

BECTU History Project Interview No 526.  
Mel Faber. Feature films: advertising and distribution.  
Interviewed by Brian Taylor and John Legard. 30.09.2003.  
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INTERVIEW WITH MEL FABER FOR BECTU HISTORY PROJECT

I'm a Liverpudlian as you may gather from a problem I have with certain words like fur-her [?] but otherwise I spent most of my life down in the London area. I think at this stage I would have been influenced in my career by my late father, Leslie Faber – I think it might be opportune to tell you a little bit about him because he was quite a character, certainly in the industry. He had a pretty chequered career before the war. I remember that in my youth we had a couple of cut price cigarette and sweet shops in Liverpool, in the Parliament Street area and not one that is to be enjoyed these days. And he also, although I can't remember this, was a cotton trader at one time in his career and we moved about. If I remember, we lived in Manchester at one time and then we moved to Liverpool and occasionally we went back – I think it was gypsies – we led that sort of life. However, before the war, I think it was about 1938, Dad joined Columbia Pictures as a trainee salesman. I recall that they went to London for an interview with Max Thorpe, which was another well known name in the industry – of whom everyone was frightened, whether they worked for him or not – and they drove overnight in a small car for this interview with Max Thorpe who actually had been a boyfriend of my mother in the earlier days because they both came from Leeds, though Dad was from Manchester. He got the job as trainee salesman at Liverpool branch and he won one or two awards for being good at sales – he did the north Wales area – and after that he was promoted to sales manager of the Liverpool branch and in 1948 was promoted again to sales manager of Columbia Pictures and was based in London. So, of course, he brought the family down and he stayed with them for a while, then he went to British Lion as assistant managing director to the late Sidney Myers, another character in the business, and then in his latter years of his career he formed Forward Films. This was a company he set up, buying and selling films. He had certain connection with Hal Chester whose office he shared in Germain Street.

INT Hal Chester was the boy star of Hollywood at one time in a way, wasn't he?

He was indeed. He was about five foot two, bursting with energy and didn't care what he said to anybody – his language was pretty hot – but they had this love-hate relationship and they were partners in certain films that they brought out at that time or acquired, mainly through Hal, I suppose – he knew the producers and did his own productions.

INT He did try to set up many productions over here.

He did indeed. This was before Eady – Eady was later than that. As I say, it was a bit of a love hate relationship and eventually they did split up and Dad continued based on the Germain Street office which became quite useful to me when I started on my own.

INT Do you think we should mention about him acquiring Shipman and King?

Or being instrumental

INT Instrumental. Because he was tied up with many people in show business.

Because he was indeed.

INT The Delfonts, the Grades, the Danzigers and joy through his interest in films anyway. He used to attend these premieres in Leicester Square.

But he was instrumental in the sale of the Shipman & King cinemas which was a very nice group of independent cinemas to the ABC circuit. I'm not sure, Brian, did he retain the lease of the three situations? At Tonbridge?

INT No. I at the time was working for the Danizigers because I had been at their studios at Elstree and then I set up the Mayfair Theatre for them at the Mayfair Hotel and at that stage they sold their interest in the hotel – the Mayfair Group had a man called Leslie Jackson in charge who was a bit of a cook and went to jail as the result of the Danzigers getting him out – and they teamed up the company, reorganised the whole effort and began to build a vey luxury hotel in Mayfair including the Beachcomber, the Candlelight Room. They had the Candlelight Rooms redone, the Chateaubriand – and came a stage when they decided they wanted to get out of hotels and Harry Danziger was married to Angela King, who was Sam King's daughter, sister of Peter King who ran Screen International or set up Screen International, and through the family interests they bought the major part of Shipman & King but your father was instrumental in bringing that deal off and the later one which occurred when the Kings wanted to sell the business a few years later – he was instrumental again in setting up the deal with Bernie Delfont and ABC Cinemas at the time.

He was the sort of guy – the middleman. Oh, dear.

INT While all this was going on, you were doing other things. I know you were in the army

Well, the point I make about that is obviously with Dad being in the businss and I had a bit of a chequered education. We were in Liverpool when the war started and I went to Quarry Bank where of course John Lennon went – a little bit after me – but we then moved to Southport when the bombing was going on in Liverpool and I changed schools at a difficult time of my education. So I didn't come out of school with any great medals and shortly afterwards, oh yes, through my father being with Columbia, I joined Columbia Pictures. He was then branch manager at Liverpool – and I didn't particularly want to work with him so I joined the Manchester office of Columbia Pictures as office boy initially. I thought my career was going to be in sales and I find it amusing now to think that I used to plead with the branch manager to allow me to go out at night under my own steam to call on independent cinemas to sell them shorts. I didn't get any payment or any commission but I did get experience and actually it stood me in good stead because it was the time the girls were being called up into the factories and the young lady who doing shorts bookings was called up and they promoted me to being shorts booking clerk. It sounds funny now when you think of the business today. Shorts were quite an important part of the programme and no computers, we had these thick log books with all the various shorts in them and we used to put a cross – mostly two days for a cartoon, perhaps, and three days – but then we had cinemas like the Tatler, which was city centre, and we'd get a week's booking and it gave me great pleasure to put the pencil through the whole week. It was good stuff.

