

Report of meeting of West of England Group at Umberleigh, Devon, on 16th May 2015.

Once again, the Group enjoyed a meeting held at the charming rural retreat of Marilyn and Nigel Scott at Puddlepool Mill, where the gardens looked magnificent on this bright spring day. We assembled in the “Rustic Regal” – the miniature cinema and museum where films of many ages and gauges are shown.

The programme consisted of films/videos from Nigel’s extensive library, [with contributions by members], of entertainers whom we know from records. We began with “Pieces of Silver” – a fascinating 1989 compilation film produced by Kodak, showing 100 years of film-making. Entertainment, actuality and advertising clips were included; some silent, and some in colour.

Reverting to black-and-white, surprisingly, though in Cinemascope, were two musical numbers from “Oklahoma” – a 16mm film found in six pieces by Nigel. More 16mm followed, with “The Old Sailor’s Story”, a 1938 film of Reginald Foort introducing and playing the Compton pipe-organ, probably at the Paramount, Tottenham Court Road. It included storms and many seascapes, some at Portsmouth. The music was suitably atmospheric and dramatic.

Organ music continued with Len Rawle playing “Varsity Drag” on the ex-Empire Leicester Square Wurlitzer installed in his home in Buckinghamshire. [From *Metroland*, the John Betjeman TV film].

Hotting up the tempo, however, was “Band Parade”, a compilation including Count Basie’s Band playing “Someone’s Rocking My Dreamboat” and other numbers. These Gaumont Movie-Paks were 8 and 16 mm extracts from feature films.

Then we turned to their arch-rival, Pathe, who filmed many entertainers in the 1930s in batches of three, for later release to cinemas at intervals. [I have some on DVD that you could *not* bear to watch back-to-back]. The first was a wartime “London and the Hun” – a patriotic song by Flotsam and Jetsam, with scenes of the blitz. Another had Jetsam [Malcolm McEachern] solo, singing “In Cellar Cool”, first in its original key and then a lower one. Very low.

After a truly magnificent tea, we resumed with Wilson Keppel & Betty doing their famous Egyptian sand-dance. Next was “Calling the Tune” – a 1936 film showing scenes of early cylinder and disc recording, with artists Charles Penrose laughing and George Robey talking. Then we had a further batch of Pathetones, mostly filmed in their sparse little studio atop their Wardour Street offices, using rather primitive equipment, but beautifully restored for DVD. These included Ella Shields singing “Adeline”, Jack Hylton’s Band playing “Choo Choo”, the Roy Fox Orchestra with female-impersonator Douglas Byng; but most extraordinary of all, “Michel”, the acrobatic American tap-dancing xylophonist.

Further acts continued with the Duke Ellington Band, “Hutch”, and “New Empire Revue of 1934”. This included the Billy Cotton Band, the Astoria Dancing Girls, and soprano Rose Perfect. And our perfect day ended with Marta Eggert, singing a German dance-band song set in a record store in 1932.

These fascinating films kept us until quite late, and we warmly thank Marilyn and Nigel for another highly enjoyable occasion.

Paul Collenette.