, Dickinson decided to act on a growing sense that film as a record of history demanded attention, and the existence and location of relevant footage had to be documented. Dickinson wrote:

... it occurred to me that a national register of film of historical and sociological importance which is preserved in this country together with a record of sources of such films in other countries would be appropriate ... a new kind of film, uncompromisingly historical, which would cater for adults who wanted to enrich their historical knowledge by studying its sight and its sound.¹

In 1969, therefore, Dickinson obtained funding from the Social Science Research Council to create the Slade Film History Register. The Register aimed to collect documentation that would support the central idea of film as a historical resource by concentrating on the period before 1963, the subsequent period, it was reasoned, being covered by

the British National Film Catalogue.² Central to this work was gathering information on the British newsreels, compiling as complete a collection as possible of copies of newsreel issue sheets, producing a selective classified index to these, and making records of films and television programmes which made use of actuality and news footage and were deemed of value in history teaching. Frances Thorpe, director of the Register, recalled:

Between 1969 and 1973 the Slade Film History Register helped to co-ordinate and inspire a significant number of scholars and researchers both in the UK and abroad. Several national and international meetings were held, productions including *Double-Headed Eagle*

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(Lutz Becker, 1973) and *The World at War* (Thames TV, 1973), used the records compiled by the Register, universities such as Leeds incorporated film into their courses and the Open University course 'War and Society' introduced film as a primary source of historical evidence under Professor A. Marwick and Lisa Pontecorvo.³

In 1973 the Social Science Research Council grant came to an end, and the Register's work could only continue in greatly reduced form with some support from University College London and the British Universities Film Council (BUFC). In 1975 the Register transferred in its entirety to the BUFC, together with one member of staff. Although the funding had been lost, the Register had already achieved a great deal in its central task of gathering copies of the newsreel issue sheets, and it existed within (and to a significant extent helped to encourage) a period of great debate among scholars and programme makers as to the historical value of the actuality and newsfilm record. Productions such as Thames Television's major history of the Second World War, *The World at War*, Jonathan Lewis' *Before Hindsight* and the BBC series *Film as Evidence* engendered notable debate among Anthony Aldgate, Nicholas Pronay, Howard Smith, Jerome Kuehl and others. But the task of providing a subject index to all British newsreel production, even selectively, was a Herculean one, and only a third of the task (on cards) was ever completed. Furthermore that very selectivity proved unhelpful, as what was deemed of historic significance in 1969 inevitably shifted as historical studies widened and the range of possible sources and areas of interest widened with them. Only a record of every one of the newsreels produced would do.

British newsreels were released twice a week, in common with most cinema newsreels in Europe. In America the distances involved led to newsreels being more usually released weekly. Each release was recorded on what is commonly called an issue sheet, giving the issue number of the release, its release date (of the first run of that newsreel, for one single newsreel might run for a number of weeks as it passed down the chain to ever humbler cinemas paying smaller rates), and basic details of the stories contained in that issue. These might be just a story title; sometimes with a line or two of synopsis, or footage length; sometimes even the names of the

cameramen who shot the footage. The issue sheets were always at the heart of the Slade Film History Register, and in 1984 the renamed British Universities Film & Video Council (BUFVC) issued the complete set on 275 microfiche.⁴ This initiative was accompanied by the publication of *The Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels* (1983), edited by the BUFVC's Head of Information, James Ballantyne. The book contained an extensive collection of abstracts from journals and books covering all aspects of British newsreel production, an attempt to list all known British newsreel cameramen, and other such data, which was augmented by two further guides published in 1988 and 1993, and two wall-charts mapping British newsreel production. In the regrettable absence of a formal history of the British newsreels, these three volumes served as the best available record of the British newsreels and their history.⁵

While the publication of the issue sheets on microfiche was a god-send to researchers, and an inspiration to a number of students just discovering the newsreels, and while the supporting documentation further opened up the newsreels as a subject for study, collating and comparing data from the records was a time-consuming and unreliable business, without a completed centralised index. Happily funding arrived, in the form of a four-year grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England to create a unified database of all of the issue sheets for British newsreels and cinemagazines held in the Slade Film History Register, a task which ultimately involved the inputting of some 160,000 news stories.

The British Universities Newsreel Project (BUNP), headed by Dr. Nicholas Hiley, with a staff of three (one based at British Movietonews in Denham), achieved this within the time-scale allotted, with an additional keywording system augmenting free-text searching across the synopses (where these existed). The 156,864 news stories on the database, dating from 1911 to 1979, did not quite represent every single British newsreel release, as records were lost (or believed lost), particularly for the earlier years. But substantially here was a record of the moving picture news of the nation for seventy years of the twentieth century, a tremendous achievement by any standards, and a fitting conclusion (to that point) to Thorold Dickinson's original vision. The database was released on CD-ROM and online (www.bufvc.ac.uk/newsreels) in March 2000.

There were newsreels in Britain between June

1910, with the first release of *Pathe's Animated Gazette*, and May 1979 with the final issue of *British Movietone*. The term 'newsreel' is all too frequently used to describe any actuality footage, so that one reads of Lumière 'newsreels', an absurd attribution. A newsreel was a means of both packaging and distributing a particular kind of actuality film. It was a collection of selected news items on a single reel, released at regular intervals. It was a product of the growth in cinema construction in the 1907–10 period, as a newsreel needed a regular, reliable audience which would come back for more of the same. The first properly identifiable newsreel was the French *Pathé Fait-Divers* (later *Pathé Journal*) in 1908. It was soon followed by a number of French rivals (*Gaumont Actualités*, *Éclair Journal*, *Eclipse Journal*) and in 1910 by *Pathe's Animated Gazette* and *Gaumont Graphic* in Britain (both heavily dependent in the early years on their French parent companies) and the *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle*. America's first newsreel came in 1911, *Pathé's Weekly*.