INT Just while we're talking about that, the thing I remember before the war was these whole streets of cinemas which dominated the landscape. You'd go from one cinema to the next. There were independents but there was also circuits in those days, wasn't there? Perhaps you could tell us who you sold to?

Yes. We sold both to the independents and the circuits but we had a special circuits department who dealt with them but even at that stage you had the Odeon circuit, you had the Gaumont circuit, both of which were owned by the Rank

Organisation, and of course the ABC circuit. So those were your main three circuits. There were quite a number of large independents.

INT Like Granada?

Granada, exactly. In the north there was H D Moorhouse – I think they probably had about 25-30 situations, Jimmy Brennan who was quite a character, there was Star Cinemas, the Eckharts – there were quite a number of them and they were doing well because of course it was war time and there was nothing else to do and people were desperate for entertainment. It was marvellous. Unfortunately, many of them didn't put back into the cinemas the money they were making at that time and, after the war, came television etc. and it showed this had been a bad policy. Those that had invested felt the benefit of it when things got tougher.

INT There was a time during the war when they started having Sunday films and there used to be these Sunday prints which came along and I remember going to the pictures when I was working on a Sunday and they used to have these terrible copies, all chopped up – presumably they'd completed their circuit release and they were dug out for Sundays. What was felt about that because obviously it wasn't very satisfactory for the viewers? Can you remember much about that?

Well, yes, I can. Because that is what they were allowed, Sunday exhibition, I think only after 4 o'clock – not to interfere with church attendances – and there was no way the film distributors or producers were going to allow them to have up-to-date.... I mean, they wouldn't even give them seven days or they might if it was a big picture, they might start on Sunday. But it didn't suit the exhibitor, the cinema owner, because on Sunday he showed special programmes which were usually tough – gangster films, etc – and they got a totally different audience – you got the youngsters in, the noise and what have you, so the normal cinemagoer didn't go into the cinema and it was a different audience and they paid probably £5 or something for the exhibition – there was none of this fifty per cent – so it was useful to some of them. But the interesting thing is that it varied with the areas because when we went to Southport there were eight cinemas in Lord Street and that's within a mile from top to bottom and they did extremely well, particularly on Sunday because before the law was changed to allow all cinemas to open on Sunday, people from Liverpool and Manchester came over especially to go to the cinema on a Sunday.

INT The other thing was the Forces who had a free day on a Sunday apart from church parade in the morning and they were available to go to the cinema in the afternoon. In certain places I went to during the war it was always fifty per cent soldiers who were in there – and troops.

INT Presumably that came to an end immediately the war was over.

Not immediately. No, no, it carried on for quite a long time but I think gradually the product was so chopped about and exhausted that they went over to seven day which was of course seven days from Sunday, not Friday as we have now which was to fall in line with pressures from America because that's what they did there. It didn't suit our industry. We've got used to it now but it wasn't a clever thing – it didn't improve business or the distribution costs or anything but there we are. Well, I was at Columbia until 1943 when I volunteered to go into the Royal Armoured Corps and I was based for six months or so in the UK and went to France two weeks after D Day. We were part of the 79th Armoured Division – they were called Hobart's Funnies – they were a specialised division, the only division in the army that had Canadians and Poles and various other than UK nationals in, and in our particular regiment we had minesweepers – these were Sherman Flail tanks...they had a gib on the front with a barrel on the end of it which had chains and the object of the

operation was we had to go in or rather when the fighting tanks reported back that they had reached mines – sometimes it was a good excuse to get out of the way – then they would call – we used to go and flog the ground with these chains – wasn't particularly secure but another thing is that when we blew up the mines we usually lost a dozen or so chains -they were blown off with it. What did we have to do? We had to get out of the tank in the lane and change them. I suppose in a way I was a bit lucky because the regiment I was in – the Westminster Dragoons – had three squadrons and I was in B Squadron and I was sent on my first leave, having been in for 18 months, and when I got back to the unit, my squadron had gone down to Gosport and they were going to send me on to join it but they said, well, no, you stay here with C Squadron. Well, of course, B Squadron were the first tanks on D Day and there were casualties – we followed on about 10 days later – it was still busy but it certainly wasn't as hectic as it would have been on D Day. From then on, we went through France, Belgium, Holland, right through to Germany. We did a stint in Helmsted, which was the border town. We were actually sent there. The Russians took over a big slice of the Magdeburg sector and we were there apparently to stop them coming any further. Fortunately, they didn't try because if they had done so, I don't think we would have had that much success. Then I actually finished up in Flensburg, on the Danish border where we were just doing occupational duties – it wasn't a bad time because the war was over and because it was near Denmark we were able to get in.

