

## A FAMILY FILM BUSINESS: Researching the Adelphi Archive

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Earlier this summer, the bfi unveiled two restored prints of vintage films at its showcase cinema on the South Bank. Nothing too unusual in this, perhaps. Last year, the centenary of David Lean's birth had been celebrated in a similar fashion, with meticulously refurbished prints of some of his early classics by the wizards of the National Film Archive, sponsored by the David Lean Foundation. This time, though, there was a difference. The two films shown this summer also had a generous sponsor – an American woman who put up \$60,000 to see two 'lost' films from 1951 returned to circulation – but they were hardly legendary masterpieces. I would guess that not too many in this room would even have heard of them - *Penny Points to Paradise* and *Let's Go Crazy* - or the production/distribution company responsible for them: Adelphi Films. Everyone, however, will know their stars: Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe. The films were simultaneously released on dvd/blu ray, not as part of a Goons or Peter Sellers series, but as the first instalment of the Adelphi story.

This is ironic, because not so long ago the National Film Archive turned down a copy of the Adelphi film *Bait* (1949), admittedly one of its worst. This indicates a good deal about changes in the curatorial policies and philosophy at the NFA:

- The growing importance of sponsorship at a time of pressure on state funding
- A new emphasis on making rare material available via dvd sales, with bfi Southbank screenings used as part of the marketing campaign
- An increasing emphasis on the national cinema
- An abandonment of the canon and aesthetic or auteurist criteria of selection in favour of a more inclusive approach, which is prepared to take seriously that which was previously marginalised, dismissed or despised.

The prime example of the latter is the new 'Flipside' series, an interesting amalgam of pulp and pretension which embraces the hidden history of British exploitation cinema as well as some obscure films that trod the boundary between art and commerce. The partnership between the bfi and Adelphi is a further instance.

My own role in this is that I am researching a book on Adelphi which I rather hope that bfi/Palgrave will publish. I came to this project more than 15 months ago when, during research for my bfi book on the post-war British 'B' film (which uses an image from the Adelphi film *Torment* on the cover)<sup>1</sup>, discovered that many of the records of Adelphi, one of the players in the second feature field of production, had survived.

Adelphi is very much a family business, established by Arthur Dent, a self-made man from a Jewish immigrant family, and a former MD of the major distribution company Wardour Films and executive of Associated British. After a brief stint with Sam Goldwyn, he set up his own business with his sons David and Stanley as respectively producer and financial director. The business is now run by Stanley's daughter, Kate Lees. Kate has ransacked family attics and garages to find surviving records, artefacts and prints. Her findings were recently featured in *The Sunday Times* and included elements of the films shown at bfi Southbank. The celluloid is now in the safekeeping of the bfi, while the paper resides in Kate's study.

This might sound unremarkable, but it is important to emphasise just how uncommon it is to find anything resembling full company records for any British film producers or distributors, small, medium or large. Paper work for Rank and Associated British is sparse, despite the importance of these companies in the history of British Cinema. What there is in the bfi's special collections is largely piecemeal, composed of the private papers of individual actors or executives. There is incomplete documentation for the experimental production companies of the 1950s – the trades union collective ACT Films and the state-sponsored Group Three – but really only the surviving information on Hammer Films rivals the Adelphi archive.

Adelphi actually pre-dates the Dent family. It was set up by Louis Zimmerman (a small-time film producer in the 1930s) during World War Two as a small distributor of re-issued material. It was mothballed in the post-war years until it was acquired in 1948 by Arthur Dent, who wanted to expand the production business (called

Advance Films) he had begun with an undistinguished biopic of Robert Burns called *Comin' thro' the Rye* (1947). The film lost money, but Dent was undeterred. Adelphi distributed the pictures made by the Dents and bankrolled other small producers working at long-forgotten studios like Carlton Hill and Brighton, where the Peter Sellers films on the new dvd were made.

This was the period of the British production crisis when rising studio costs made the fulfilment of the supporting-feature quota that had been introduced by the 1948 Films Act extremely problematic. Undercapitalised mushroom companies specialised in recycling stock footage, dubbing jaunty commentaries onto documentary, silent or foreign footage or turning out under-lit melodramas filmed in hired country houses - anything to offer something serviceable to hard-pressed exhibitors looking to meet their quota obligations. Consequently, the early catalogues of Adelphi might look like a bit of a rag-bag of cheapjack titles, but this was par for the course for production-distribution companies trying to find a niche in a market dominated by the vertically-integrated combines: Rank and Arthur Dent's old employers ABPC.

