The birth of Ealing Studios

Movies had been made at Ealing Green almost since the birth of cinema, with Will Barker Studios operating on the site. In 1929 Basil Dean’s Associated Talking Picture Company began building stages there, opening in 1931 as Ealing Studios, and making films from 1933 under the name of Associated Talking Pictures (ATP).
Between 1931 and 1938 ATP (combined with other companies to whom they rented the stages out) made around 60 feature films at Ealing Studios, and launched the careers of stars such as Gracie Fields, George Formby, Will Hay and Margaret Lockwood, and directors such as Carol Reed.

At this point there was no definable Ealing trademark with a wide repertoire of genres employed from the historical epic through to the working-class musical, but two things were clear across these films: (1) they were made by highly skilled technicians, and (2) they were crafted to a home audience. Both are significant, as the former has allowed the reputation of British film’s technical skill to be recognized worldwide, and the latter because within 30 years this home audience became painfully less significant than the global audience.

In 1938, after a series of disagreements with ATP’s directors, Basil Dean left filmmaking and returned to the theatre (later leading wartime entertainment for the troops through ENSA). His replacement, Michael Balcon, was attracted across from MGM and his arrival heralded a golden age for Ealing.

The studios produced on average around five or six features a year, but also made shorts and documentaries, and by the time war broke out in 1939 it was already known for films possessing a ‘cosy’ Britishness. As the war approached, Balcon began planning a propaganda role for Ealing Studios.
Ealing at war

The significance of film as a tool for promoting a unified image of the United Kingdom was not lost on the wartime British government which (after an initial panic that meant the closure of cinemas in fear of mass casualties through bombing) took control of filmmaking through a newly created Ministry of Information (which had the power to veto a film or any aspect of a film from script, through budget, to actors, and editing decisions), placing regulations on production that ranged across both fiction and documentary.

Patriotically, Balcon was determined that film should serve the nation’s wartime needs and proposed to the Ministry of Information that the film industry be directed towards producing a raft of propaganda films to counter those coming out of Germany. With his plan ignored by the Ministry, Balcon set about rationalizing production within Ealing, and turning its focus on current wartime issues (such as spying, and the role of the Merchant Navy) and on morale boosters (often comedies, sowing the seed for later post-war directions).

National identity was an essential ingredient of British wartime productions and to a lesser extent those made in the immediate post-war period, and some underpinning principles defining this identity were described in a memorandum from the first Minister for Information, Lord Macmillan, as independent spirit, caring for the underdog, and resilience or ‘backbone’. He also decreed that the unifying strengths of British institutions such as policing by consent and parliamentary democracy...
should be consistently contrasted with Nazi institutions such as dictatorship and the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police).

Lord Macmillan saw that for a people engaged in ‘total war’, the British public would need to be reminded of what they were fighting for, and of what the unifying aspects of society were across social, regional and national borders. Under the direction of the Ministry of Information, Balcon (along with other filmmakers) began to construct a clear national identity that identified British strengths, linking them not only in opposition to the current enemy, but also to the ‘regular’ activities and occupations of a former time. Serious themed films such as *The Bells Go Down* (Ealing Studios 1943, Director: Basil Dearden) and *San Demetrio, London* (Ealing Studios 1943, Director: Charles Frend) offer a sense of the determination of the British character, while *The Foreman Went to France* (Ealing Studios 1942, Director: Charles Frend) and *The Goose Steps Out* (Ealing Studios 1942, Director: Basil Dearden/Will Hay) offer (through comedy) a clear sense of the working man’s role in defeating the Nazis. Each highlights the contemporary position of Britain’s fight against the Nazis and each adds to the image of ‘plucky little Britain’ uniting in the face of a common enemy.

**NATIONAL CINEMAS**: A ‘national cinema’ was seen by the wartime British government as an essential tool for maintaining morale and promoting ‘authorized’ messages about Britain to the rest of the world (particularly America, but also to ‘the enemy’). All films made in the Second World War period (1939 to 1945) had to be approved by the Ministry of Information, a government department established to oversee the messages and values contained within them and to ensure that they were working in the nation’s best interests.

This concept gave audiences something to identify with, and in many wartime films offered images of an idealized Britain, one that was unquestionably worth defending. The essential point in exploring national cinema at this time is that there were a number of key spectator groups being considered, not just the ‘home’ audience.

Some British films of the period that are directly aimed at specific audiences beyond the ‘home’ audience include:

- *The Proud Valley* (Ealing Studios 1940, Director: Penrose Tennyson) – an African-American (Paul Robeson) coal-miner is welcomed into a Welsh mining community in the year preceding the outbreak of war, demonstrating a natural affinity between Britain and America. Nazi Germany’s views on racial purity were well known by this point and so the message being sent would not have been lost on most audiences.
Ships with Wings (Ealing Studios 1942, Director: Sergei Nolbandov) – a drama ostensibly about the Fleet Air Arm, but more significantly one that stressed the importance of both the Air Force and the Navy to an American audience, whose government was supplying raw materials to Britain.

San Demetrio, London (Ealing 1943, Director: Charles Frend) – based on the true story of a merchant ship carrying American oil across the Atlantic, torpedoed, abandoned and recovered by her crew: aimed at the American market to highlight the importance of their continued support.