INT Wonderful food.

We could not believe the food. You'd get a plate of four fried eggs with bacon, you know – we hadn't seen anything like this. It was quite something. Particularly having spent a lot of time in Holland, Netherlands, during the war and seeing how they were starving and the Germans had taken everything – potatoes from their cellars, what have you. Mind you, we used to bring it back. We were based there. We used to load up the tanks with anything we could pick up, like bicycles, potatoes, and give them to our friends in Holland who had nothing but would leave, like, boiled eggs for us knowing we ere coming back and being hungry – theywere really quite wonderful.

INT Did you come across the AKC very much in--

No, no – I think on two occasions we saw films but it was towards the end of the war. It was certainly about. We heard about film shows but they were mainly in places like Brussels, the larger towns.

INT They had those wonderful projection boxes brought off the back of their trucks and put inside...

Yes, because obviously it was all mobile. And that was my war service. I wasn't demobbed until 1947 because it was a question of age and service and the younger of us were kept on as the army of occupation. And I was demobbed from Cuxhaven to Hull and then onto Liverpool and Southport. I didn't really have anything lined up so far as my career was concerned because I didn't want to go back into film distribution. It may sound a bit odd because that was all I knew but the atmosphere in that company, Columbia particularly, before I left was very strained, it was very American, it was high pressure – we very rarely kept a salesman for more than a month – this old thing, he has a good week and then the next week is not quite so good and so forth – you know, you did this last week, we want more this week – and the branch managers hardly stayed more than two or three months so it was not a good atmosphere. After a little while, again through my father – he was friendly with a Newcastle man called Sydney Shurman who took quite a big part in the industry in

later years. Sydney ran a screen advertising company called Progressive Publicity from Manchester and I had a friend who was working for him – through Dad, we knew him but I didn't know him – but my friend was working for him, selling space on screens in local cinemas. I wasn't too keen on the idea because it was purely commission and whilst I was confident I would be able to sell, I just feel that you need a bit of basic to give complete loyalty to the company. I think they have to be entitled so you don't have to worry too much about getting the big figures immediately. Anyway, I did that for about a year and had some success. I didn't break any records but at least it kept me out of trouble and I was able to earn and pay my keep. But at this time – this was 1947 – when my father joined British Lion and it looked as if he was going to be permanently based in London – and he then decided that as a family we would come down to London, which made sense. I then went to my boss, Sydney Shurman, and said, "Look, I think it's probably time I changed my career and it's an opportune time because we're going down to London and I don't think my future lies in selling space on local cinemas."

INT When you say selling space, what is it for lantern slides? Or filmlets?

It was mainly for filmlets, or what we call slide on film – we had this very old library of 15-second filmlets. What happened was we sold on the basis of this probably 11 or 12 seconds of action which became terribly dated – like a motor dealer, for example you're selling to a motor dealer and the models that were in the library were probably four or five years old which wouldn't have enhanced his sales to any great extent – but the point I'm making is when the live action part of the advert finished, we then tagged on the end the name and address and telephone number – and of course you got this action and movement and sound and all of a sudden it stopped and the shopkeeper's name came on the end. In time, obviously, they improved. There were a number of cinemas which would only show lantern slides – and that was okay if they put them on the right way up but as often as not they would put 'em upside down and then you'd get whistles. Of course, live theatres carried on with slides because house lights were on, etc. and you had to have a projector but it was pretty basic stuff that we were selling. That certainly improved in latter years – it's become a science now. So Sydney Shurman said, "Well, look, we're doing quite well, we're expanding" – incidentally he had a connection with the Sheckmans of Essoldo fame which was a big circuit, mainly in the northeast – they did spread out in latter years but mainly in the northeast – and he was married to, I think, one of Sol Sheckman's daughters – there was some connection – and that helped him to get the rights of these cinemas. I don't think Solly gave anything away but it helped to make it a stronger company. But it was mainly in the north and then he said what he would like me to do as I was going to live in London was to become his space buyer – in other words, negotiating contracts with the cinemas as opposed to selling the space on the screen – and this suited me very nicely because it gave me a salary and a car and I just felt I was part of the company rather more than selling space on commission. And, of course, through Dad I had very good contacts with exhibitors throughout the country – and this was a help to me because obviously his name would open doors that might otherwise not have been opened. Obviously, this was after the war – when the cinema business was not quite as good as it had been, obviously. It's always been an up and down industry – aren't they all.