The newsreels were characterised by their regularity. Released bi-weekly in Britain, they mimicked newspapers not only in their names and their news agenda, but in their constant, reliable appearance. Just as the newspaper reader always knew where to find the next day's printed news, so the newsreels aimed to become a habit among audiences. This created some financial stability, but it also created the conditions for news itself. As Nicholas Pronay writes of archetypal newsfilms, they 'set out to interest a *specific* audience by reporting an event which had *news value* not because of the inherent pictorial interest of the subject, but because the audience was already interested, had already been *conditioned* to be interested in it'.⁶ News is always conditional upon its audience; it cannot exist in some abstract form. Our sense of news is wider than it generally was in 1910, for we belong to widening circles of communities: locally, nationally and globally. But the basic rule remains: each community receives the news it desires, and our widened sense of what is news has led to the super-saturation of news media today.

Each newsreel imitated the others to a considerable degree, through a mixture of financial caution, suspicion and an implicit acknowledgement that the newsreels thrived through their very homogeneity. Each newsreel in the silent era consisted of around five stories of a minute's length, described by inter-

titles, the emphasis very much on the pictures telling the story. The number of stories grew towards the end of the 1920s, and still more in the sound era, when newsreels were ten minutes or more in length. Sound led eventually to commentary (there was an engaging period, roughly 1929–1933, where newsreels had live sound and music but seldom commentary), and to the word dictating the image. There were variations in lengths as patterns of release grew more complex. Nevertheless, each newsreel kept faithfully to a numbering system, for both issues and individual stories, and to the weekly or bi-weekly pattern for first-run releases.

This discipline in description has enabled the creation of an effective database of national newsreel production. The BUNP is arranged by individual news story. Each story has to be defined by its newsreel company, issue number, library number, its position within the newsreel, and its date of release. Such data pinpoint the newsreel to a specific time and a specific means of production, and differentiate a newsreel database from a mere footage source. If we cannot recreate the audience of the newsreels, we can at least give a good indication of the definite conditions under which any newsreel was produced. The names of the cameraman, commentators and other staff who worked on any one story further pinpoint the story in time, and reveal the process by which the newsreel story was made. Historical understanding and value only comes with an appreciation of the means by which the newsreel story came into being.

Below is a sample record, albeit an unusually detailed one, that of the *Topical Budget* newsreel's coverage of the wedding of the Duke of York and Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (the future King George VI and Queen Elizabeth) in 1923. The record gives the following information: the newsreel's name at this period (between 1922 and 1923 the newsreel was extended to include that of its newspaper owner, the *Daily Sketch*); the 'newsreel group' it belongs to (so all *Topical Budget* newsreels file together despite that newsreel's many name changes); the issue number of the complete newsreel release to which this story belongs; the position of the story within that issue (it was the first of two stories); the first release date; the Newsreel Project's identifying number for the story; the title of the story, taken whenever possible from the print itself; the synopsis, in this case quite an extensive one taken from the catalogue record for the film in the National Film and Television

A sample
record from
the BUNP
Database

NEWSREEL COMPANY DATA

Newsreel: Daily Sketch Topical Budget

Group: Topical Budget

Issue Number: 609-2

Item Number: 1 of 2

Date released: 30/4/1923

Record Number: BUN 128990

DESCRIPTION FIELDS

Item title: The Royal Wedding

Description: [1ST SUBTITLE]: 'HRH THE DUKE OF YORK, the King's Second Son; MARRIED AT WESTMINSTER ABBEY TO LADY ELIZABETH BOWES-LYON, Youngest Daughter of the Earl of Strathmore. "The Duke leaves the Palace".' Coach and cavalry entourage leaving entrance to Buckingham Palace. [2ND SUBTITLE]: 'Lady Elizabeth leaves her modest home in Bruton St. to become the fourth lady in the land'. Lady Elizabeth, in wedding dress, steps out of house and into waiting carriage. [3RD SUBTITLE]: 'Arrivals at the Abbey'. Shot, taken from high up, of carriages arriving outside Westminster Abbey, with cheering crowds. [4TH SUBTITLE]: 'In The Abbey'. Still photograph of the couple at the altar – camera pans downwards, then left. [5TH SUBTITLE]: 'Married'. MS Bridal coach leaving the Abbey entrance. MCS of coach as it passes by camera, including brief close shot of the couple inside. LS from high position as coach slowly leaves the Abbey area, with cheering crowds. [6TH SUBTITLE]: 'The return to the Palace'. Two shots from high position of the coach on its journey, being cheered by crowds. [7TH SUBTITLE]: 'Across the Horse Guards'. Another shot from a high position of procession passing down Horse Guards' Parade. Closer shot of this. Another such shot of the coach with King George V and Queen Mary passing by. [8TH SUBTITLE]: 'St James' St.'. View down at procession coming down St James' St, with cheering crowds on either side. [9TH SUBTITLE]: 'Piccadilly'. HA view down as coach comes down Piccadilly, crowds cheering from the windows and either side of the street. Closer shot of coach at Hyde Park Corner, with people behind the main body of the crowd running ahead to get a second look. MS at ground level as the bridal coach passes through the gates of Buckingham Palace. MLS the couple with King George V, Queen Mary and Queen Alexandra on the palace balcony. HA panning shot of the vast crowd outside the palace. Much closer shot of the couple, with Queen Mary, on the balcony. [10TH SUBTITLE]: 'Thanking their multitude of friends'. Shot from same position of the couple looking out from the palace balcony.

Keywords: George VI of Great Britain; Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother; Royalty; Rites of Passage; Celebrations – Royal; Queen Mary of Great Britain

Location: London

STAFF AND TECHNICAL NOTES

Cameramen: Filmed by Benson, Bool, Bloomfield, Bovill, Dennis, Ford, Gardner, Grant, Hutchins, Jones, Purnell, Redknapp, Rodwell, Roseman, Tobin, Thomas, Yates, Jimmy Taylor and George Woods Taylor. In their trade press advertisements Topical claimed that they would use thirty cameramen.

Compilers' comments: The length given in the issue books is 328 feet.

