

## CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF THE HISTORY PROJECT

# JIM WHITTELL EXHIBITOR



**Interviewer: Sir Sydney Samuelson**  
**Date: 6 September 2010**

**James Whittell recalls his career in the film industry - in particular, working for Odeon Cinemas and becoming its managing director from 1985 to 1990.**

The full interview can be seen as recorded on video and as transcribed at the British Entertainment History Project website. It has been edited and re-ordered with the approval of Jim Whittell for publication in THE VETERAN.

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*As a trainee manager in the main foyer of the Gaumont Bradford.*



*The Kinematograph Weekly Company of Showmen certificate issued in 1965 when Jim Whittell was at the Odeon Rotherham.*

**M**y father was the opening manager of the Odeon Harrogate and the Odeon Morecambe. He then became the regional manager for Southan Morris's large independent outfit, in charge of the Potteries and various cinemas in the vicinity. Throughout my childhood, my father always had to be in the cinema on a Saturday night to phone Southan Morris with the region's results, and every Sunday he did a tour of many of the cinemas taking myself and my mother with him, so my childhood was just filled with cinema visits. At his base office, the Rex/Rio Newcastle-under-Lyme, if the film was other than a U he would take me into the projection box so I could watch the film from there. At a very young age I saw A's and H's (as X's were called in those days).

I was too young to actually work in the cinema. By the time I was 12, my father moved to manage The Craggs in Morecambe (the CTBF's northern care home) for ten years. I did my A-levels. I was going to be a chemist, the world's finest chemist – I was quite good at chemistry, physics and maths –

but as soon as I realised what it was like to be a chemist, I thought, No – I'm going to follow my father into the cinema industry.

I went for my interview at the Odeon in Morecambe (the very cinema my father opened in 1937). I went for a further interview at the Gaumont in Preston with a man called Roy Mason who was a northern regional controller and he gave me a job in Bradford as the trainee assistant manager at the Gaumont there. That would have been 1962.

In those days the Gaumont was what was called a key cinema, and the key cinema general managers wore tails still and they got a laundry allowance of 15 shillings, whereas my laundry allowance as an assistant manager wearing my ordinary black-tie dinner jacket was ten and sixpence – which was a very useful additional payment in those days, straight into your pocket from the petty cash.

Once in, the Rank Organisation, when they realised what a bright lad I was, used to send me on various management courses.

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### THE HISTORY PROJECT

The History Project began in 1987 with an interview with cinematographer Eric Cross published in our last issue. It was then known as the ACTT History Project and subsequently the BECTU History Project, reflecting strong support from the trade union.

The History Project is building and preserving what is now the UK's largest oral history collection of over 700 interviews with professionals

### Showmanship

Gone have the days of showmanship. There's nothing more frustrating to me, because I can remember key was the standards of presentation and showmanship. For example, it was the manager's job to sit through the first performance of a presentation, not just to make sure that the sound levels were correct but also to see the whole programme go through.

There used to be what they called "house tabs", the main house curtains, and then there were screen curtains inside those, and variable masking so that, as different films had different ratios then, it was terribly important that the masking move in or out and up and down to ensure that the picture was picture perfect against the masking.

So if I was opening a presentation I would want to see house tabs opening; almost immediately the screen tabs open, and the picture hits the screen the minute the screen tabs start to move, so you've got the picture there. Then you might have four trailers: widescreen, standard, CinemaScope. For every one, the masking would have to change and the sound levels – stereophonic sound or flat sound. All that would be a masterful job by the projectionist to make the whole thing perfect.

And the changeovers were manual and one reel of film lasted 20 minutes. So if it was an hour and 40 film there would be all those changeovers and the projectionist could [only] leave the box for 10 minutes but no more.

Something that doesn't apply to this day at all – managers were given every opportunity to promote films, to which end they put a requisition in for cash – usually paid for by the distributor, not by the exhibitor. I mean, we're talking £10, £15, £20. So they would put a requisition in for, say, £15, listing what they were going to do with that £15.

There were three main accolades to be won. The most important one was

the Kinematograph Weekly showman certificate, of which I'm happy to say I've got one on my wall to this day: a big, beautiful-looking certificate that would name a film that had been promoted in such a way as to win this. Then within ABC there was an AB Circle showmanship manager, and within Rank there was a showmanship star.

Sadly, [now] the glorious cinema manager and his team are nothing more than shopkeepers and supervisors. They won't have any say in the presentation, in the timing, in whatever else goes on.