A big development that came about – perhaps it might be opportune now to tell you the companies that were operating in the cinema advertising field apart from, obviously, Progressive Publicity of which I was then a member – there were the main companies which were Langfords and Theatre Publicity, both of which were part of

the Rank Organisation. The reason they had two companies was political – Langfords dealt purely with the independent cinemas. Theatre Publicity was Odeon and Gaumont so they did not have to disclose the intercompany arrangements or payment for screen advertising whereas on the independent side obviously it was a different thing. There were also a number of smaller companies. There was Independent Advertising which again was based in the northeast at Newcastle which was run by Arnold Sheckman who was Sol Sheckman's nephew and what he did – it really seemed like quite a good idea – was he got together the independents and gave them all an interest in the advertising company, didn't pay them a rental for the space but they took a share of whatever profit the company made. It should have been very successful but it didn't develop to any great extent and it was sold to Pearl, Dean and Younger because Pearl & Dean had taken over Youngers who were one of the main companies but I'll come to that in a minute because it's quite an important part of our industry history. Actually, he went on with Independent until 1959 when the company was sold. There were companies like Roberts of Leeds who probably did about 15 to 20 cinemas' screen advertising; there was a company in Glasgow called Topical Advertising; there was a company, Presbury's, of course, who were a very old name in the business – they were still dealing with independents. Magnet Advertising in London – they did theatres more than cinemas. There was a company called Twentieth Century Publicity who were based in Blackpool and they were run by a Canadian and 20th Century Publicity worked on a totally different base than other screen advertising companies. What they did was they sold live action films taken on the premises with a handheld 8mm camera and you can imagine when this was blown up to 35! But what was interesting was that they didn't sell, as we all did, to butchers, bakers and carhire people – they sold to people who made car parts, people who made gifts, more factory based or wholesale based rather than to the shopkeepers and, of course, the advantage of this was that these people were never called on – in our business, selling space, in any one day the shopkeeper would probably have half a dozen reps coming in to try and sell them advertising space – screens, programmes, local papers, guides – and there was always that in-built opposition which made our jobs quite difficult. But they were on raw territory – these people are coming to come here with a camera crew, going to make a film – wonderful! And the only theatres they did were city centre news cinemas like the Tatlers and Classics in Marylebone as they used to be and the adverts would be shown ten times a day perhaps. Very cleverly, they had two reels and they showed one with the first performance, Reel A, and Reel B was shown with second performance so they able to get the double the revenue – and probably double the complaints because how many advertisers would have gone in and seen the programme that didn't include their advertising – but of course they were told this in the first place, weren't they? They didn't last that long but an interesting about them what the fact the 20th Century Publicity was their name and they had an opening title made on a pinch on 20th Century-Fox, and you had this wonderful opening, ba ba ba ba, the fanfare of trumpets, etc. etc. and then you had this dreadful production to follow, a bit of a comedown

There were quite a number of companies, I say, in the business. And what was interesting was the fact that there was no trade association in those early days. There was subsequently – there was the Screen Advertising Association. It was originally the FAA and now it's the CAA because screens can now be on TV or whatever. You used to get, particularly on the buying side, it was a free for all so you'd go in to see a small independent cinema in Bungay in Suffolk and we'd say we want your advertising rights and he said I'm sorry, I'm dealing with Youngers. Well, that's all

right, we'll take over from them. Oh. We'll pay you more – and contracts were signed. What they didn't realise or didn't want to realise was they'd already got a contract which probably had five years to go because most of the contracts were five years. You'd a situation with two companies submitting their ads and it was chaotic, but this was all regularised later on but it was a bit of a jungle at that time. Where the industry, I suppose, became respectable was the ABC circuit held out and would not show advertising – it was taboo, they didn't want to know and they wouldn't show it – but whilst Dickie and Ernie Peal and Bob Dean were at the Rank Organisation with Theatre Publicity they were negotiating – obviously quietly – with ABC because that contract was worth a lot of money, they had a major chain, a ready made chain. For anyone else to start up, pick up a bit here and a bit there, you couldn't compete with Rank. A major chain like ABC – this was big time. In 1953, fifty years ago, they acquired the advertising rights for the ABC circuit. I think it was a 12-year contract which was also quite something, and they left Langfords and Theatre Publicity, taking most of the key staff with them, and they assumed that they would be able to take the rest of the independents' business. They obviously wouldn't get the Odeon and Gaumonts but they thought because of their contacts and knowhow that as well as having ABC they would take the independents. So Rank were in a very difficult position. The managing director of that time was John Davis, who anyone on the business will know was quite a tyrant, but he was landed in a difficult position here because there was no one to take over. So what he did was, through another party who knew us both, he acquired Progressive Publicity, Manchester – we weren't a big company but we had the knowhow because Sydney Shurman – another director was Joe Caverson whose brother was Sydney Caverson who was sales manager of GFD, General Film Distributors, which was an arm of the Rank Organisation at that time. The story goes – and I've retold this on many occasions – is that John Davis, through this intermediary, contacted Sydney Shurman and said I want to buy your business and your team and he said to Sydney – he set up a meeting with accounts, etc.- and he said to him, how much do you want and Sydney named a figure and John Davis said, fine, we'll take it, and for the rest of Sydney's life he always wondered whether he hadn't asked for sufficient. We use to pull his leg about that. But that meant I went in assistant to the general manager, Sydney was the general manager. This was only Langford, they kept us away from Theatre Publicity, we handled the sales for it – I looked after the salesmen going out to sell space – but it was separated and we had to fight hard to retain the goodwill and the contracts because exhibitors would think Oh, my god, the people who know the business have gone, what's going to happen to our revenue... obviously the first thing they would think about because it was pretty important to them.