Thus, as an independent distributor with interests in production, Adelphi represents more than itself. Its archive provides genuine and detailed insights into the operation of a whole sector of the post-war British film industry, a sector populated by the likes of Grand National Pictures, Apex Film Distributors, Eros Films, Equity British Films, Monarch Film Corporation, Renown Pictures, Exclusive Films, Ambassador Film Productions and many more. These companies struggled daily to get their products into the booking diaries of the major circuits and the dwindling army of independent exhibition houses in the days before independent television finally forced most of them out of business. Apart from that on Exclusive and its production arm, Hammer Films, little or no academic research has been carried out on these small and medium-sized companies, and the relationship between them and the exhibition sector they serviced remains largely obscure.

Here, the Adelphi archive promises to plug a gap in our understanding of how the film supply chain operated at a time when government and union thoughts turned to nationalisation, and the national cinema was eventually stabilised by the National Film Finance Corporation and the Eady fund. (The archive contains correspondence

with the NFFC, for instance) It is a transitional moment in the national cinema when British films reached the zenith of their popularity for domestic audiences. The story of the post-war decade is one of opportunities and crises in which private entrepreneurship met state policy-making in what, at best, was an awkward alliance and more often an uneasy stand-off. It was also a time when contrasting philosophies of film-making – documentary/progressive and exploitative/commercial – were forced to find some common ground in the interests of mutual survival, and the haphazard growth of small companies was eventually strangled by the monopolistic tendencies of the industry.

Adelphi employed 30 staff at its London offices, with one salesman and one clerk at each of its branch offices in Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool and Cardiff, plus agents in Birmingham and Newcastle. The distribution of re-issued films and American second features was the bread and butter activity of Adelphi, but increasingly large lashings of jam were provided by its production ventures, especially as the benefits of the Eady Levy began to be felt in 1952. Initially setting its sights not much higher than modest programmers – co- and supporting features – Adelphi experimented with a couple of thrillers, but discovered that comedies featuring radio or music hall performers had the potential to play as first features, even though they were made on meagre budgets. The company had a major hit with the service comedy *Bless 'em All* (1949). However, the archive reveals that the producer/director of that and subsequent films for Adelphi, Robert Jordan Hill, failed to make a fortune from his labours. In fact he writes to Arthur Dent, appealing for money to keep him from bankruptcy, but Dent is angry that Hill's last two features have gone way over schedule and budget. Again, escalating and uncertain studio fees are in evidence. Director and Associate Producer are not even on first name terms.

The archive contains many revealing and poignant documents like this: a letter from Spike Milligan expressing surprise at receiving any 'lolly' at all from *Penny Points*, 'knowing the film profession to be what it is'; another letter to Peter Sellers informing the soon-to-be multi-millionaire that the same film has eventually earned him an additional £33 in royalties. There is also a wealth of legal documentation, notably contracts with actors such as Diana Dors (who made four films with Adelphi) and

with producers and directors. Most films have documented production costs. These are uncommon in other British collections but not unknown. On the other hand, there is unique correspondence concerning negotiations with circuit bookers that emphasises the significance of circuit deals and sheds light on a particularly dim corner of the field of cultural production. Similarly, there are uncommon data on export sales which are suggestive of the surprising range of territories in which even modest British programmers managed exhibition.

The archive allows us to compare the relative success and failure of the company's product. In some cases we know every cinema in which a film played. This, again, is unique in my experience. For example, I have never previously seen any surviving documentation similar to the bookings sheets for the co-feature comedy *My Wife's Lodger* (1952), starring Dominic Roche and Diana Dors. It reveals not only where the film played and what its takings were in each venue, but that the booking percentage varied from one cinema to the next on the basis of individual deals struck between Adelphi's salesman and the cinema booker. We also know where it was booked as a second feature, as here it generated only a flat fee (marked F). Moreover, we can use these figures cautiously to compare the popularity of the film in different regions of the country (although this is partly dependent on the popularity of the films it was teamed with in different programmes. A letter from author and star Dominic Roach preserved in the archive, also reveals that he took 5% of the gross takings wherever the film played and that he policed this carefully. In a few cases, we also get an insight into what audiences made of the films at sneak previews, via their feedback sheets.

All in all, then, the Adelphi archive is a remarkable resource for the investigation of, not simply a minor film company, but the system within which it operated.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane, *The British 'B' Film*, London: bfi/Palgrave, 2009