



At the beginning of the twentieth century, films were only five years old. They were shown at fairgrounds, music halls, or anywhere a screen could be set up and a room darkened. Subjects included local scenes and activities, views of foreign lands, short comedies and newsworthy events.

The films were accompanied by lectures, music and a lot of audience participation. Although they did not have synchronized dialogue, they were not 'silent' as they are sometimes described.

Initially it seemed not more than a fad, a novelty shown at fairs, but it quickly emerged as the dominant form of popular entertainment. Ticket prices were extremely cheap, charging prices of one or two pence, catering to the poorest pleasure-seekers.

The idea of a permanent venue for showing films only gathered steam around 1906, when several cinemas, or 'electric theatres', opened.

It was a time of experimentation with film makers eager to explore the possibilities of this new medium. Film makers started to move beyond the short two-minute film and were beginning to discover new ways of telling stories on screen.

Documentary filmmakers Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon were one of the largest film producers in Britain in the 1900s, making films under the title: "We take them and make them" They would film scenes of everyday life such as fun fairs, sporting events, schools, transport and factory workers then screen the results back to local audiences who saw themselves on film often for the first time, under the slogan "Local Films For Local People".

Out of the great number of films made in Britain between the years 1895 and 1907, the most prolific and influential were the group of Brighton-based filmmakers who began to edit and color tint their films, as well as exploring trick photography to enhance their stories. The leading members of this group were former magic lantern lecturer turned filmmaker George Albert Smith and James Williamson.

Smith was an early exponent of social realism; with his 1901 film 'The Death of Poor Joe' being the earliest surviving film based on a Dickens character, adapted from 'Bleak House'.

Williamson, who famously pioneered the use of cross-cutting in his film, 'Fire!' also in 1901, which refined a new film grammar using unprecedented multiple shots edited together to create a chronological sequence propelling a coherent narrative along, allowing for emotional sophistication.

Both filmmakers were at the forefront of Britain's contribution to the birth of film, with the progression from the production of single shot unedited films to multi-shot edited films.

Cecil Hepworth was also a pioneer of cinema, successfully making 'scenic films' and 'actualities' such as the 'funeral of Queen Victoria' in 1901. These films were usually under a minute long until 1900 when the average film length of a film extended to between 2-4 minutes.

Hepworth's style of film language, typically frontal staging with action played out in a single long-shot tableau, continued until the classical narrative system was popularized. Co-directed by Hepworth and Percy Stow, 'Alice in Wonderland' in 1903, which was the first version of Lewis Carroll's famous Victorian 1865 surreal novel, was the longest and most ambitious picture yet produced in Britain, taking its visual cues from Sir John Tenniel's drawings. The film was memorable for its use of special effects, including Alice's shrinking in the Hall of Many Doors, and in her large size, stuck inside the White Rabbit's home and reaching for help through a window.

In addition to trick shots to enable Alice to shrink, grow and disappear, this landmark fantasy also crafted transitions to allow the Duchess's baby to turn into a pig, superimpositions to place the Cheshire Cat in a hedge and dissolves to reveal Alice waking from her dream as she is chased by the Queen of Heart's playing-card courtiers.

Hepworth himself played the Frog Footman while his wife Margaret doubled as both the White Rabbit and the Queen; there was even a cameo by Blair, the family dog who would later find fame a couple of years later in Lewin Fitz Hamon's movie 'Rescued by Rover'!

By the end of the decade film was starting to be seen not merely as a fairground attraction. In the coming years the cinema industry would be born. Films would no longer be screened in random locations. Instead more and more cinemas would open, offering a different type of entertainment.