INT Was the revenue a large part of an independent's take over a week?

It was indeed, Brian. If you take into account screen advertising, the revenue from ices and sales, it could have amounted to 30% of the take and many more cinemas would have closed had it not been for that revenue coming in, no doubt about that. So it was a godsend to them.

INT When you were selling film, say you were at Columbia, did you give the independents a better deal than the majors? Or did the majors get the better deal?

The majors always got the better deal – that's life, isn't it. No, the independents, we did the best we could for them but obviously we were responsible to our supervisors, etc. but no doubt about it, the circuits were able to squeeze us as in any business because they had the screens and they could say fine, if you won't take our programme, then we'll go somewhere else. What of course did happen to a great

extent not on the advertising side but on the distribution side...they'd be horrified at it today, but the film salesman would go in for Columbia, whatever, with a list of product and probably out of a dozen, three of them may have been winners, right? There's no way you would let the exhibitor have those three without taking at least the bulk of the rest of them because your sales manager or whatever would sling it out. And did all the time.

INT It must go on still today.

Well, you've got to be very careful today because it's your making it a condition of trade. Yes, I'm sure it does happen but perhaps not as overtly....

INT. And in those days you had different sort of programme – you had double features.

Yes, most cinemas showed double features. Yes. Up to quite more recent times. Of course, the second feature was obviously a B film and wouldn't have made a lot of difference as to what they put in because the key feature was selling them. Mind you, I can recall going to the Empire Leicester Square and seeing two features and a variety show in the middle for seven and six, five shillings even.

INT Radio City Music Hall...

Yes, yes, those days have gone. Now one of the plusses of Pearl and Dean acquiring the ABC circuit and becoming a major player was the fact that Bobby Dean and Ernie Pearl – Dickie Pearl (or Charles as he was officially known) was the younger brother – Ernie Pearl and Bobby Dean were very highly thought of in the advertising world – they knew all the agencies and they had good contacts with them, and what they did – and they were instrumental in this – was they formed what was the FAA, the Film Advertising Association, and this gave respectability because advertising in all forms has always been a bit of a dodgy sort of, not well thought of, medium, and cinema, with all that was going on with these dual contracts with the exhibitors and adverts not being shown, didn't enhance the name of the industry – but through the Pearls and Bobby Dean and the FAA it gave more prestige and we had certain rules that we had to conform to, they weren't always conformed to – for example, to stop this duplicating contracts with one cinema, we had a system whereby if one contractor acquired the rights of an opposition – if Theatre Publicity took one from Pearl & Dean or whatever – you were bound to advise the outgoing contractor that you had a contract and we had to ask for the termination date of their agreement – which avoided this duplication and you had to abide by it. There was odd occasions when there was a bit of ----- [END OF SIDE ONE]

SIDE TWO

With the advent of this major company now, that Pearl and Dean had, it did give the industry much more prestige and particularly because Ernie Pearl was a very highly respected member of the national industry, not just the cinemas – he knew all the agents and was able to influence them in getting them to realise that this was not a jungle anymore, this was a respectable business. Things like statistics came up and the number of attendances were incorporated and the agencies felt they were then getting value for their money which they hadn't known previously. It obviously helped the other companies who were left in the business – there weren't that many then, quite a lot of them had closed. My period with Langford and Company, with Sydney Shurman, came to an end after four years because John Davis had realised how vulnerable he had left himself in that part of the business and he gradually brought his own executive staff in and we could see the writing on the wall. So what happened then was that Sydney and Jo Caverson and myself left at the end of his contract or rather I think they released him from the last year. I know that even while we were

there we were running around getting contracts for a new company – Rank must have known but it didn't bother them, I suppose we were so small – and he formed a new company which was called Cinema Screen Services – you recall the name, yes – and we obviously were getting round the people that we had the goodwill with and we were taking the business from the Rank Organisation. That went quite well.

INT: Did you take any circuits? Or did you have independents?

Well, again they were mainly independents but there were some smaller independent circuits that we were able to acquire that we had dealt with and they had sufficient confidence in us to be able to give us the business – one of the, I suppose, stars in our group was the fact that Sydney was very friendly with George Lodge in Belfast who had the Opera House and some other key situations and it gave us, I think, a little bit of prestige, as it were, dealing with this sort of level. And we gradually built up what was at time one of the few independent contractors left in the industry because Rank, having acquired Younger Publicity and formed Pearl and Dean and Youngers Limited. I remained with Cinema Screen Services as general manager for the company. I got a good additional experience because we ran a couple of bingo halls – one of which was the Chequers St. Albans which I acquired for the company, which actually we ran as a cinema for a while and it was a very good cinema and I was a bit sorry that we actually turned it into bingo because there was no other cinema in St. Albans, which was a busy town.

