

Elstree & Borehamwood Museum
Friends Newsletter
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90 YEARS OF ELSTREE AERODROME
AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

Back in November, we opened our latest exhibition celebrating 90 years of Elstree Aerodrome, which was initially established as a landing strip by members of the Country Club at Aldenham House in 1934. Lots of research was undertaken, based on the book 'Elstree Aerodrome – 90 Years in Pictures' by Grant Peerless and Richard Riding. Peerless helped us out towards the development of the exhibition, sourcing text and pictures for the panels, and giving an overall view of the everyday operations at the Aerodrome.



A team of six helped set up the exhibition, a full-sized model aircraft was constructed by Alan Kirtley, whilst Dave developed a flight simulator to be attached with the model, adding to the sense of realism and interactivity. Back in the Summer, Dave also took photographer Derek to take some present-day snaps of the Aerodrome currently in action. After months of planning

and preparation, the exhibition was finally unveiled at a preview evening on 4th November for local councillors and trustees. It was an enjoyable and well-attended day, Humphrey Gibbs, Viscount Aldenham, who manages the Aerodrome, joined the proceedings, and a number of people eagerly tried out the flight simulator to much enthusiasm and interest.



The exhibition officially opened to the public the following day, and since then it has become very popular with over 300 visitors attending, at the time of writing, as well as four visits from various local schools around the area. We have also organised a Friends evening and there are plans underway for more events later this year. The exhibition will be open until July, so here's your chance to peruse through an illustrious history of aviation at the Elstree Aerodrome.

THE STORY OF THE IMPERIAL STUDIOS



Elstree was once described as The British Hollywood; during the 1930s, five film studios were in operation. The Imperial Studios, owned by British & Dominions was primarily devoted to producing quota quickies, the studio produced a number of notable films that were popular at the box office. Actors like Robert Donat, Merle Oberon, William Hartnell, Rex Harrison, Vivian Leigh and Anna Neagle made their earliest films here, and budding film-makers like Freddie Young and David Lean learnt their craft. Although the studio only lasted seven years, its ripples on the British film industry lasted long after its demise in February 1936.

In 1925, the British film industry was in disarray, almost every studio had closed down and American films were flooding the market. Incredibly, American entrepreneur J.D. Williams set his sights on Elstree as the location for a new film studio that would rival those in Hollywood. He founded British National Pictures along with W. Schlesinger. Between them, they bought a forty-acre site and acquired the services of Herbert Wilcox to head up the production unit. As the two film stages were being built, discord soon arose between Williams and Schlesinger and litigation followed. Their solicitor John Maxwell was brought in to stabilise the situation. Nearly bankrupt by then, Williams returned to the US –

and Maxwell took over the studio, renaming it British International Pictures. Shortly after producing **Madame Pompadour (1927)**, the first film to be shot at the new studio. Wilcox departed and established British and Dominions Film Co, with Nelson Keys in June 1927. Their first film was **Dawn (1928)**, a biopic about the life of WW1 nurse Edith Cavell. B&D's earliest productions were shot at various facilities including Cricklewood Studios.

Meanwhile, sound was coming in and Maxwell successfully negotiated with Radio Corporation of America for use of their Phototone equipment. A temporary sound stage was built, and the first film shot there was **Blackmail (1929)**. Subsequently six permanent sound stages were built. Latterly, Wilcox signed a picture deal with His Master's Voice for use of their recording artists, yet he had no studio of his own, so he turned to Maxwell for help. He subsequently purchased three sound stages, and named the new site, The Imperial Studios. The earliest films shot there included **Splinters (1929)** and **Rookery Nook (1930)**. Subsequently B&D's films were soon performing well at the box office; a number of actors were becoming household names, including the Yorkshire comic Sydney Howard in films like **Up for The Cup (1931)**, and Dorothy 'Chili' Bouchier (once dubbed The Brunette

Bombshell) who wowed audiences with films like **Carnival (1931)** and **The Blue Danube (1932)** respectively.



