



After the closure of Ealing Studios in 1955, Michael Balcon erected the following plaque:



"Here.....many films were made projecting Britain and the British character." Discuss this assessment in relation to the 1940s.

The studios at Ealing, West London were built in 1931 by Basil Dean, a theatre director who had formed film production company Associated Talking Pictures (ATP) in 1929. Ealing Studios are best known for their run of classic comedies of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In fact, their very 'Englishness', their quirks and idiosyncrasies often lead to them being dismissed as twee and stereotyped, this is, however, missing the point.

With the onset of war, Balcon decided to change the format of the films produced by Ealing and from this period onwards the majority were made from original screenplays rather than books or plays. Personnel however, did not change drastically, in fact many actors appeared time and again in Ealing films, in larger or smaller roles that perhaps partially accounts for the family feeling that pervaded the studios. Monja Danischewsky, Publicity Director at Ealing in the Balcon days, coined the phrase 'Mr Balcon's Academy for Young Gentlemen', referring to the family atmosphere of the studios and how Balcon ran the operation. Balcon got a reputation for being a 'sober presence in a flamboyant industry...' (*Drazin, 1998, p.100*).

Technical staff were fairly constant with some small interchange between directing, writing and editing. However, there were few women employed behind the scenes, and in fact, there were very few films made of special interest to women. An already forming realist slant to filmmaking was strengthened when Cavalcanti joined the company in 1942, but in fact, Ealing had been making documentaries and Ministry of Information films since 1940.

The films of the 40s followed a general slump in home grown British film production in 1937-8. Shepperton hadn't been used since 1937, Pinewood had been closed since 1938, and the new Amalgamated Studios at Elstree had been snapped up by competitors and then leased to the Government as a warehouse. The beginning of the war in 1939 seemed to pose a threat to an already insecure British film industry,

but in 1939, Britain's 4,8000 cinemas were definitely not closed, and there was considerable pressure on the British Film Industry to produce British films to supply the obvious need for films to show, partly for financial reasons (to prevent over-reliance in import costs for American films), but also to resist the cultural impact of unleavened Americanism.

'If a British film lacked at times the hard technical perfection of an American film, it was substituted and overbalanced by its human impact on its audience.' (Michael Balcon in Higson, 1995, p.211).

The key British studios - Ealing, British National and Gainsborough - that had emerged in the 1930s did survive and prosper throughout the War, mainly because of wealthy patriotic backers. In 1938 Michael Balcon had become Head of Production at Ealing, and the company had the backing of the Courtauld family; Gainsborough, backed by the Jewish financier Isidore Ostreer, had contracts with MGM and Twentieth century Fox; British National (Rank), founded by flour millionaire J. Arthur Rank, later took over production at Elstree, revitalised by the presence of John Baxter.

The Ealing comedies tended to present a distinct worldview of England as a quaint untouched place worth keeping that way. The realism and documentary feel of the Ealing films are the binding forces that make Ealing films synonymous with projecting Britain and the British character. The films are mirrors of times gone by and offer viewers today insight into what life was like back in the 1940s. No film shows the 'real' but gives an interpretation of it. Using the film makers opinions of what they wish to show and represent the real as. When watching these films today, I feel I am taken back to a 'better' time. A time without the narcissism of our society today.

'It is a world that is essentially quaint, cosy, whimsical and backward-looking;'
(Aldgate & Richards, 2002, p.150).

Internationally, the documentary movement is frequently identified as Britain's major contribution to world cinema, while domestically its influence on both the aesthetics and the institutions of cinema is regarded as decisive. Aesthetically, the 'documentary attitude' is credited with (or blamed for) the dominance of social realism and an ambivalence towards 'artiness' in British cinema.

I decided to interview my Gramps (who was in his early twenties in the 1940s) about the Ealing films of this period to inject personal opinion from a man that saw these films first hand. From here on, I shall refer to Gramps as Mr Rowland.

I began asking Mr Rowland if cinema was a preferred leisure activity in this era. He had many stories of cinema going and suggested it was a very popular form of entertainment. Mr Rowland remembered the organ playing before the film started and in the interval between the A and B feature. He believed it was very good value for money as there were two films shown, plus cartoons. This was an era of cinema going where you could smoke in the auditorium and it was only four pence for a seat in the balcony section, where apparently peanuts were thrown down onto the cheaper seats!

Mr Rowland remembers the Ealing comedies to be very popular in their day. They offered an alternative to the escapist Gainsborough films and Mol propaganda. Ealing, says Mr Rowland, made films that were 'mirrors on society' and 'for the ordinary person'. People could relate to the characters and locations.

Ealing, to Mr Rowland, did project Britain and the British character. In films like *Passport to Pimlico*, the local 'bobby on the beat' had much respect from the community, which was true to life in the 1940s so says Mr Rowland. Also, the class structure of the Ealing films was a parallel to the evident class divides in society of that time. The close-knit neighbourhoods of these films also represented how British life was lead in those days, where everyone knew your name and people looked out for each other.

So, let us take a closer look at two Ealing comedies of the 1940s and see how they projected Britain and the British character. The two films up for closer analysis are *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) and *Hue and Cry* (1947).