INT And this of course was at the time when there was a big changeover in the use of cinemas where the 1,000 and twelve hundred seaters were not getting the audiences and they were becoming redundant and all those long avenues of cinemas in Manchester, Liverpool and all the other cities were doing no business at all. They either went for redevelopment or they went to try dance halls, they tried everything. Mecca took a large part in that, they changed cinemas into dance halls. And that even started in the war, of course. But there was a big shift and this was all because of commercial television, basically.

Absolutely. Once commercial television started, the business, the national business on the cinemas, dropped. This is where the local business was so important because without it we would really have been in trouble. Gradually it came back – the thing, of course, was that cinema attendances were then so low. Because of the novelty of television, people weren't going-----

INT This was when ITV started.

This was when ITV started, yes.

INT That was 1955. That must have been a ----

That was a big blow, yes.

INT A very sudden drop in attendances.

Obviously, it gradually sort of lessened. It came back but a lot of cinemas couldn't stand the drop and went and became bingo halls or whatever.

INT Or went for redevelopment.

That's right.

INT It was a very big chance. As a cinema owner you would have had a bit of a problem to know what you were going to do next.

INT Which cinemas did you own yourself?

I did – later in the story. What I was going to say was I was getting a good all-round experience because apart from screen advertising, Sydney Shurman started a film distribution company called Panton Film Distributors – it was Panton Films because it was in Panton Street – and he had good contacts, Sydney, both in film distribution and in the exhibition side. One of his very close friends in the business

was Eric Rhodes, the managing director of Classic Cinemas. Well, of course we got the advertising rights there so that gave us a boost.

INT And what was the number of cinemas Classic had?

Classic had, I think, probably about 30. A good size. Good spots. Baker Street.

INT It was a very clever idea because it was old films that hadn't, weren't going onto television because television was anti-film in a way at that time.

And they were getting this product. One of the additional things he did, he started this Panton Film Distributors and we were distributing about a dozen old MGM product – they'd been good films in their day but they were very old but the funny thing is that one of them was King Solomon's Mines and we re-released, obviously, and it did the most incredible business throughout the country which paid for the deal over and over and over, so it was a very good move. Gradually that petered out but I'd left him before then. But it was interesting because as well as buying time, I was selling films – to Rank and whatever.

INT You were back to the beginning.

Back to the beginning. He also ran a couple of bingo halls – St. Albans – and he took over one or two cinemas – Notting Hill Gate was one and I think he had the Coliseum Harringay. He had a few cinemas – they weren't wonderful. They're still going – the Coronet is a very good situation which his daughter Denise Shurman is still running and I think she does very nicely. Right, in about 1966 I formed Grownor [? NOT CLEAR] Entertainments Limited on my own because an opportunity arose for me to get the lease at the old State cinema Leytonstone and I felt the time had come in my career that I had to go on my own as it were, if only partially – I was still working for Cinema Screen Services – because I took this bingo hall in Leytonstone. I knew nothing about bingo but my brother in law Jack Myers (who Brian was very closely associated with) was running a bingo hall at Deptford. He had been a prisoner of war in Germany and he had run bingo, or housey housey or whatever it was, quite successfully and of course everybody was getting into bingo and Jack had this knowledge of the bingo operation and he acquired this rundown club – a closed cinema in Deptford High Street which he acquired from Michael Winner's father and I don't think Michael Winner's father gave anything away. Nevertheless, he ran it pretty successfully and I had the opportunity of going down there to learn the business which I did actually for the best part of a year in the evenings – because during the day I was in cinema advertising. But this hall in Leytonstone was unusual – it was only small – but I acquired the lease from a man called Harry Hymanson – that was a small circuit called H&G Cinemas – Hymanson and Goldberg – and that was a small circuit, and they had cinemas like the Metro Willesden and Leytonstone and one or two others that weren't particularly well run but I was quite friendly with him and he gave me the opportunity of taking over the lease. He suggested that he was doing me a favour by allowing me to pay a rent of £30 a week but eventually, when we came to finish, I saw he was on a peppercorn £5 a year to the freeholders. But there we are – it suited me at the time. It was very difficult, because apart from the fact it was a run down building and constantly required money being put into it for repairs and things, we were a quarter of a mile from the Granada Leytonstone and they were running bingo and, of course, any promotion that we put on they doubled. It was quite an education for me because in bingo, in a small club, as you will know, Brian, you get to know your members and it's almost becomes like a family – totally different to the cinema business – totally – but not my true love.