### Bingo

I hated bingo. These beautiful buildings sitting there with house lights and cleaners' lights to make them as bright as possible, and there was no showmanship to it at all. The worst of all was I can remember at one or two Odeons they used to do cine-bingo, so it would be three days showing films and four days playing bingo. And I just used to hate every moment of it.

Eventually they started the bingo division which I wasn't part of – I was always part of the cinema division. The bingo division grew once they realised how much money there was in it and then started cherry picking which cinemas they would take and convert to full-time bingo. It was always a sad loss to me when they took a beautiful cinema that seemed to be doing okay but of course the profits would double, treble, quadruple once it was changed to bingo.

That's when they took all the seats out, put bench tables and chairs in there and equipped the stage permanently for bingo rather than as it used to be you when you wheeled on the ball machine and use the theatre's PA system to do it. I fought very hard to stop any cinemas going to bingo but lost every time.



Odeon senior management in 1989. Top row, from left: Chris Mott, Roy Pirie, Roger Bennett, Barry Keward, Tony Ramsden (all Regional Directors) and Nigel Pidgeon (HR Director). Seated from left: Cynthia Williams (Purchasing), Stan Fishman (Film Booking and Marketing Director), Jim Whittell, Malcolm Walker (Finance Director), and Mary Hopper (JW's Secretary).



The Leicester Square Theatre becomes the Odeon West End in July 1988. It has recently been demolished to make way for a new hotel and cinema complex. The Chaplin statue has moved to Leicester Place, opposite the Prince Charles cinema. (Editor's collection.)



The new Odeon signage by day and by night, as reintroduced by Jim Whittell. (Photographs by Allen Eyles.)

A provincial Odeon in Birmingham used to make – and bear in mind this is middle '60s money – £15-£20,000 a year profit. The first year it operated as bingo it made over £350,000 in profit.

I can understand why Rank and every other company started looking at cinemas not as a cinema operation but whether it was well located for a bingo operation. The good thing about it is that city centres don't work as bingo halls so it would always be the provincial cinemas, the suburban cinemas, that were converted.

### To Holland

Rank had taken over the largest cinema, distribution and production company in Holland and left it with the original owner to run it. Very, very naïve. Within a few months I was asked to go over, mainly to sort out the exhibition. The whole thing was a disaster, it was losing money everywhere. The ex-owner was spending money like water, it was like Christmas. Rank had arrived, the bank was full of money – not his money, Rank's money – and he was spending it like water.

The first six months I was commuting before I was made the managing director of the whole thing. I knew everything about cinema then, I knew a fair bit about distribution but not from a distributor's point of view, and I knew nothing about film production. And this company was an exhibitor, a distributor and a film producer.

So in taking the job, it was a great adventure. My children went to Dutch schools, we all set about learning Dutch because I naively believed we were there for a long haul. I suppose I should have been more strategically astute knowing that Rank wished they hadn't bought it, and they got rid of it at the earliest possible opportunity after my being there.

It was probably one of the happiest two-and-a-half years of my life doing all those things, and making it very profitable to the point where a Rank director flew across one day. I met me at the airport, drove him into the office, and in the car he said, "I've got some good news for you. We've sold the company."

That was not good news to me. They'd sold it to Goram and Globus, the "go-go boys". And this is what hurts: they bought the business for 15 million guilders, and within four weeks they had refinanced it on a mortgage for 22 million guilders. So within four weeks they had received an extra seven million guilders into their pocket. The fact is that under that pressure of financing the company could never ever make a profit again. Every bit of gross profit went into paying interest fees, mortgages. And the two came along and offered me kings' ransoms to stay, but I can't stand them. Eventually it was sold at a very cheap price to Pathe, the large French film company.

### Odeon Cinemas Ltd.

I came to know a guy from the industry who had ventured into catering and was at that time the managing director of UB Restaurants – United Biscuits. I couldn't get a guarantee from Rank in Holland that I would be transported home and found a job, having made it clear I wasn't working for Goram and Globus. This guy made me the operations director of Pizzaland restaurants. This was all based on the fact that as a young student I worked in Littlewoods café in Morecambe serving the customers there. He believed I had catering experience, I didn't. And so for two and a half years I ran Pizzaland restaurants in the main – there were several restaurant brands.