Length in feet: 310

Archive in London; the keywords added by BUNP staff; the location (a field filled in if the location is not made apparent by the synopsis); the names of the cameramen; and the length of the film, in this case noting the difference between the extant print and the length as recorded in the Topical Film Company issue books, which formed the chief source of information for this record (the provenance for such

newsreel records is recorded in general terms elsewhere on the BUNP Database).

A keywording system has been introduced, on top of the free-text searching across synopses, which was an amalgam of terms used by the newsreel companies themselves and terms considered likely to be of value to researchers. Any subject indexing system is subjective, and the unevenness



Fig. 1. The staff of British Pathé News gathered for a group photograph during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. [Richard Koszarski collection.]

of the records (some of which have lengthy synopses, others of which have no synopses at all) only adds to the lack of total certainty in subject searches, but themes such as 'Cold War', 'Entertainment and Leisure', 'Fashion and Costume' and 'Industrial Relations' are of obvious value. Less obvious terms such as 'Bizarre items', 'Period Attitudes' and 'Humans of Unusual Size' give indication of the news-

reels' particular outlook on life, and our particular outlook on them.

An attempt to show the process by which newsfilm is produced was the inspiration behind the current extension of the BUFVC's newsreel work, the British Universities Newsreel Scripts Project (BUNSP). In October 1998 Reuters Television, then owners of a number of British newsreels⁷ but with

their library about to pass to the management of ITN, donated on to the BUFVC a collection of some 40,000 newsreel documents. These covered the 1930s to the 1950s for the newsreels *British Paramount News*, *Gaumont British News* and *Universal News*, and comprised issue sheets, assignment sheets, cameraman's dope sheets, shot lists and commentary scripts. Also among the documents, arranged neatly by newsreel issue, were newspaper clippings, sports programmes, exhibition catalogues, leaflets and all manner of ephemera, all of the documents used by the cameraman or editorial staff as background data. Here was the very process by which the newsreel was created. The opportunity to enrich the existing newsreel database was evident, and a second application for funds to add these documents to the database over four years was successfully made to the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

The plan was to digitise some 80,000 newsreel documents (further documents of this kind having been identified in other newsreel collections) over four years (1999–2003). The documents would be sorted into five main types, according to what had survived (for instance, only commentary scripts survive for *Gaumont British News*):

Assignment sheets

Such documents from the news editor describe in detail what the cameraman was supposed to film. They indicate how pre-planned the news could be, but they are comparatively rare among British newsreels.

Dope sheets

Every cameraman had to fill out a form recording everything that he had filmed, usually describing it shot by shot, and frequently adding further comments. British newsreel cameramen were not known for their retiring natures, and these lively and opinionated documents frequently make for highly entertaining reading, as the cameramen add their own glosses on the difficulties of newsreel production and the often marked differences between newsfilm and reality.

Shot lists

The editorial department would provide a shot-by-shot description of each individual news story, with footage lengths for each shot. They provide the clearest indication of the contents of a newsreel

story, as well as providing a guide to possible missing footage in the holdings of present newsreel libraries.

Commentary scripts

Sound newsreels were led by the word, and it was the word that determined the particular angle that a newsreel would take. Consequently the commentaries are of prime importance in assessing how the newsreels informed, moulded opinion, obscured or misled or propagandised, and the commentary scripts are likely to be the documents of greatest interest to political historians. The commentary scripts generally come with corrections and deletions, usually routine but sometimes revealing, and have been shown to match exactly the text as delivered in the existing newsreels.

Ephemera

Frequently a newsreel cameraman would be simply handed a newspaper clipping and be told by the news editor to go and film that story. Such clippings survive in the newsreel documentation collections, as well as boxing, soccer, golf, tennis and athletics programmes, exhibition programmes, promotional leaflets and any other sort of document that might have helped the cameraman film the story or the editorial department identify names and places. Often such documents have pencilled comments about who was filmed where or when. The BUFVC has unexpectedly acquired a small but delightful museum of mid-twentieth century memorabilia.

The documents are being identified and labelled at the BUFVC, then scanned by a digitisation bureau before transfer to the online database. They are being made available as PDF files (requiring free Adobe Acrobat software), as this particular image format allows manipulation of the image online and print-outs that fit all of the document onto a single page. Image resolution has been calculated so far as possible to fall between the best quality picture and the quickest download time. At the time of writing, 20,000 *British Paramount News* documents have been entered on the database, with a further 9,000 *Pathé News* documents in preparation, and 7,500 *Gaumont British News* commentary scripts digitised and ready for entry. The final figure of 80,000 documents by 2003 will be a tall order, but the results will create a database of film documentation unlike any other in its extent and range.

In addition to the work of adding the digitised documents, the BUFVC is augmenting the database and its newsreels website in other ways. Work is being done to identify further newsreel documentation sources to fill in those gaps in the current database, and issue sheets record have now been traced for *Gaumont Graphic* for its earliest years 1910–1917, and for the later *Gaumont Sound News*, which ran 1929–1933 and on which the young David Lean worked as a cutter. A biographical database of British newsreel staff, detailing some 700 lives of cameramen, editors, commentators, sound recordists and others, has been constructed and half of which, at the time of writing, is now available on-line. Plans are in train to audio stream interviews with newsreel cameramen⁸ as well as interview video clips, and to build up the website as an information resource for newsreels, with a general history of the British newsreels, accounts of the individual reels, articles on newsreels and lists of further resources.

The value of the British Universities Newsreel Project Database is three-fold. It exists as a record, a monument even, to what the British newsreels produced 1910–1979 and to seventy years of British history, viewed with partiality and with huge omissions, certainly, but an immense visual record all the same. Secondly it exists as a record of extant news footage, used by researchers who want to search across the records of several newsreels. Thirdly, it exists as an aid to academic study.

Traditionally the newsreels have been the stalking ground of political historians, most interested in how they distorted or disguised the news, how they helped form or suppress political opinions, how they endeavoured to maintain the status quo. This approach particularly characterised newsreel study in the 1970s, when academics first became aware of them as a distinctive medium in need of serious analysis, it also being a time when newsreel footage was becoming increasingly (and sometimes indiscriminately) used in television historical documentaries. Such concerns remain the bedrock of studies involving newsreels, but interest has since broadened. There has to be more to them than the old complaint of ‘what the newsreel does not show’. What was filmed, the richness of the content, is at least as important and keeps the newsreels fresh as a subject of research.