INT But didn't you keep films going?

I did keep films going a little later on when I acquired the Regal Highams Park. That had belonged to Southan Morris. Now the Southan Morris circuit after the war was a major player – there weren't just the Odeons and ABCs. He was a major player. He opened the Ritz at Birkenhead just before the war which was a beautiful cinema which people came from miles to see. It's in the archives, the books about cinemas, it's well written about. But he had a number of cinemas but he was gradually getting rid of them and I think a lot went to Essoldo. Highams Park was a white elephant – had been when he had it, it was in a bit of a backwater in Walthamstow area of east London. Sydney Shurman had tried to run bingo there without any success and he'd handed it back to Southan Morris. At the time I was quite close to Southan Morris because, apart from the fact that I was interested in Highams Park, I was booking films for him – he had the Ritz at Surbiton and Harpenden, Highams Park he had leased – so I was quite close to him. That's how I was able to acquire from him a lease at Highams Park and we started off on cine-bingo – we opened four nights a week films and three nights a week bingo. Well, the first week we got about two thousand people in for the bingo and about two dozen in for the films. So obviously the future of the theatre was going to be as a fulltime bingo club and that was what we did, we did it gradually. But I can tell you an interesting side there – because I was very loathe to give up showing films completely, I decided we would go the other way – we'd try and bring a bit of culture into the area and for four Sundays I booked Pasolini films, you know, good stuff, good continentals, and I got onto the local press and I thought I'm going to get some help here and sure enough they gave me a full page spread – this is what we're going to do and blah, blah, blah – and should be well supported but can I tell you that not only did none of the public turn up but neither did the press. But it just goes to show. We did try.

Round about that time – no, I think I'm getting out of order now in sequence, it doesn't matter – well, round about that time I acquired the lease at the Priory Royston and this was a cinema that was open but that was doing very poor business. No, I think it closed just before we took it over, if I remember rightly. The intention was to get a bingo licence but I took it over, that's right, it was running as a cinema and it was doing nothing, I think we were taking about £100 a week on a good week. And I discovered they had stopped advertising in the local paper because it was costing £5 a week for the insertion, and they had no programmes out, so really, unless people were passing the cinema, they had no way of knowing what was going on. So we got behind it and we started advertising in the paper and we certainly managed to improve the business quite considerably but I think this was 1957 when we had that very hot summer – round about there – and what happened was the week before the heatwave started we were showing Death Race 2000 and which was about car racing, it was the first of the Clockwork Orange type of film, and we got behind this film, we got the actual car in the High Street in Royston with the driver on a Saturday morning. Well, the crowds were looking at it and it was wonderful. Of course, it was on the following week and I couldn't believe it, we took nearly £700 – my word! And then of course the heatwave started and we dropped the following week – I think it was the film about the musicals, There's No Business Like Show Business – and we dropped to 80 quid, so that rather shattered my confidence and eventually I passed the lease over to a man called Peter Lindsay who was really only interested in bingo and concentrated on building up because at that time I had left Cinema Screen Services and started what became known as FAS in the business – Faber Advertising Services. And I started that from Germain Street where I moved in with my father – he wasn't there very often, he used to come in and look at the runners and riders and then go to

his club for lunch with the boys, then he'd come in in the afternoon to say goodbye – but it suited me because it was a good base and I was able to get around from there and acquire contracts from exhibitors that I had goodwill with from Cinema Screen Services. It didn't endear me to Sydney Shurman – but that was his fault, not mine. Had been perhaps a little more generous in giving me a bigger interest in the business, then I might have stayed there, who knows. But I started this business and I developed this quite quickly until we became probably the fourth – there was Pearl and Dean at this time, there was Rank (which subsequently became Rank Screen Advertising which subsequently became Carlton) and there was Presburys and myself, Faber Advertising. We worked closely with Presburys because we weren't big enough to go, our holdings weren't big enough to go to the advertising agencies – advertising agents don't like dealing with minnows, they like to deal with the big people and know that they've placed their contracts, whatever – and consequently unless you were in that sort of league, you couldn't get national business and we had to get national business. I had quite close ties with Rank, having been there originally, and I was quite friendly with the managing director who was Douglas Thomas. I arranged for them to sell my screens to national advertisers and we got a commission on it which obviously helped to keep us in the field. That went quite well.

INT It was at this stage that the cinema business was beginning to change because you got us all these new multiplexes arriving and they were smaller cinemas with different programmes in the same building and it changed the face of the industry, didn't it, for a very considerable time that reflected in the attendances

We had to consolidate because of that, obviously. Ideally we should have merged with Presburys and we tried – I pulled my father in on this, thought it would be helpful in negotiations – but they were the oldest established company, they were going in 1880 or whatever in the cinema advertising field and they were very sort of hidebound in their ways. Both the principals died and after the death of Guy Presbury, who was one of the two founders, it was a fire sale and Rank took it over. There was no one else to go to. We've discussed Highams Park, haven't we? Yes, I think I've covered that.

