

# Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain: Research Design, Methods and Sources

## 1. The ethnographic inquiry

This part of Cinema Culture in 1920s Britain, which was guided by the methodological protocols of interpretive sociology, ethnography, and oral history, was devoted to gathering data from surviving cinemagoers of the 1930s and began in 1991. However, the main period of data gathering was between 1994 and 1996, when CCINTB was funded by a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council and staffed by a Research Fellow and a secretary.

Three types of data or materials have been gathered in the course of the ethnographic inquiry: interviews, postal questionnaires, and other materials generated by 1930s cinemagoers.

### 1.1 Interviews

Cinemagoers of the 1930s were interviewed in four UK locations: [Glasgow](#), [Greater Manchester](#), [East Anglia](#), and the London suburb of [Harrow](#). These were carefully chosen to give a spread of settlement patterns and class and regional cultures. Interviews were piloted in the city of Glasgow in the South West of Scotland, where the project was based. In the 1930s a centre of shipbuilding and other heavy industry, this self-styled 'movie-mad' city was reputed in the 1930s to have Europe's highest number of cinema seats per head of population. The nineteenth-century city of Manchester, in the North West of England, was a centre of the cotton industry in the 1930s and boasted many cinemas, old and new: in 1934, for instance, there were 109 cinemas for a population of 770,000. The Greater Manchester fieldwork area incorporated [Bolton](#), a small industrial town about six miles north of Manchester city centre and the site of Mass Observation's celebrated 'Worktown' studies of the 1930s. Situated to the North West of London, Harrow underwent considerable growth during the 1930s, becoming transformed from a semi-rural area to a prosperous metropolitan suburb boasting several new supercinemas. In the 1930s as today, the predominantly rural counties of Suffolk and Norfolk in East Anglia featured a variety of settlement patterns, including small market towns, ports, and seaside resorts as well as villages of various sizes. The region's most significant industries were agriculture, horticulture, and fishing.

Interviewees were sought in several ways. Most of the Glasgow interviewees were selected from people who had been in contact with the project from its beginning and from contacts of the Research Fellow's in educational groups and in day centres and residential homes for the elderly. Interviewees in the other three fieldwork locations were sought through media appeals in which people who went to the cinema in the 1930s were invited to get in touch with the project. A total of thirty-seven local radio broadcasts and announcements in local newspapers and national publications for the elderly were made. Approaches were also made to institutions and organisations of various kinds (local history societies, friendship groups, housebound library users' services, residential homes for the elderly, and so on).

Interviewees were chosen from amongst these 'first contacts' with a view to balancing several demographic factors: location--the aim was to interview more-or-less equal

numbers of people in each of the four fieldwork locales; type of contact--a mix of self-selected volunteers and others was aimed at; and also gender, social class in the 1930s (judged on the basis of terminal education age, first occupation, and parents' occupations), and ethnicity. A quota in terms of class and gender was estimated, on the basis of contemporary data on the social composition of the cinema audience, at two-thirds women and two-thirds working class. The ethnicity quota was less straightforward, because no data were available on the ethnic composition of the 1930s cinema audience in Britain. Approaches to multicultural community organisations and similar groups in Glasgow, Manchester, and London generated few contacts, though a number of Jewish people were interviewed.

A total of seventy-eight core informants were selected for interview, the largest single group of whom had responded to media appeals (Table 1). The seventy-eight were fairly evenly spread across the four fieldwork locations (Table 2). The rough social class and gender quotas aimed at were satisfactorily achieved (Tables 3 and 4).

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>Mode of contact</b>	
	Personal Contact (Glasgow)	10
	Responded to Media Appeal	33
	Volunteer from Local Organisation	13
	Volunteer from Day Centre	12
	Volunteer from Residential Home	10
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>78</b>

<b>Table 2</b>	<b>Location</b>	
	Glasgow	17
	Greater Manchester	22
	East Anglia	21
	Harrow	18

<b>Table 3</b>	<b>Gender</b>	
	Male	29
	Female	49

<b>Table 4</b>	<b>Social class during 1930s</b>	
	Working	44
	Working/Middle	6
	Middle	27
	Upper Middle	1

Interviewees' birth years ranged between 1897 and 1928, with the majority clustered between 1917 and 1923. The median year of birth was 1919. A cutoff year of 1925 was aimed for on the grounds that those born after that date would remember little of the 1930s. In the event, several people born later in the 1920s were interviewed (Table 5).