At the simplest level, the newsreel database is a record of popular obsessions. By far the largest subject featured is Sport (30,624 stories). Second



comes Royalty (16,465 stories), followed by the USA (15,748 stories) and Politicians (13,584). The Soviet Union scores 2,079, the Cold War 587, Atomic Energy 491. At the lower end of the register one can have fun finding such oddities as Robots (76 stories), Hairdressing (75 stories), the South Pole (33 stories), Escaped Monkeys (10 stories) and Invisibility (3 items). That newsreel favourite, Multiple Births, scores 268, and the database rejoices in 128 stories on Humans of Unusual Size.

The database used in this way becomes a useful barometer of social change and popular awareness, and the ebbs and flows of news subjects can be traced over the years. There were 313 items on the Spanish Civil War, but one may trace the waning of the newsreels' interest in the topic, from 91 items out of a total of 5840 issued in 1936, to 86 out of 6354 in 1937, and 64 out of 5878 in 1938, the clearest indication of a public wearying of the subject. One may be very sure that the newsreel editors were acutely attuned to public taste, at least to the end of the Second World War. It was partly a failure to adjust to the new expectations of the post-war world that led to the newsreels' ultimate demise.

The database does not (as yet) link in directly to the newsreel films themselves, but the growing collection of newsreel documents being put online is a resource unto itself. There is, it is important to stress, much information in the surviving documentation that cannot be discovered from viewing the newsreels themselves. The paper records let us see

Fig. 2. *Pathé Gazette* title page, 1940s.
[Courtesy of British Pathé.]

through the film into the process of manufacture, an exercise which both illuminates the films and shows that it is quite possible to uncover a great deal that is of value to the historian without any recourse to the films themselves. While no researcher should ever be discouraged from seeking out newsreels to view, not least simply for the great pleasures that they offer, the documents alone are a treasure trove. The newsreel records that have now come to the BUFVC, and similar documents identified in other collections which will form part of the overall digitisation programme, have been inaccessible to researchers for years, and indeed their inaccessibility may have led to distortions in the writing of British newsreel history.⁹ The documents reveal how the newsreel, and hence the news itself in this form, was constructed. They reveal in particular how the newsreels edited their material and a particularly intriguing aspect is how they regarded faked or reconstructed shots. The surviving documentation for *British Paramount News* and *British Movietone News* in particular gives an insight into the manipulation of newsreel footage during the 1940s.

The official line was that the newsreels were very careful about 'fakes' and 'reconstructions', avoiding the former and identifying the latter. In 1941 Gerald Sanger, editor of *British Movietone News*, declared passionately 'that the two terms are not identical: "Faking" is definitely an immoral practice; it is misrepresentation, and an effort to deceive the public ... On the other hand, "reconstructions", where no authentic pictures exist, are legitimate – always provided that they are not represented as genuine'.¹⁰ The surviving newsreel documentation confirms that the newsreels were careful to identify 'fakes', and even used the term to cover stories involving stock footage. When library material was used to supplement a heavily-censored story – as with the D-Day landings in June 1944 – it might be described as 'representational material',¹¹ but in most cases the deliberate construction of stories from stock footage was acknowledged as 'faking', even in internal memoranda.¹²

The trouble was that the newsreels could not function without 'faking'. Their operation was shaped by two significant developments over the previous decade – the coming of sound and the growth of considerable footage libraries. The first had shifted the focus of continuity from the filmed images to the newsreel commentary, and the second had permitted the newsreel editor to illustrate that commentary

with a range of visually-appropriate images, whether or not they came from the actual story being reported. The editor could thus plan a story well in advance, and determine how it would be reported even before the cameramen returned from their assignments. The commentary was the focus of the story, and, as the surviving documentation shows, the cameramen and library staff were given the often difficult task of illustrating it.

The newsreel production process began with the drawing up of verbal instructions. At *British Paramount News*, for example, the news editor Fred Partington prepared a 'script' for all the important stories, indicating how they were to be covered, suggesting particular shots, and even scripting interviews for the cameramen to shoot. The filming of the actual story was expected to follow these instructions to the letter, and in March 1944 Paramount cameraman Maurice Ford was happy to reassure Partington that he had managed to obtain 'scenes as requested per script'.¹³ As the *British Paramount News* story files indicate, the primacy of the written word now extended backwards from the cutting room to the assignment desk.

The process can be seen at work in the reporting of a wartime coal dispute. On 10 March 1944 someone at Paramount – probably Fred Partington – took a bundle of press cuttings, and drew up a detailed script headed SOUTH WALES COAL STOPPAGE. This script suggested interviews with the Fuel Minister, Gwilym Lloyd George, and with Arthur Horner, the President of the South Wales Miners' Federation – whose office and home phone numbers were given. A telegram was sent to Horner requesting a 'SHORT NEWSREEL INTERVIEW ON COAL STOPPAGE TOMORROW OR SUNDAY IN CARDIFF OR WHITCHURCH.' The script also proposed the shooting of various scenes at the miners' delegate conference in Cardiff the following day, including 'arrivals, crowds, general view of building,' plus shots of mass meetings at the collieries on 12 March, and possibly film of the miners' return to work on the following day.¹⁴

The newspaper cuttings had come from the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express*, and *London Evening Standard*, but the editor of *British Paramount News*, Tom Cummins, had apparently decided to take a far more hard-line approach than any of these papers. The script thus included a list of the complaints which coal miners might rehearse on camera, taken from the report in the *London Evening Standard*, but it also



Fig. 3. Pathé newsreel cameraman Jock Gemmell. [Courtesy of British Pathé.]

urged the cameramen to add 'other grievances that you can find on the spot'. The script further encouraged the cameramen to get an 'interview with [a] soldier-miner if you can find one home on leave', and suggested that they should film an interview with a soldier who would voice the opinion that 'if they strike, they will let down the Second Front'.¹⁵ The editorial staff at Paramount plainly knew how the story was to appear on the screen, even before the cameramen left London.