I thought I would be running restaurants for the rest of my life. But, low and behold, I got a telephone call from a man [at Rank] called Michael Gifford who said in effect "What are you doing in the restaurant business? I thought

you were a cinema lover. I'll give you a proper job if you want to come and talk to me". And he said Odeon Cinemas is yours if you want it, so I grabbed his hand off and came back as the MD of Odeon Cinemas. Actually they were called Rank Theatres Ltd. and one of the first things I had a terrible battle over was changing the name of the company from Rank Theatres to Odeon Cinemas Ltd. – and, more importantly, bringing back the Odeon logo which is that original 1930's "O".

It was a fight with the Rank board to change it to Odeon Cinemas. They wanted Rank Theatres. We're not theatres, we are cinemas. The original name of the company was Odeon Cinema Ltd, and they agreed we could change it.

I can remember the board meeting – Mike Gifford was a great supporter of mine, he says, "Call it what you like as long as you make money." And the PR director said to him, "Well, couldn't we at least have the word Odeon green and not let it go to red?" For me, how could you have Odeon other than in red? So its name was changed to Odeon Cinemas Ltd.

I then looked at how many Gaumonts, Plasas, unknown name cinemas that we were operating at that time and, much to the chagrin of certain people, I said everyone will be renamed Odeon with effect from a certain date, and that made sign makers quite happy. That's how it was so that by, I suppose, 1987 no cinema operated by Odeon was called by any other name than Odeon, not matter where it was.

On the top of the list was the Leicester Square Theatre and so Stan Fishman, marketing guy, came up with the name – call it the Odeon West End – which we duly did.

The finest bit of my career was running Odeon Cinemas. I loved every minute of it. And I always say: when I took over, it was making £600,000 a

year profit; when I left, it was making £15 million. Which was in the space of five years. I think I was also the longest serving managing director of Odeon they'd ever had.

I actually visited every single Odeon three times a year which is something no other MD had ever done. In those days there were 107. I introduced the slogan "First Choice" Odeon, and we spent a lot of money refurbishing them but the bottom line for me was making sure that all those managers felt they personally own the brand, and it was their own reputation that was going to be on the line in terms of customer satisfaction and visit experience.

I always used to say to them, "It doesn't matter how old the toilets are, but they've got to be well lit, they've got to be very clean, and they've got to smell fresh." Cinema toilets had a terrible reputation – if you make sure that they're very clean, well-lit and smell fresh, it doesn't matter how worn out they are, it'll be a nice visit experience.

And that applied to everything – quality of presentation, stage presentation, cleanliness of foyer smell. I always used to call it the hear/see/feel/smell experience, so when you see the Odeon in front of you, 200 yards away or 100 yards away, it should look immaculate, it should look as though you're heading for a wonderful visit.

And the minute you touch those doors they've got to feel clean and nice, and then walk in and you look around, all clean, bright, sparkling. You breathe in, are there no nasty smells, nothing to put you off.

The projectionists were badly downtrodden in my view in 1984-5. The simple thing of offering every projectionist a white coat with free laundry and the words First Choice Odeon, instead of walking around in his own clothes. If you ask him to wear the white coat, he's put that on with pride, and he would then walk round in his white coat.

Promoting "first choice" Odeon in an American trade paper in 1990. (Editor's collection.)



Below: The Odeon Mezzanine appeared in the alleyway alongside the Odeon Leicester Square. (Photographs by Allen Eyles.)



## Modernisation

In 1985 Odeon Cinemas had one custom-built twin at Nottingham and they'd looked at mechanisms to twin or triple or quadruple cinemas and could never find a satisfactory payback situation. In other words, the cost of doing it would never have given an adequate return and in those days the hurdle rate (as it was called) that Michael Gifford was looking for was 15%. Unless you could look at least a 15% return on the capital he wouldn't do it.

Through good friends at Rank Leisure Services technical department, we found a way of doing it much more cheaply than had been considered before – mainly to do with the technology of wall insulation, because the last thing you want is sound penetration between screens. And a wonderful guy came up with a new insulation – from Italy, of all places – that suddenly allowed us to do it and in the course of '85 to '89 I probably converted seventy cinemas and added at least 200 screens by twins, triples and quads.

By the end of '88 we were looking at cinemas and going back. The Odeon Birmingham was originally a 2,600 seater cinema. The decision there was to say no more to live shows because it was a live show theatre. We knew if we converted it, it could no longer do live shows. So over the four years it went from one screen to three screens to seven screens to nine screens, so that today the Odeon New Street has got nine screens in it in what was the original shell of that beautiful Paramount.

The technical services department were the project managers. The technical services department would tell me how many screens they could get in and at what price. They would then use a myriad of different contractors to do the different jobs required but it was technical services who delivered the finished article. And very innovative they were.