All but three of the seventy-eight core informants were interviewed more than once, with the majority being interviewed on two occasions. Forty-five people were interviewed on their own, the rest in couples or groups: siblings, married couples, and friends as well as members of clubs, associations, residential homes, and suchlike.

<b>Table 5</b>	<b>Year of birth</b>	
1897		1
1902 to 1910		12
1911 to 1915		11
1916 to 1920		27
1921 to 1925		20
1926 to 1928		7

Interviews were conducted by CCINTB's Research Fellow, Valentina Bold, an experienced oral history researcher. Most of the meetings took place in interviewees' homes, with a few in day centres, residential homes, or group meeting places. While the interviews covered preset topics (Table 6), the interviewer never visibly consulted the checklist, questions were open and non-directive, and informants were not dissuaded from straying into other areas. The pattern of questioning was to move from the specific to the general: for example from discussing local cinemas to exploring feelings about the cinema. For the first interviews, the interviewer prepared a selection of memory stimulants, including photographs of local cinemas and 1930s film stars. These were used discreetly, and only where the interviewer was sure they would not be 'leading' or intrusive. In first interviews, informants were keen to be recorded and to offer facts 'for posterity', listing cinema names and locations, for instance. Some informants had done preparatory research of their own. First interviews lasted between one and three hours.

Second and subsequent meetings, with rapport established, were freer and, rather than information flowing in one direction, were closer to exchanges between interviewer and interviewee. On this occasion the interviewer would follow up issues arising in the informant's first interview and take along contemporary film annuals and popular reference books as memory stimulants. Most informants responded with enthusiasm when handling material from the 1930s. More peripheral and contextual detail emerged during second interviews, often giving deeper insight into the informant's attitudes and outlook. Second interviews lasted about two hours.

A total of 207 hours of tape-recorded interview material was gathered. In all but a few cases (where sound was of very poor quality, for example), interviews with core informants were transcribed.

To analyse the interview transcripts, the qualitative data analysis software QSR NUD\*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) was used.<sup>1</sup> This software supports storing, managing, indexing, searching, and theorising with, qualitative data. A coding frame was derived initially from transcripts of pilot interviews, and indexing and analysis of the interviews began during the project's funded period.

**Table 6 Checklist of questions for first interviews**

Cinemas attended: when, where, how often (describe; a cafe)?  
How often did the programmes change?  
When did you go (day / time of day)?  
Time of year (summer/winter differences)?  
Cost/payment in kind?  
Differences in local cinemas: 'posh'? types of films?  
Go into town for the pictures?  
Staff: commissionaires; usherettes; managers; organist  
Live acts? (singing to 'the dot')

Who did you go with (friends/dates)?  
What did you wear (makeup? hairstyle? 'dress up')?  
Did you eat and/or drink during the films?  
How did you/other people behave? (if enjoying/not enjoying the picture)  
How did you feel? (before/during/after)

Favourite films: likes and dislikes; what makes a 'good' film or a 'bad' film  
Favourite stars  
Differences/changes in taste (children/men/women)  
First experience of sound/colour pictures  
Shorts; news  
European films

How did you choose films?  
In a fan club? collect photos? read magazines? film society?  
In a cinema club? (children?)  
Did you sing songs from the films? Buy sheet music?

Other forms of entertainment you enjoyed in the 1930s?  
Did you go to the cinema on holiday?

What did going to the cinema mean to you (how did you feel?)

## 1.2 The postal questionnaire

In the course of the search for interviewees, hundreds of letters, enquiries, and offers of information were received from all over Britain, and it became apparent that the project had generated much more interest than could be accommodated through interviews alone. Though not originally planned, it was decided to ask those correspondents who were not interviewed to take part in a postal questionnaire survey.