On 11 March 1944 Paramount cameraman Jimmy Gemmell and sound engineer Christopher Lankester left London for Cardiff to film the interviews, accompanied by Douglas Hardy who was assigned to shooting additional silent footage. Gemmell and Lankester managed to interview Arthur Horner and one of the local miners' delegates, whilst Hardy filmed silent 'cut-ins', but subsequent shooting at the conference proved difficult. 'Various shots were taken as the men entered the hall,' Hardy reported on his dope sheet, but 'owing to the temper of the men we were requested to keep out and in any case the hall was very badly lit': 'However there is a single shot *taken through glass* into the hall. Following this comes several shots of the men leaving.'¹⁶

To supplement this material Gemmell filmed general silent footage of the colliery districts, plus 'miners at street corners in village, discussing situation': 'General views of idle collieries and empty coal waggons (estimated approx. 700 trucks), idle pit head gear, posters on village walls etc.'¹⁷

The story was assembled from this footage, plus library shots taken from April 1936 which showed the mines at work. As the complaints from soldiers had not materialised the message about war production had to be carried by the commentary alone. The story thus opened with Gemmell's shots of idle South Wales pits, with the commentator noting that 'on the eve of the Second Front, coal, prime requisite of Britain's war machine, was not produced in this area.' According to the first draft, the commentator was to have added that during negotiations 'the men disregarded their leaders, made mockery of the victory-effort-output, and struck.' However, when the item was released as THE COAL DISPUTE, in *British Paramount News* No. 1361 of 16 March 1944, the middle phrase was prudently deleted. Claims that the miners were 'embittered by memories of pre-war employment,' and that their actions 'cost the nation half-a-million tons of coal per week,' were also re-

moved. Horner and the miners' delegate were allowed a brief statement of their case, but the item still finished with Gemmell's shots of empty coal trucks, and the observation that 'the country demands that there shall be no more strikes': 'No coal means no victory'.¹⁸

Cummins would presumably not have considered any of this to be 'faking', or even 'reconstruction', but as simply the efficient operation of a commercial newsreel. The documentation indeed suggests that although cameramen and editorial staff had identified the problem of 'faking', they did not extend this term to include manipulations of the image through editing and commentary. Moreover, the definition of 'faking' did not extend to light or humorous items. In November 1944, for example, cameraman Lovat Cave-Chinn and soundman Christopher Lankester filmed RECORDS TAKE PLACE OF LETTERS HOME for *British Paramount News* No.1438. This concerned a plan for British soldiers to send recorded Christmas greetings to their families, and was happily staged throughout. Unfortunately, as Cave-Chinn admitted, there were still problems with the shots of mum and dad listening to the recording at home, for as he noted 'dad was not only a very ham actor but he also had great difficulty in keeping his top teeth under control': 'We were therefore not able to shoot the sound sequence as we would have desired'.¹⁹

The truth was that the newsreels' definition of 'faking' excluded a whole range of manipulations that took place both before and after filming. For example, it was considered essential to rehearse interviews, as few people could be relied upon to keep talking when faced with a newsreel camera, microphone, and lights. In September 1945 Paramount thus filmed a story about a new light car, and the file contains a 'Tentative Script for "People's Car" Story', probably written by the reel's assistant editor and commentary writer, John Stagg. This 'script' even included the interview to be shot with the car's designer, obliging cameraman Henry Hawkins and sound engineer Christopher Lankester to film several retakes until he got it right. The final version, headed £100-CAR MAKER SEEKS FACTORY, differed only slightly from the draft 'script,' although it did have a new joke ending, which Jimmy Gemmell, the second cameraman on the story, shot several times until it came out word perfect.²⁰

The permitted use of library footage could also come very close to 'faking'. The final story in *British*

Movietone News No. 910A, released on 14 November 1946, was IN REMEMBRANCE OF TWO WARS. This showed London's Armistice Day ceremony, which traditionally commemorated the dead of the First World War, but was now extended to include the dead of the Second World War as well. As the Movietone (postproduction) shotlist explained, a new inscription had been added to the Cenotaph in Whitehall, and was solemnly unveiled by the King: 'K[ey]S[hot] G[eneral]V[iew] crowd shot. Elevated, choir boys leading procession out from Home Office to Cenotaph. King, in naval uniform, walks up to Cenotaph and unveils new inscription 1939-1945. GV unveiling ... RAF band plays hymn "O God Our Help in Ages Past", cut-ins of crowds and shots of Cenotaph, also Royal Party ... Various single shots of march past, including S[emi]C[lose]U[ps]. Cut-ins of crowds watching'.²¹

The story was an important one, and British Movietone news had assigned five cameramen to it – Ken Hanshaw, Dick Harris, Alec Tozer, Martin Gray, and Eddie Smales – as well as taking material from the Royal Rota cameraman, John Turner. However, it seems that the cameramen had all concentrated on the main events, and when the assistant editor of *British Movietone News*, Tommy Scales, saw the footage he must have realised that it required more reaction shots of the crowd looking up at the newly-inscribed Cenotaph to tell the story in visual terms. Cut-ins were thus obtained from the British Movietone news library, and were used to illustrate the solemn story of the unveiling that was described in the commentary.

Unfortunately the surviving documentation shows that these crowd shots had a rather more prosaic origin. They had been taken fourteen years earlier, and included in the item LONDON ENCOURAGES MONKEY'S ESCAPE in *British Movietone News* No. 171 of 12 September 1932. As the shotlist records, the original crowds were not looking up at the Cenotaph, but at a monkey named Mary which had escaped from a fun fair, and spent some time climbing around the billboards in Piccadilly Circus: 'Close shot of crowds in street watching monkey on building. (Could be used as a crowd watching and looking up at something of interest). Close shot of group of men laughing and pointing. Close shot of monkey clinging to side of building. She climbs up onto letter on same. Elevated close shot of the crowd watching same. (Again could be used as type shot)'.²² These 'type shots' had been pulled from the

British Movietone library for the Cenotaph story, but there is no indication that their re-use in a different context was regarded as any form of 'faking'.

