

BIRT ACRES' STUDIO

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IN THE *NEW MAGIC LANTERN JOURNAL*, vol. 11, no. 9, pp. 12–13, there is an article about 'England's Earliest Film Studios', written by Bill Barnes. He mentions the open-air-studio in the Strand, constructed by the American William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson (spring of 1898) and Robert Paul's purpose-built film studio in north London (early in 1898), followed by the studios of Cecil Hepworth and Will Barker in 1899. All others were still later, except one studio which is only mentioned by a small notice: Robert Paul's studio on the roof of the Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square, where he shot *The Soldier's Courtship*. No date is given, but it can't be earlier than April or May 1896, according to John Barnes's dates in *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England* (1976, pp. 102, 103, 107, 108, 109, 124, 207, 208, 221). This is too late, too. Bill Barnes continues, stating that the '...first English film studios, if they can be called by that name, were very simple makeshift set-ups comprising a single backcloth against a wall or other support, as used by the first filmmakers such as Birt Acres...'. This ending is mysterious as there weren't any other filmmakers at that time, except maybe Robert Paul (who was still an optical technician, becoming a filmmaker only in 1896). To say it clearly: Birt Acres stands there alone, as a film pioneer and a filmmaker. He is the main person in the story of the first English film studio, which Bill Barnes alludes to, but unfortunately does not elaborate on.

This is the full story. The photographer Birt Acres, when employed as manager of the big dry-plate manufacturer Elliott & Son Ltd in Barnet (from 1892 to 1895) and living in nearby Clovelly Cottage, was at the same time eager to finalise his system of shooting films. In February 1895, he made two trial films outside his house with his assistant Henry W. Short – *Cricketer Jumping over Garden Gate* and *Incident outside Clovelly Cottage, Barnet*. On 30 March 1895, he made another open-air film, *The Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race*, which could be called the first English documentary.

Then he left Elliott & Son in order to be totally free for filming. The public was informed by a notice in the *British Journal of Photography*, 26 April 1895. Just around

the corner from Clovelly Cottage, in the backgarden of 45 Salisbury Road, Birt Acres, with help from his young assistant Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, started to construct a studio for filming. This had a simple plank stage, was of wooden construction, with wooden planks on the ground, wooden folding screens to the right and left sides, a wooden ceiling above, and a single backcloth 'against a wall or other support', as Bill Barnes says. It was there that Acres shot his fiction films, not ON the screen, but IN the screen – i.e. the studio itself was mostly part of the picture. The audience was able to notice that the actors were playing not in the open-air, but on a stage. All these films were short comedies, mostly played by travelling actors. Although Birt Acres was a professional photographer there are no known photographs of the studio in the backgarden of 45 Salisbury Road. However, a scene from *The Boxing Kangaroo* (Fig. 1) shows two actors with the animal on the wooden floor of this stage, and behind them the rear wall can be seen. In this way we have an unintentional photograph of the studio itself. In *Monkey-dancing* (Fig. 2), the actor's and the animal's situation is the same, but on the left and the right side the walls can be identified. In the third film (Fig. 3) the three actors are fighting on the wooden planks of the floor, while the rear wall behind them is decorated with newspapers and pictures. This is a scene from the famous *The Arrest of a Pickpocket*, the world's first crime movie! This film has earlier always been thought to be filmed open-air in the streets of London.

When this film was unearthed a hundred years later, the date of production, 11 April 1895, was revealed by the date of the newspaper it was wrapped in. The set also contained other films of Acres. All in all there was 100 feet of film, tagged onto the end of another film. Altogether 14 different films could be identified (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11 November 1995). These were the films Birt Acres advertised in *English Mechanic*, 14 June 1895, p. 6. After the films had been restored (*Daily Mail*, 19 June 2006) they were presented in October 2006 at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival in Italy.

Fig. 1 *The Boxing Kangaroo*, March 1895 (courtesy Tjitte de Vries, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper Archive, Rotterdam)



Fig. 2 *Monkey-dancing*, March 1895 (courtesy Tjitte de Vries, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper Archive, Rotterdam)



Fig. 3 *The Arrest of a Pickpocket*, March 1895 (courtesy Tjitte de Vries, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper Archive, Rotterdam)