The questionnaire was kept short and simple, and designed--through the choice, framing and ordering of questions--to stimulate recall of events and experiences of more than sixty years before. Questionnaires were sent out in two batches: 129 in May 1995 and 97 in December 1995. Of these 226 questionnaires a total of 186 were returned, representing a response rate of over 82 per cent. Questionnaires were processed using SPSS, a software package widely used for quantitative data analysis in the social sciences. Three quarters of the questionnaire respondents found out about the project through announcements in a local newspaper or a specialist publication for the elderly (Table 7). Although no gender balance was planned or intended, respondents divided themselves

more or less equally as to gender: of the 186, 91 (49 per cent) were male and 95 (51 per cent) female. Some six in ten were born between 1915 and 1924, the median year of birth being 1922 (Table 8). Nearly one-third of all respondents lived in the South East of England during the thirties (Table 9), and the majority lived in larger towns and cities as opposed to small towns and rural areas.

	n	%
Personal contact	13	7.0
Local radio	4	2.1
Newspaper e.g. <i>Manchester Evening News</i> )	75	40.3
Specialist press e.g. <i>Mature Times</i> )	62	33.3
Local history/film society	4	2.1
Unknown	28	15.0

	Male		Female		All	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1903-1914	6	7.0	10	10.5	16	8.6
1915-1924	51	56.0	59	62.1	110	59.1
1925-1934	34	37.0	26	27.4	60	32.3
Median y.o.b.	1923		1922		1922	
Range	1906-32		1903-34		1903-34	

	n	%
South West England	14	17.5
South East England	61	32.8
East Anglia	34	18.3
Midlands	12	6.5
Yorkshire/Humberside	9	4.8
North West England	22	11.8
North England	5	2.7
Scotland	11	5.9
Northern Ireland	1	0.5
Wales	15	8.1
Unknown	2	1.1

Just over half the respondents finished their full-time education at the age of fourteen or below: that is, at the minimum school-leaving age for this generation, for whom education beyond elementary school was a minority experience. The women, however, were rather more likely than the men to have received a secondary education. At the end of their full-time education, the largest single group of men and women entered jobs classified as skilled: these include secretarial and clerical occupations (which account for more than 27

per cent of all respondents) as well as certain types of administrative and craft jobs. A substantial additional group found work in sales occupations, and another group in agriculture and other primary occupations. In general, as might be expected of a self-selected sample, the people taking part in this survey appear to have had slightly more formal education, and to have worked in jobs requiring greater skill and/or more training, than would be expected in their age group as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

### **1.3 Other informant-generated material**

Nearly all the 1930s cinemagoers who responded to appeals to take part in the project, both at the beginning and during the main period of data gathering, made initial contact in writing. Many of these people sent long letters with descriptions of favourite cinemas, lists of films and stars, and memories of their cinemagoing days. Others enclosed essays, poems, and other writings about 'the pictures' in the 1930s, press clippings, drawings, and photographs. Some of those who took part in the questionnaire survey also enclosed material of this kind with their completed questionnaires. In all, there are around five hundred of these items. All this material was archived by the early 2000s, but was not catalogued, transcribed, or added to the NUD\*IST database.

A number of interviewees also donated their collections of cinema memorabilia (scrapbooks, copies of 1930s film weeklies and film annuals, fanzines, and so on) to the project.

Where informant-generated materials were drawn on for CCINTB outputs, selection and analysis were conducted manually.

### **1.4 Citation conventions for ethnographic materials<sup>3</sup>**

Every CCINTB interviewee, questionnaire respondent, and correspondent was assigned a unique reference number under which all materials from or relating to that individual were archived.

Citations of memorabilia, correspondence, and similar materials in CCINTB outputs included the informant's reference number and the accession number of the item concerned. For example, in a letter cited as

95-100-1, Lewis Howells, Gwent, to Annette Kuhn and Valentina Bold, 9 February 1995

the informant's reference number is 95-100 and the 1 refers to this particular letter. A reference to an item of memorabilia such as

95-38-21, Spring Supplement to 'The Golden Star', 1977

incorporates the reference number of the informant who donated it (95-38) and the number of the item as listed within that person's record (21).

