

Cuckoo in the nest: Edwardian itinerant exhibition practices and the transition to cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1906.

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the

# Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1906

Vanessa Toulmin (bio)

When the cinema came, the manager was often a blend of the fairground showman, the travelling theatre proprietor and the panorama lecturer.

—John H. Bird, *Cinema Parade: Fifty Years of Film Shows*

Rachael Low, in her now-classic study of British film, marks 1906 as the year that witnessed the widespread realization of permanent purpose-built palaces for the exclusive showing of “living pictures.”<sup>1</sup> This article will examine this belief and argue that development occurred both regionally and at different rates of acceleration throughout the Edwardian period (1901–1910). The early Edwardian period was when the cinematograph was the property of the itinerant showmen who commissioned, programmed, and in some instances produced their own material for a differing and constantly changing audience in each of the localities they visited. Drawing on material collected during the Mitchell and Kenyon project, original archives held by the National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield Library, and a close search of U.K. regional newspapers, it will seek to provide a chronology for the transformation period and suggest reasons for its development. In addition, it will bring to the forefront the importance of the role played by itinerant exhibitors who presented the cinematograph in this transitional period and show how they were ultimately responsible for its success.

## Introduction

The entertainment environment in the United Kingdom in the 1890s was a dynamic and bewildering mixture of low-class illegitimate venues and practices alongside legitimate theater, music halls, circuses, operas,

lectures, and reading halls and, of course, the burgeoning cinematograph industry.<sup>2</sup> Leisure time had advanced throughout the nineteenth century as increased wages, improved transportation systems, and a recognized system of play or nonwork time had enabled a dynamic market to evolve, catering to a largely urban population.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the cinematograph in the late Victorian era has been widely studied in the United Kingdom with perhaps more emphasis placed on technological developments and film production than its impact on related leisure industries. The cinematograph's appearance in London in 1895 and its subsequent impact in the last few years of Queen Victoria's reign have been extensively researched by scholars such as John Barnes, Richard Brown, and Luke McKernan, among others.<sup>4</sup> However, its subsequent transformation from a novelty or wonder to a fully fledged part of twentieth-century exhibition and entertainment culture has never fully been assessed. Only recently have British scholars begun to examine the first few years of Edward's **[End Page 52]** reign and the subsequent development of the cinematograph as an exhibition form that evolved into the institution known as the cinema.

The first decade of the twentieth century is often called the long Victorian era by scholars but is, in reality, a very different era. By the time Edward acceded to the throne in 1901, he reigned over a society that enjoyed the benefits of reduced working hours, increased holiday time, and improvements in transportation that enabled citizens to participate in a full range of popular amusements. Free time could be spent on holidays and excursions to seaside and countryside; "rational recreation," in which pursuits were allied to educational activities and the culture of "self-improvement"; or a range of popular entertainments, including music halls, circuses, and the fairground.<sup>5</sup> Many of the forces in industry, commerce, and science that had been instigated in the later Victorian period came to fruition during Edward's reign. Politics, commerce, and the rise of the trade unions; the emancipation of women; and the beginnings of publicly financed education shaped the culture. The Edwardians were essentially living in a fully urbanized society, rising from 77 percent of the population living in cities in 1901 to 80 percent by 1911;

working and social conditions were greatly improved and would continue to improve as the decade commenced.<sup>6</sup> The social critic Charles Masterman described the new urban populace as the “City” type of the coming years, the “street bred” people of the twentieth century, the “new generation knocking on our doors.”<sup>7</sup> This urbanized multitude became the...

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VANESSA TOULMIN

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