The Producer of both films was Michael Balcon. The worst that could be said of Balcon's achievement is that it was sometimes too suburbanly cosy; against this it may be said that he brought a new naturalness into British feature films. 'He certainly expressed vigorous views on the necessity of patriotism in the cinema,' (Harper, 1994, p.110).

From the beginning, *Passport* projects the British character, with a still shot of Personal Points coupons, Clothing books, ration books surrounded by a reef – on screen titles state the film is dedicated to the memory of such items. The audience would have identified with these items, as they would have used them in their own lives. The residents of the London street that features in *Passport* briefly break from English rule and escape the ordeal of this rationing. The still shot seems to act as a moment's silence in remembrance of people lost in the war.

There is a utopian desire to escape the post-war gloom and despondency in *Passport*, a very British mind state of the time. One of the opening shots tricks us into believing that the sun-bathing girl is in some tropical location (seeking utopia) until it is revealed that she is really on the roof of an ordinary hardware store in the middle of London, but her mind is likely to have been off day dreaming of that tropical location!

Characters are used that would be easily identifiable to the audience, that reflect the British people, making use of stereotypes to aid easy story telling. For example the friendly 'bobby on the beat', P.C. Spittler, the fish shop owner Huggins and the hardware store owner Arthur Pemberton, who seems to know everyone and have their respect.

Passport uses many establishing shots of the location the film is set in, London. This seems to give a real atmosphere to the film and sets it firmly in Britain. But, can just setting a film in Britain and using familiar British characters make for a film that projects Britain and the British character? There is more to it than that. The 'Britishness' is deeply rooted in the subconscious of the film. Arriving there from the filmmakers ideas and is embedded within every choice made. The opinions of characters in what they say, the manner in which they act, dress and so forth are all part of the projection of the film's Britishness.

T.E.B. Clarke, who called these Ealing comedies, 'what if' films, wrote the screenplays for both films. Set in East London in the 40s, *Hue and Cry* is definitely a 'what if?' film as a criminal gang is foiled by an enthusiastic army of schoolboys, the film met a public desire for relief after years of fighting and continuing hardships.

So, what can we find in *Hue and Cry* that fits what was said by Balcon on the plaque and how does it project Britain and the British character. *Hue and Cry* starts with

comical graffiti style titles that, from the onset, suggest a schoolboy 'tom foolery' tone and one of social unrest, a milieu that continues through the film. Is this typical of schoolboys then, perhaps, and definitely different from how the school 'kids' act today, with their vandalism and felony. Back in the 1940s, schoolboys made their own fun, it seems. They did not need to turn to crime; in fact, in *Hue and Cry* they do their best to stop crime!

Maybe a romantic idea that in the 40s era the youth did not commit crimes, it is a outlandish notion, however, this film does suggest something of the times gone by and how the youth made entertainment for themselves in a post-war environment. The 'Britishness' of youth is therefore shown here, with dens set up on bombsites in their neighbourhood mixed with a love for comics.

In a similar approach to *Passport*, there is a continuing feeling of 'love thy neighbour' or at least help them out, in *Hue and Cry*. Close knit neighbourhoods where, in a *Cheers* manner, 'everybody knows your name'. In *Hue and Cry*, the main point of this 'people working together' notion is the pinnacle ending where all the local schoolboys unite to fight the criminals. There is one instance of 'people looking after each other' that touches my heart in this film.

This is when the detective inspector offers to help a young boy, Joe, to find a job in Covent Garden. After a near miss for Joe, as he is suspected of a crime in a local store, the detective takes a shine to this lad and helps him out with employment. However, a funny twist occurs later on, when the detective turns out to be the ringleader of the criminals that the schoolboys try and uncover. The nature of people helping each other out is a classic Ealing stamp that stands for representing the British character.

There are other occurrences in this film that seem to be representing the British character. Joe's family having a meal around the table, a trait that is fairly redundant in our modern times, is a scene where sibling squabbles take place and the distance between parents and children is apparent. Another instance that seems quintessentially British is when 'ginger pop' is offered to the boys at the comic book storywriters' house. There is an air of Sherlock Holmes meets Oliver Twist, as the storywriter seems similar to Fagan and the boys as budding Sherlock Holmes'.

Gender issues are evident in *Hue and Cry*. When the climax takes place, the boys hijack the airwaves of the local radio station and ask for all boys wanting a fight to go to the arranged place where they are to meet the criminals. Note however, no girls are asked for, as girls, of course, do not fight. Apart from the token girl in this film, who plays the tomboy character. Yet again projecting the British character and the sexist attitudes of the 40s. '*Hue and Cry*, premiered at the height of the appalling winter of 1946-47, lit up cinemas with its exuberance and humour and took people's minds off the fuel shortage.' (Aldgate & Richards, 2002, p.157).

The words of Michael Balcon, upon the plaque, seem to ring true, as Britain and the British character do indeed seem to be projected in these two comedies of the 1940s. This does not seem to just be bound to the films of the forties either, as *The Titfield Thunderbolt* is overly British, or English maybe, with its close knit country villagers and beautiful English countryside landscapes.