References to individual questionnaires used the same convention, for example:

95-324, Questionnaire, Mrs A. Close, Lincolnshire, December 1995.

Extracts from interviews were referred to by archive transcript number, with name(s) of interviewee(s) and location and date of interview; for example:

T94-17, Margaret Young and Molly Stevenson, Glasgow, 5 December 1994.

## 2. The historical inquiry

Source materials for the historical inquiry comprised primary published and unpublished documents, with an emphasis on material by, for, or about cinemagoers of the 1930s: the popular film press and other mass-circulation periodicals of the 1930s, including women's magazines; film industry sources such as trade journals, directories, and almanacs; contemporary official and semi-official inquiries and reports on cinemagoing; and box-office figures, popularity polls, and audience surveys, both published and unpublished.

Historical source materials also included information on local cinemas in the areas where interview fieldwork was conducted, letters and diaries written by filmgoers in the 1930s, and 1930s cinema memorabilia. Notes on much of this material were added to the NUD\*IST database (see 1.3 above).

### 2.1 The popular press

An exhaustive review of popular film periodicals of the 1930s was undertaken, and this yielded information about the films and stars that were popular at the time, as well as affording a general impression of the 'structure of feeling' of 1930s cinema culture.

The most important British popular film magazines of the 1930s were *Film Pictorial*, *Picturegoer*, *Film Weekly*, and *Picture Show*. All but *Film Pictorial* (which was started in 1932) were published throughout the decade and up to the outbreak of the Second World War, when *Film Weekly* was absorbed by *Picturegoer*, and *Film Pictorial* by *Picture Show*. All were weeklies, with the exception of *Picturegoer*, which was monthly until May 1931, when it too went weekly. In the mid 1930s, these four journals enjoyed a combined weekly circulation of more than 300,000 copies, indicating a readership in excess of one million. In addition to the big four, a large number of more ephemeral fan periodicals appeared at various times during the decade, among the most important of these being a weekly called *Girls' Cinema*, which after a change of title (to *Film Star Weekly*) eventually merged in the mid 1930s with *Picture Show*.

These journals offer a useful source of information on the popularity, with critics, and to a certain extent with cinemagoers, of different films and stars. *Film Pictorial*, *Film Weekly* and *Picturegoer* all, at various points during the 1930s, had scales for rating the films they reviewed. *Film Weekly* ran an annual readers' poll for best British films and performances; and from 1932 *Picturegoer* awarded its Gold Medal annually for the best film performances by male and female stars.

Women's magazines, especially towards the end of the 1930s when the new weekly, *Woman*, was launched, also published film reviews and occasional or regular features on cinema. Two film monthlies, *Film Fashionland* and *Woman's Filmfair*, are in fact hybrids of woman's magazine and film magazine.<sup>4</sup>

#### Popular film periodicals consulted

British Film-Studio Mirror	1931-32	Monthly
Cinema Express	1932-33	Weekly
Cinegram	1937-39	Fortnightly
Cinegram Preview	1939-40	Fortnightly
Fan Fare	1935	Monthly (1 Issue)

Film Fashionland	1934-35	Monthly
Film Favourites	1932	Monthly (2 Issues)
Film Pictorial	1932-39	Weekly
Film Souvenir	1935	Monthly (2 Issues)
Film Star Weekly	1932-34	Weekly
Film Weekly	1930-39	Weekly
Girls' Cinema	1930-32	Weekly
Movie Fan	1931	Monthly (8 Issues)
Picture Show	1930-37	Weekly
Picturegoer	1930	Monthly
Picturegoer	1931-39	Weekly
Screen Pictorial	1937-39	Monthly
Woman's Filmfair	1934-35	Monthly

#### **Women's magazines consulted**

Woman	1937-39	Weekly
Woman's Journal	1936	Monthly
Woman's Weekly	1930,1934	Weekly