Rookery Nook (1930)

Wilcox was looking to break into the lucrative musical market, his next film was **Goodnight, Vienna (1932)**, based on the operetta by Eric Maschwitz. He signed up theatre star Jack Buchanan as the lead, but had difficulty trying to cast a lead actress. By chance he saw Anna Neagle supporting Buchanan in a play called 'Stand Up and Sing', which impressed him enough to sign up Neagle. This would mark the beginning of a long partnership between Wilcox and Neagle that would span over 32 films, they would eventually marry in 1943.

The studio was also licenced to other companies including London Films, set up by Alexander Korda. He upped his game with **The Private Life of Henry VIII (1933)**, it starred Charles Laughton as the eponymous monarch. The film cost £93,710, five times that average sum of a British film of the time, yet it was highly successful in the UK and the US, gaining around £500,000, it also gained Laughton an Oscar for Best Actor. Buoyed by its success, Wilcox responded with **Nell Gwyn (1934)** with Neagle and Cedric Hardwicke. It was voted the 3rd most popular film of 1934, according to Film Weekly. Meanwhile, Korda continued his initiative for international films with **The Scarlet Pimpernel (1934)** with Leslie Howard as the chivalrous adventurer.

At B&D, Wilcox continued his spate of historical pictures with **Peg of Old Drury (1935)** which starred Neagle as 18th century actress Peg Wolfington. The film did well in the UK and the US, and was voted 3rd best British film of 1936. He also produced **Escape Me Never (1935)**, directed by Paul Czinner and starring Elisabeth Bergener, it did well enough to nominate her an Oscar for Best Actress.



Herbert Wilcox

Later that year, J. Arthur Rank produced his first feature film at the studios, **The Turn of the Tide (1935)**, about the plight of Yorkshire fishermen in a rural fishing community. Wilcox was soon approached by Lord Portal to break away from B&D and establish his own production unit. **Limelight (1936)** was the first film produced under his new company, Herbert Wilcox Productions. It starred Neagle in a semi-autobiographical account about her entry into films. It was distributed by Rank's newly formed General Film Distributors, who also released **Debt of Honour (1936)**, which Rank produced at the studios. He was increasingly dissatisfied with the facilities at Elstree, so he looked towards setting up a new studio in rural Buckinghamshire. Early in 1936, Wilcox started production on another musical **London Melody (1937)** with Neagle and Italian actor Tullio Carminati.

With the filming partly completed, on the early hours of 9th February disaster struck, Wilcox was awoken to find that the studios he helped establish were on fire. A huge inferno engulfed the studios and despite the best efforts of studio staff and fire crews headed by Joe Grossman, the devastation was profound. All three sound stages were destroyed, along with 44 dressing rooms, 24 offices, 3 reception rooms, a converting room, and a wax shaving room used for sound recording, the sets and costumes for Wilcox's latest production and **Love in Exile (1936)** were also destroyed. Wilcox was inconsolable, and noted at the time that the fire was "one of the biggest disasters the British film industry has ever experienced."



The studios following the fire

Maxwell was in no financial position to offer Wilcox new facilities. So, Wilcox remounted his film at the newly completed Pinewood Studios, where he funded his insurance money towards the new site. The surviving support buildings were sold to various companies including the Rank Organisation and Cinesound Sound Effects. In 1996 two memorial plaques were inaugurated on the former site, honouring the careers of Neagle and Wilcox. Although the studio's existence was short, it produced popular films that were commercially successful in the UK and abroad and it burgeoned the careers of many actors and filmmakers. Its mark on the British film industry was profound.

MIKE'S NOTE

Thank you for supporting the museum during 2024, we look forward to your continued support over this coming year. Please note that deadlines for renewing annual subscriptions is 31st August, after which those who have not renewed will no longer receive Newsletters or invites to Friends events.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Our next reminiscence meeting is "Going Down the Village" on Tuesday 4th February, at 96 Shenley Road at 10:30am.

Elstree & Borehamwood Museum

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Open: Tues, Wed & Thurs: 12pm – 6pm

Sat: 10am – 3pm

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