The production of a detailed 'script' was designed to reduce this borrowing from the library, and to ensure that the cameramen's footage fitted the editor's original conception of the story. Yet this subservience of pictures to words still gave newsreel cameramen considerable practical problems. Many newsreel items were based upon newspaper cuttings, and on many routine stories, as the *Gaumont British News* cameraman John Turner recalled, 'one was just given a cutting'. The cameramen would pick up these cuttings from the assignment desk, obtain the shots that illustrated the newspaper story, and return the cuttings to the file for use in editing the film and writing the commentary. The problem, as Turner remembered, was that in many instances these stories turned out to be a 'journalist's dream', and the newsreel cameraman found himself in a desperate search for pictures.²³

A good example came at the end of March 1947, when someone at *British Paramount News* prepared a file of newspaper cuttings on the floods in East Anglia. With headlines such as HE FARMS IN A HANGAR NOW these cuttings described how local farmers were forced to move onto old airfields, and included interviews with two farmer's wives who had been evacuated from their flooded homes.²⁴ On 2 April 1947 Ted Wright, Paramount news editor, took this file and wrote an assignment sheet for cameraman Ian Struthers, explaining that he was to get the necessary shots for a special item on the crisis in farming, 'with special emphasis on the appalling conditions in the Fens.' With reference to the newspaper interviews, Wright instructed Struthers to film both Betty Bedford and 'Mr + Mrs Newman + their ruined farm': 'We would like a few scenes showing Mrs Bedford installed in a Nissen Hut. Then if you can locate the Newmans try for a short sequence as outlined in the attached newspaper cutting. We are after the extremely pathetic angle ...'²⁵

To ensure that his cameraman knew just how pathetic the story had to be, Wright expanded the newspaper cuttings into a detailed shooting script, showing exactly what material Struthers had to obtain. Mrs Bedford was to be filmed amid the chaos of her temporary home, but the Newmans were to be shown 'pointing to [their] farmhouse almost submerged in floods,' and Struthers had to get one of

them to say 'We built that farmhouse 21 years ago and in that house are all the treasures we have accumulated during our married life. We were almost ready to retire.' They were then to be asked 'What is the extent of your loss?' at which either the husband or the wife would reply 'I cannot estimate the extent of my loss. Everything has gone and I am not very impressed with all this talk of a nationwide relief fund. Sometimes we think that the people in the town are not interested.'²⁶

However, scripting this particular story proved to be rather futile, as the original newspaper report was a work of imagination. As Struthers reported, when he returned with just four minutes of film, neither Mrs Bedford nor Mr and Mrs Newman fitted the roles assigned to them in Wright's script:

We eventually found Mrs Bedford at the aerodrome after taking numerous detours around the flooded roads and wasting much time. True she is installed in a Nissen-type hut but she and her husband are living in considerable comfort. The building is full of their belongings and stores. Their larder is four times the size of mine at home. They have first class lino on the floor, far better than I can buy, and rugs on top. I mention these details to show that it would be impossible to show them in an 'extremely pathetic angle'. They left their farm with plenty of time to salve everything. They have been in the Nissen Hut now for two weeks now, and seem quite content. It seems that farmers of the fens do very well, and a set-back like this would not worry them a great deal.²⁷

Mrs Bedford's cheerfulness had combined with the poor weather conditions to make it almost impossible for Struthers to obtain the necessary shots. As he noted on his dope sheet: 'I took pictures of Mrs Bedford outside her Nissen Hut. It was raining. I did the best I could with the cows in the hangar; I could have done with half a dozen sun arcs.' He did manage to get a general view of the hangar, and some closer shots of cows being led inside, but it hardly contained the pathos he had been sent to find. Having done his best with the Bedfords, Struthers tried to locate the Newmans, and found them in a nearby village after some hours of searching. Once again the cuttings did not match up to reality, and the staged shots were quickly abandoned. As Struthers observed, not only were the Newmans as stoical as Mrs Bedford had been, but 'from in front of the

Fig. 4. A British Pathé news cameraman filming on location from the roof of a specially designed camera car.
[Richard Koszarski collection.]



house where the Newmans are staying it is impossible to see their farm': 'We spoke to Mr Newman, but he did not seem very upset about the situation and just said that he was one of many in the same plight. I do not think he was a suitable type to do a recording even had we had recording gear with us. He had quite a good suit on.'²⁸

Frustrated by the general cheerfulness, but still eager to locate 'the extremely pathetic angle', Struthers decided to film the full extent of the floods near the village of Sutton. 'As an alternative to the story in mind,' he explained, 'I went on a folding boat with some men who were getting furniture from one of the submerged farmhouses.' He took shots from the rowing boat showing flooded farm buildings and submerged haystacks, and produced some impressive introductory images for the final reel. Struthers also took a long panning shot of one bungalow 'almost completely under water', but he could do little to prevent the reality from drifting slowly away from the imagined story. 'I spoke to the man who owned the brick bungalow which only has the roof

and two feet above water,' Struthers noted afterwards, 'and he was quite cheery about his prospects.'²⁹

As Struthers concluded of the whole affair, 'Here again is shown the folly of relying on the writings of an irresponsible journalist for the foundation for a newsreel story.'³⁰ The commentary-writer did his best to inject the required note of pathos, but it needed careful drafting to avoid an ironic contrast between the words and images. The working title had been AFTERMATH FLOODS STORY, but in the final version this was changed to FARMING TAKES ITS COAT OFF, so that the smiling faces could become an example of British stoicism. Betty Bedford made it into the reel, both in a long shot walking across the aerodrome to her Nissen Hut, and in a close-up 'smiling at camera.'³¹ Yet she was no longer smiling with satisfaction, for as the commentator explained, 'still putting a brave face on misfortune – the typical country attitude in face of calamity – the farmer's wife refused to give way to pessimism.'³²