## **2.2 Film trade publications**

The film trade press is a useful source of material on the popularity of films and stars from the distributor's, and more significantly from the exhibitor's, point of view. From 1936, the American trade weekly *Motion Picture Herald* and its companion publication, the annual *Motion Picture Almanac*, ran listings of money-making stars (but not pictures) in Britain, in two categories: all-star (British and Hollywood stars); and stars in British made pictures only. However, the British trade press lagged somewhat behind the American in collecting and publishing information on audiences' choices at the box office, and it was not until 1937 that the British trade paper *Kinematograph Weekly* began publishing its annual survey of the biggest box-office attractions of the previous year. From around 1936, therefore, it is possible to obtain a reasonably clear picture from published British and American trade sources of the popularity of particular stars and films in Britain, as measured by box office receipts.

#### **Film trade publications consulted**

Kinematograph Weekly	1937-40	Weekly
Kinematograph Year Book	1930-10	Annual
Motion Picture Almanac	1933-40	Annual

## **2.3 Other contemporary material**

Other historical source materials including contemporary published and unpublished materials of various kinds: including official records on regulations governing children's



admission to cinemas and on the censorship of 'horrific' films; inquiries into children's cinemagoing conducted by local authorities, pressure groups, and others; popularity polls such as the questionnaire surveys organised by the cinema impresario Sidney Bernstein in 1931, 1934 and 1937; surveys and observations of film audiences conducted under the aegis of Mass Observation from 1937; letters, essays, diaries, and other material produced in the 1930s by cinemagoers; and photographic and cinematic 'documents' such as photographs of cinemas and newsreel footage of cinema openings.

Also included under this heading are books and essays published during the 1930s on the state of Britain in general, and on cinema in particular.

## 2.4 Libraries and archives

Popular press, film trade press, and other contemporary source materials were consulted in various general and specialist libraries; local, regional, and national specialist archives; local record offices and local history collections; as well as in CCINTB's own memorabilia collection.

### Libraries and archives visited

Bolton Local History Library  
British Film Institute, Library  
British Film Institute, Special Collections  
British Library, London  
British Library, Newspaper Division, Colindale  
Cinema Museum, Ronald Grant Archive, London  
East Anglian Film Archive, University of East Anglia  
Harrow Civic Centre Library, local history collection  
Manchester Central Library, Arts Library  
Manchester Central Library, Local Studies Unit  
Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex  
Mitchell Library, Glasgow  
National Archives, Kew  
North-West Film Archive, Manchester  
Scottish Film Archive, Glasgow  
Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich

## 3. Films

Feature films were selected for inclusion in the inquiry using two methods: firstly, from an analysis of historical source materials; and secondly, on the basis of testimonies of 1930s cinemagoers gathered for the ethnographic inquiry. Nearly all the selected films were viewed, and detailed notes taken. Film analysis began with narrative breakdowns and proceeded to examination of cinematic elements (mise en scene, lighting, editing, and so on) and in selected instances detailed shot breakdowns were carried out. Films not viewed are denoted below with an asterisk (\*).

### 3.1 Films from 1930s sources

A list of twenty films which were popular in Britain in the 1930s (ten British, ten Hollywood) was compiled early in the project with a view to ascertaining the tastes of British audiences and reviewers at the time, and to assess changes of taste over the period. The list was produced by triangulating data from several contemporary sources: reviews in, and awards given by, the popular film press; newspapers and other mass-circulation publications; film and star popularity polls conducted among filmgoers; and data on box-office attractions gathered by the film industry. The popularity of individual stars with reviewers and filmgoers and at the box office was also taken into account in compiling the list in Table 10.