## The flagship

The Odeon Leicester Square had a reincarnation from me and my main claim was to open up the front completely to its original glory. More importantly, from a finance point of view, there was an alley – it used to lead from Leicester Square through to Charing Cross Road, and that was basically the projectionists' and the manager's car park. I thought how can we possibly allow this fresh air in prime West End to be left as it was. It was a very narrow alley, and very high. We fitted five 60-seater screens called the Odeon Mezzanine into that very narrow space. And, hard to believe, those five cinemas made more profit than the Odeon Leicester Square in a normal year. The Odeon Leicester Square could take millions if it was a big film, but if it was a not very successful film then you've got this enormous overhead for very few people visiting. The five screens used to be full all the time – afternoons, evenings.

And that was purely "move-over" as they used to call it. The booking arrangements for West End cinemas are based on relationships with distributors who want a date to open their picture, and that takes no regard to how well the film that's in the cinema prior to that date is doing. Move-over houses were critical, and the finest move-over possible was to move from anywhere in the West End into the Odeon Leicester Square Mezzanine. That meant it was always supplied with product that could easily fill 60 seats five, six times a day. And hence in my time the Mezzanine became more profitable than the Odeon Leicester Square over a year.

There are two boxes for five screens, because of the constraints of that alley. We were never mean with projectionists in the Odeon Leicester Square. The chiefs always had whatever they wanted for perfect projection.

The Odeon Leicester Square, in the days of barring, barred every cinema in the UK, and therefore could open first run solo and regularly did so. In my day, the need for five/six West End outlets was critical to the distributors to

get that ongoing premiere opening and run. We had the Odeon Haymarket, two [screens] in the Odeon West End, and the Odeon Leicester Square, plus on rare occasions the Odeon Marble Arch. They counted themselves as West End opening cinemas. In order of priority, the Odeon Leicester Square was number one, the Odeon West End was number two and there were two screens in there, and the Haymarket were number three.

The Odeon Haymarket was an arthouse cinema in our view. For example, The Odeon Marble Arch [was] bottom, because it was too far from the West End. We used to do premieres there of – shall we say – less successful pictures where the producer or the director definitely wanted a West End premiere. We could always, as a last resort, accommodate them there.

## Butlin's

Mike Gifford asked me to move from Odeon to Butlin's. I was very, very happy running Odeon Cinemas and was proud of the achievements and one day he simply said, "You're needed more with Butlin's than you are with Odeon Cinemas." Never one to turn down an opportunity, I went and became the managing director of Butlin's Holidays Ltd. Probably the worst decision of my life. I missed the cinema industry so much. My only real achievement in my view was we built an Odeon cinema in every single holiday centre.

To cover the cost we made a miniscule charge for admissions, but we were booked by the cinema circuit, the films showing were the current release films at that time, and I was very proud of that.

## Apollo

Apollo was a live theatre company, nothing to do with cinema, that was started by Paul Gregg. In the course of probably ten or twelve years, Paul Gregg became the largest live theatre owner in the country. As an aside, Paul Gregg and I were assistant managers in Sheffield in 1961-2: he was at the ABC and I was in the Odeon in Sheffield. We struck up a relationship there, mainly because our two managers were showbiz rivals.

Fred Hutchinson, who was an independent cinema operator, fell on hard times and Paul said, "Well, don't worry. I'll buy them off you." So he bought a small group of cinemas which he immediately called Apollo, and those small cinemas were just kept operating because Paul has a soft spot for cinema like me.

He sold the entire company including the cinemas and theatres, about 1999 or 2000. In 2001 we met up and he said, "I fancy buying back the Apollo Cinemas". The cinemas were definitely available because the whole company was owned by a live theatre organisation, not a cinema organisation. I think because he had a contractual reason that he couldn't buy back anything from the company he'd sold, I became involved with him and successfully acquired the original Apollo Cinema chain, which would have been in 2002, I guess. Our main activity was to modernise them and to make them more attractive, which we duly did. I ran them from take over through to finding a successor for me to run them.

Because I was a freelance consultant to Apollo Cinemas, and having done it for almost three years, the tax authorities pointed out to me that I had better go on the payroll of Apollo Cinemas. My pride wouldn't let me go on the payroll of Apollo Cinemas, that was number one. Number two, I believed that I'd done it – I was by then 63 or 64. I really do believe you should give young bright people the chance to make progress.

*Jim Whittell is a long-standing member of the executive committee of the British Cinema and Television Veterans.*