This was not the only occasion on which Para-

mount cameramen protested that the newspaper cuttings they were given turned out to be 'fantastic', 'journalise at its worst', or even 'sheer balderdash'.³³ Yet they continued to do their best to obtain the shots demanded by their 'script', without any feeling that the process was manipulative. In May 1947, for example, Paramount cameraman Arthur Farmer filmed the strike of London street cleaners for GARBAGE STRIKE MAKES CITY HUM in *British Paramount News* No. 1690. This included shots of rubbish burning, which had demanded more than a little manipulation, for, as Farmer noted on his dope sheet, 'it has not been burning today, but just smouldering from last night.' Farmer had been obliged to relight the fires for the camera, but he made no reference to the dangers of misrepresentation, noting only that 'the police did not approve of Paramount's starting the fire again'.³⁴

The newsreel cameramen of the 1940s seem to have felt it their job not to report the news, but simply to obtain the shots demanded by their editors. Their concerns were technical, and questions of 'faking' were plainly left to the editorial staff. In September 1947 Paramount cameraman Douglas Hardy was thus sent to get shots of the effect of the miners' strike on mining towns, but had trouble obtaining the required shots of empty gasometers, for, as he noted, 'all the gasometers for miles around were full (save one).' Yet Hardy was nevertheless happy to film this partially-empty gasometer, and was only concerned about the pictorial effect. 'Regret this poor angle the only one,' he noted on his dope sheet, 'but otherwise would show three even larger ones full.' The shot was duly incorporated in HORNER AND THE STRIKE for *British Paramount News* No. 1726.³⁵

Under the pressure of bi-weekly newsreel production, the stark language of 'fakes' and 'reconstructions' thus broke down into many shades of linguistic grey. 'Reconstructions' came to be known as 'build up' shots, which editors and news editors planned in advance in order to 'build up' a story that seemed visually weak. In October 1947, for instance, comic shots of Paramount staff dressed as traffic policemen, and jacking a car up on bricks, were added to shots of a car protest rally to make MOTORISTS PROTEST BASIC CUT in *British Paramount News* No. 1738. These shots were added to 'give spread' to a story which was otherwise considered rather thin.³⁶ These 'build up' shots were apparently not regarded as 'fakes' because they were

used humorously, and thus were readily identifiable to the audience.

The only evidence of protest about 'faking' in fact came when cameramen staged shots for serious news stories, and got found out. In July 1949 David Samuelson was one of several Movietone cameramen sent to cover the dock strike, and his footage appeared in *British Movietone News* No. 1049A as DOCK STRIKE – SERIOUS DEVELOPMENTS. According to the shot list this story began with shots of 'newspaper boys shouting out Royal Proclamation – Emergency proclamation, etc.' However, the magazine *Impact* denounced this as a 'highly dangerous distortion,' revealing that when the *British Movietone News* camera team had discovered that the newsboys were not shouting about the crisis, 'Samuelson manned the breach, grabbed a stack of papers and yelled full into the conveniently placed Movietone camera, "Proclamation signed ... read all about it!"'.³⁷

This 'reconstruction' was quite blatant – Samuelson was not only identifiable on the screen, but even claimed 2s 6d on his *British Movietone News* expenses form for 'Tip to news boy for loan of papers and pitch'.³⁸ Yet there is no indication that within the newsreels themselves such activities were uncommon or even frowned upon, and in August 1949 it was claimed that editors were still happy to stage the human detail they needed to illustrate their commentaries. As one film technician admitted, 'an office charwoman was recently filmed by one newsreel unit in an office rigged as a typical housewife's parlour where she was paid to whine about Strachey and food problems'.³⁹

The newsreels have traditionally been used as a medium of visual illustration, firstly in their own time as visual commentaries illustrating stories which frequently had been established by another medium (newspapers); secondly as illustrative material in television documentaries. Paradoxically it may now be through a third form – as written documentation – that the newsreels finally start to speak for themselves. The British Universities Newsreel Scripts Project aims to make them into a legitimate object of academic research, by making available the fullest possible range of materials that went into their production. The newsreels' strengths, and their weaknesses, will be better understood as the details of their manufacture are made readily accessible for the first time in any country.

Overall, the British Universities Newsreel Project Database is a testament to sixty years of British newsreel production and to the richness of the newsreels as a social and historical resource. The documentation illuminates how the newsreels were produced, and gives ample warning for us to be attentive not only to the newsreels of the past but to any news that is delivered to us. Knowing the agenda and the process of news production enables us to understand more fully the news we are given, and also to appreciate the art of making the news. Trivial

the newsreels often were (though not nearly as much as their detractors might have us believe) but they kept their finger on the popular pulse for decades, and they did so with admirable skill. Reconstructing British newsreel production through the British Universities Newsreel Project Database has been an absorbing, pleasurable and rewarding occupation, and its existence will help to sustain interest in studying newsreels, which remain a fertile ground for illuminating the past. ♦