INT We were talking about cinema audiences dropping and saying at that time too, had it not been for the advent of television, had it not been for screen advertising and the sales, they would have really been in trouble and far more would have gone.

INT But was it also that the age group of the people who ran independent houses at the time got to the stage where they were thinking of retiring and there wasn't people with the urge to take over their cinema?

Well, yes, there's always been an interest in people acquiring cinemas. Funnily enough, yes, you would have thought when these went they would have gone and the interest would die down but people were always interested, thinking perhaps they could do better with the product or get better product or whatever, and there were many cases where circuits had released cinemas or leased them out to somebody and the independent had made a success of it, you know, because his overheads are probably less and he was on the job. One of the problems that always with circuits was that head office booked films irrespective of the requirements of the local areas – instead of saying to the managers, what would you like us to show, they booked it and probably.... that has changed now to a great extent, totally different anyway because you've got ten films to choose from in the multiplex, but this was the thing that you got these independents who would take over not a derelict but a cinema that the circuits had released and make quite a success out of it. Still happening today.

INT Is the advertising today as important?

Probably more so.

INT Because the types of adverts you see in the cinema now are rather different, aren't they? You have the sort of miniature movies

What you're saying is most of them, we don't know what they're selling, that's what I find. They're besides themselves.

INT It's very different, isn't it?

It is different. Also, obviously because of the TV market. There's so much more money now put into the production of advertising and you know, you've got the Putnams who started in advertising and went on to big things but it is very important part of the revenue and the circuits particularly can command a really big slice of whatever the revenue is. Because of the intense competition today between Pearl & Dean and Carlton, the contractors are being squeezed and are having to pay more and more because they want to retain that level so that they're both.... I hadn't come to that but actually I sold my business, Cinema Screen Services, to Rank Screen Advertising after about ten years, so I still had the bingo interests. What was happening, the reason I sold it, was two fold. One was that we were a very small operation in that it was all done from this small office and I used to wake up at night and think Oh my God, I don't have to die but if I went into hospital for a fortnight or something, who's going to sign the cheques, who's going to give the reps their business – I mean, I had a secretary but it either meant I had to expand, which meant new premises, new expense, etc. or to get out. It coincided actually with the time the Rank Organisation decided to retract and it was the worst PR operation in the history of the industry, I think – they announced in the press that they were closing thirty cinemas – now why they just didn't quietly close them, I don't know – whether they thought they were going to get sympathy, I don't know – and this affected, down the line, their various companies. Rank Screen Services were losing quite a proportion of the cinemas they were offering to their salesmen and Douglas Thomas would have been in the position "No, I'm sorry we haven't got the..." and I suggested to him that he bought Faber Advertising Services which of course he was quite interested in doing because he was then able to say to his sales force, Well, we lost these but Faber Advertising Services are bringing in 95 screens – they may not have been in comparison to Odeons and Gaumont but nevertheless they boosted his numbers. As part of the deal, they invited me to join them as a consultant on the space buying side, as a part-time consultant, and I did that for ten years and retired from Rank. I was out for about a year and a half and I got a telephone call from Peter Howard Williams who had been the national sales manager with me when I was with Rank and he had gone to Pearl and Dean and he became managing director of Pearl and Dean, and then he phoned me from out of the blue and he said what are you doing, Mel? I said, well half the time I'm pushing a trolley round Sainsburys. And he said, Oh, you don't want to do that – why don't you come in and see me. And what had happened was that his contract buyer, his space buyer, a lady called Lydia Pohani who was very well known in the industry having been in it for years, had up tracks and gone to Carlton and he was in it deep because he had nobody there who knew the exhibitors. She had an assistant but this young lady was purely on the secretarial side. She spoke to the exhibitors but she didn't know them. And he said, why don't you come and join us and help us out. And I said fine because it would give me something to do and I said I don't want to work full time. He said, no, do three days a week. I said, lovely.

Another story I tell which is quite amusing. We discussed terms and I said fine. Well, what about a car? He said, use your own car and we'd pay you mileage. So I said, Oh, well, that's all very well, Pete, we're running one car and I can't leave

Gloria without a car particularly if I'm going out to work, so I said haven't you got a car that I could have. And he said, Wait a minute, yes, you can probably have Lydia's car which was the girl that had gone. And I said, what is it? And he said, an Audi. And I said, Oh, what colour? Bloody cheek! I was joking, of course. So I had the use of the car until the end of its contract hire period. And I joined them initially for a three-month period. I did ten years until last September, that was September 2002, and I retired. It was then part of Scottish Media Group, it wasn't quite the Pearl and Dean that I had known beforehand – it was very much public company-orientated. Quite honestly, I would have been happy to carry on for another year but they had a rearrangement and they thought it was possibly time for me to pick up my boots and start playing bowls or whatever.

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