Because of a paucity of data for the earlier years of the decade titles given for the years up to 1935 are less likely to be reliable than the later ones. The list is not intended to suggest that these were the most popular films in Britain during the 1930s, but rather to serve as a broad indicator of contemporary tastes.<sup>5</sup>

<b>Table 10</b>		
<b>Films Popular in Britain, 1930-39</b>		
[dates are for British general release]		
<i>Year</i>	<i>British</i>	<i>Hollywood</i>
1930	Rookery Nook	The Love Parade*
1931	Sally in Our Alley	A Free Soul
1932	Sunshine Susie	Arrowsmith
1933	I Was a Spy	Cavalcade
1934	Private Life of Henry VIII	Queen Christina
1935	Escape Me Never	Lives of a Bengal Lancer
1936	The Ghost Goes West	Mr Deeds Goes to Town
1937	Victoria the Great	Stowaway
1938	It's in the Air	Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
1939	The Citadel	Three Smart Girls Grow Up

### 3.2 Informants' films

Included in the list of informant-generated film titles are pictures which interviewees have memories of seeing (a passing reference to a film did not qualify it for inclusion); titles listed by significant numbers of questionnaire respondents in answer to the question 'Do you recall any films that made a particularly strong impression on you?'; and films to which detailed reference is made in correspondence.

This is not a straightforward exercise, however, because informants rarely offer detailed memories of particular films, and where they do the film's title is often forgotten or misremembered. This is especially apparent with the earliest memories of films, which are often simply of isolated images or scenes. Where informants refer to serials or series films without mentioning specific titles (for example, the Fu Manchu films), indicative titles have been added to the list only where the films are discussed at length by informants and/or are frequently mentioned (Table 11). It is perhaps worth noting that, as a British-made film, Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* is unusual in being mentioned more than in passing by a number of informants.

<b>Table 11</b>		<b>Films named by informants</b>	
<i>Title</i>		<i>Director/Country/Year</i>	
All Quiet on the Western Front		(Lewis Milestone, US, 1930)	
Blue Angel/Der blaue Engel		(Josef von Sternberg, Germany, 1930)	
Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde		(Rouben Mamoulian, US, 1932)	
42nd Street		(Lloyd Bacon, US, 1933)	
Four Sons		(John Ford, US, 1928)	
Frankenstein		(James Whale, US, 1931)	
It Happened One Night		(Frank Capra, US, 1934)	
The Kid		(Charles Chaplin, US, 1921)	
King Kong		(Cooper/Schoedsack, US, 1933)	
The Mask of Fu Manchu		(Charles J. Brabin, Jr, US, 1932)	
Maytime		(Robert Z. Leonard, US, 1937)	
The Mummy		(Karl Freund, US, 1933)	
The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu--serial		(A.E.Colby, UK, 1923)	
The Mystery of the Wax Museum		(Michael Curtiz, US, 1933)	
Night Must Fall*		(Richard Thorpe, US, 1937)	
Ramona*		(Edwin Carewe, US, 1928)	
Seven Keys to Baldpate		(William Hamilton, US, 1935)	
Seventh Heaven		(Frank Borzage, US, 1927)	
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs		(David Hand, US, 1937)	
The 39 Steps		(Alfred Hitchcock, UK, 1935)	
Three Smart Girls		(Henry Koster, US, 1936)	
Top Hat		(Mark Sandrich, US, 1935)	

<sup>1</sup> Now known as NVivo: [Best Qualitative Data Analysis Software for Researchers | NVivo \(qsrinternational.com\)](https://www.qsrinternational.com)

<sup>2</sup> For a copy of the questionnaire and a report of the findings of the survey, see Annette Kuhn, 'Cinemagoing in Britain in the 1930s: Report of a Questionnaire Survey', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1999), pp.531-543.

<sup>3</sup> While the citation conventions set out in this section have been revised and updated for CMDA, they still apply to CCINTB outputs: see Julia McDowell and Annie Nissen, 'A Digital Archive Is Born: Revisiting the "Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain" Collection'. *Alphaville*, vol.21 (2021), pp.144-159.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail see Annette Kuhn, 'Cinema Culture and Femininity in the 1930s', in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds.), *Nationalising Femininity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.177-192.

<sup>5</sup> For further details and additional findings, see Annette Kuhn, 'Researching popular film fan culture in 1930s Britain', in *History of Moving Images: Reports from a Norwegian Project*, (ed.) Jostein Gripsrud and Kathrin Skretting (Oslo: Research Council of Norway, 1994).