Notes

1. *A.I.D. News* 3 (November 1972), 6–7, quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *Thorold Dickinson: The Man and His Films* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 182–183.
2. The British National Film Catalogue was established in 1963 to record films available for non-theatrical loan or purchase within the UK, filling in the gap left when the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin* no longer listed or reviewed such films. The renamed British National Film & Video Catalogue continues as part of the BFI, with its quarterly *British National Film and Video Guide* now published by the British Library.
3. Quoted in Richards, *Thorold Dickinson*, 183.
4. *British Newsreel Issue Sheets 1913–1970: the complete collection held by the Slade Film History Register reproduced on microfiche* (London: Graphic Data Publishing in association with BUFVC, 1984).
5. There is still no standard history of the British newsreels, good or bad. Raymond Fielding's *The American Newsreel 1991–1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972) serves as a good general account of newsreel production, primarily in the USA, but with some attention to British newsreels. Luke McKernan's *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (London: BFI, 1992) serves as a history of silent newsreels in Britain in covering the history of a single newsreel, and Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Scholar Press, 1979) and the chapter on newsreels in Rachael Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979) cover the 1930s. Two entertaining autobiographies of British newsreel cameramen are Ronnie Noble, *Shoot First! Assignments of a Newsreel Cameraman* (London: George G. Harrap, 1955) and Paul Wyand, *Useless if Delayed* (London: George G. Harrap, 1959). An autobiography by cameraman John Turner is due to be published by the BUFVC at the end of 2001. There is a good bibliography of newsreels worldwide, prepared by the FIAF Documentation Commission, in Roger Smither and Wolfgang Klauke (eds.), *Newsreels in Film Archives: A Survey Based on the FIAF Newsreel Symposium* (Trowbridge/Madison/Teaneck: Flicks Books/Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).
6. Nicholas Pronay, 'The Newsreels: The Illusion of Actuality', in Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 97.
7. The three main commercial owners of newsreels in the UK are currently British Movietone, which holds the newsreel *British Movietone News* (1929–1979); British Pathé, which holds *Pathe Gazette/Pathe News* (1910–1970), and the cinemagazines *Pathetone Weekly* (1930–1941), *Pathe Pictorial* (1918–1969) and *Eve's Film Review* (1921–1933); and the ITN Archive, which on behalf of Reuters Television manages *Gaumont Graphic* (1910–1929), *Gaumont Sound News* (1929–1933), *Gaumont British News* (1934–1959), *British Paramount News* (1931–1957), *Empire News Bulletin* (1926–1933) and *Universal News* (1930–1956). The BFI's National Film and Television Archive holds a wide range of newsreels, with unique holdings of *Topical Budget* (1911–1931) and *British Screen News* (1928–1932). The Imperial War Museum's Film & Video Archive holds newsreels for the First and Second World Wars, including specialist reels sponsored by the Ministry of Information and the armed services.
8. The interviews come from an oral history programme organised by the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU). The BECTU History Project organises audio and video recordings of British film and television veterans, generally names not celebrated elsewhere, and the Project has amassed a collection of 500 interviews to date.
9. Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History* (London: Scholar Press, 1979) is possibly the only major study to make use of such newsreel documentation. See also Anthony Aldgate, 'Newsreel Scripts: A Case-Study'. *History* (1976), 390–391.
10. Gerald Sanger, 'A News Reel Man's Conscience', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1941, 22.
11. *British Paramount News* No. 1388, memo [by Tom Cummins?], c.15 June 1944.
12. For example, when *British Paramount News* No. 647 reported AIRSHIP HINDENBURG EXPLODES in May 1937, the compiler of the shotlist noted 'all scenes faked from Rolls 5438 and 5149.' Likewise, the shotlist for JOHN D ROCKEFELLER PASSES AWAY in No. 652 is marked 'story faked from Rolls 2895, 1221, 744': *British Paramount News* Nos. 647 and 652.

13. *British Paramount News* No. 1367, 27 March 1944.
14. *British Paramount News* No. 1361, commentary script headed SOUTH WALES COAL STOPPAGE, c.10 March 1944; copy of telegram to Arthur Horner, 10 March 1944.
15. *British Paramount News* No. 1361, commentary script headed SOUTH WALES COAL STOPPAGE, c.10 March 1944.
16. *British Paramount News* No. 1361, Hardy's dope sheet, 12 March 1944.
17. *British Paramount News* No. 1361, Gemmell's dope sheet, 12 March 1944.
18. *British Paramount News* No. 1361, commentary for THE COAL DISPUTE.
19. *British Paramount News* No. 1438, Cave-Chinn's dope sheet, 9 November 1944.
20. *British Paramount News* No. 1517, press release, 'Tentative Script,' dope sheets, commentary, and shot list. See also script in *British Paramount News* No. 1535.
21. *British Movietone News library card* – BUNP Database no. 014147.
22. BUNP Database no. 003810.
23. *British Paramount News* No. 2488, Arthur Farmer's dope sheet, 29 December 1954, and information from John Turner, October 1999.
24. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, Daily Herald cutting, 29 March 1947.
25. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, 2 April 1947, 'Assignment' for Ian Struthers by E.J.H. Wright.
26. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, undated manuscript notes in Wright's handwriting. The final sentence originally read 'I can't believe that anyone is going to give money for us.'
27. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, 'Cameraman's Caption Sheet,' 5 April 1947, filled in by Struthers.
28. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, shot list headed AFTERMATH FLOODS STORY, shots 12–14, and *British Paramount News* 'Cameraman's Caption Sheet,' 5 April 1947, filled in by Struthers.
29. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, 'Cameraman's Caption Sheet,' 5 April 1947, filled in by Struthers: *British Paramount News* No. 1681, Shotlist headed AFTERMATH FLOODS STORY, shots 1–10.
30. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, 'Cameraman's Caption Sheet,' 5 April 1947, filled in by Struthers.
31. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, shot list headed AFTERMATH FLOODS STORY, shots 15 and 16.
32. *British Paramount News* No. 1681, handwritten amendment to commentary script. The original version of the script put this slightly differently, noting that 'still putting a brave face on misfortune Mrs. Betty Bedford refused to give way to pessimism – the typical farming attitude in face of calamity': *British Paramount News* No. 1681, Typescript commentary for FARMING TAKES ITS COAT OFF.
33. *British Paramount News* No. 1713, E.H. Hawkins' dope sheet, ca. July 1947.
34. *British Paramount News* No. 1690, Farmer's dope sheet, ca. May 1947.
35. *British Paramount News* No. 1726, Hardy's dope sheet and shot list, ca. September 1947.
36. *British Paramount News* 1738, 'Inter-office Communication,' J.C.R[ogerson] to E.J.H.W[right], 22 October 1947; Farmer's dope sheet, October 1947.
37. P. Sheridan 'British Movietone Choose,' *Impact*, Summer 1949, 15.
38. BUFVC, David Samuelson Collection, expenses claim.
39. *Tribune*, 5 August 1949, 'Beware of the Newsreels', 2.