The Goose Steps Out (Ealing 1942, Director: Will Hay/Basil Dearden) – a star vehicle for the popular comedian Will Hay, full of comedic impersonations of leading figures in (and stereotypes of) the Nazi leadership. While the principal audience would have been the home market, films such as these were brought to the attention of ‘the enemy’ as tools of propaganda.

Each of these films offers specific messages and representations of values to targeted audiences for a definite and considered purpose.

Through images of the British at war, at the various fighting fronts and on the home front, an impression of a British subject, loyal to the crown, fearless in the face of the enemy, strong, determined, and above all (and in contrast to the enemy) fair, just, and with right on their side, was created. Idealized characters with their idealized actions (in some cases stereotypical characters and stereotypical actions) were placed in opposition to ‘the enemy’ in films such as Went the Day Well (Ealing Studios 1942, Director: Alberto Cavalcanti) and Next of Kin (Ealing Studios 1942, Director: Thorold Dickinson).

The characters created during this period did not necessarily reflect real individuals at the time, but rather those who could be held up as role models of the time. It was important not only to show those in the armed forces and government agencies as heroic in carrying out their duty to Britain, but also to show those on the ‘home front’ (the miners, the dockers, the factory workers, the firemen, the Land Army, the postmistress) as equal in heroism; holding society together and retaining everything good about Britain until the troops came home. At a time (particularly
in the early years of the war, and again in the aftermath) when there was so much uncertainty, fear, doubt and anguish, the continuation of familiar actions and behaviours despite the horrendous conditions of ‘total war’ became a touchstone of hope against adversity.

ACTIVITY

Look at the films you have studied and list some of the principal British characters in a grid similar to the one below. Try to achieve a mix of different ages, classes, ranks, and genders. Score each on a scale of 1–10 in each column (1 being weak in the quality and 10 being strong in the quality). Then do the same with principal ‘enemy’ characters.

- What do the scores tell you?
- Do you notice anything significant about class, rank or gender?
- Where are the key differences between British and ‘enemy’ characters?
- Are there any other columns you think should be added, or should replace those above?

Case study

THE BELLS GO DOWN (1943)

The Bells Go Down (1943)
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The Bells Go Down (Ealing Studios 1943, Director: Basil Dearden) is the story of the war on the home front, focusing on the lives of the Auxiliary Fire Service at the height of the German Blitz on London. A propaganda piece, made at a time when the tide of war had not yet turned in Britain’s favour but when there were signs of hope emerging, with the worst of the Blitz now a memory, it is celebratory in tone, despite being touched with realism and tragedy.

Shot in Ealing’s growing documentary realist style, it uses real footage of the Blitz and simulates the action of the firefighters based on the footage of the Auxiliary Fire Service at work that would have been familiar to the audience through the cinema newsreels.

It does not merely deal with the straightforward issues of fighting the enemy, but also concentrates on the difficulties of existing on the home front. It portrays a classless society where an upper-class fireman is not an officer as would be expected but merely a firefighter. It is not without note that one of the crew (Brooks) is given the back history of having fought with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, and it is clear that there is a socialist message underpinning this work.

Not only does the film deal with the firefighters’ reaction to the harsh reality of war, but it also allows the spectator to gain a new perspective on these men in revealing their home lives, familial relationships and friendships, and how they deal with the difficulties that war wages on these aspects.

**ACTIVITY**

Look at the opening sequence of The Bells Go Down. What message do you think is being conveyed here?

The film is shot in a realist style – how and why would this have affected the wartime spectator?

What do you think the directors were trying to achieve through the scene where Bob’s pregnant wife, Nan, nearly gets killed by a bomb?

Swap the classes of the principal characters: discuss with peers what affect this would have in terms of the affect on the audience. Are some changes positive for today’s audience? How do you think a wartime audience would have responded to your changes?
Individual acts of heroism were celebrated more often in post-war films that sought to reinforce a British identity that filmmakers were concerned about disappearing in the social and economic changes occurring as Britain rebuilt itself. During the war collective heroism was promoted, where ‘everyday heroes’ came together from the farms and factories, from the pubs and pulpits, from the council house and the country house, to do their duty and to defeat a common enemy. The ship’s stoker was depicted as having equal importance to the ship’s captain, the air raid warden as significant a hero as the fighter pilot. Class, rank and gender representations that dominated British film of the 1930s were quickly revised to ensure depictions of unity: a coming together of the British peoples which in itself is identified as part of the British character – unity in the face of adversity.

Thus, while the 1950s offered a war populated by individual (or small teams of) heroes in films such as The Cruel Sea (Ealing Studios 1953, Director: Charles Frend), and Dunkirk (Ealing Studios 1958, Director: Leslie Norman), films made during the war concentrated on collective actions such as that of the firemen during the Blitz in The Bells Go Down, or of troops of soldiers making a stand in the North African desert in Nine Men (Ealing Studios 1943, Director: Harry Watt).

It is not surprising that issues of class, rank and gender seem to pour out of virtually every British film made in this period, since these aspects were all undergoing significant change as the war progressed. The defeat of the British Expeditionary Force and the evacuation of the survivors at Dunkirk lost not only significant material reserves, but also many of the most experienced officers and non-commissioned officers the British armed forces had. As they were rebuilt post-Dunkirk (particularly the Army which had suffered significant loss, and the Royal Air Force which needed to boost its pilot training to make up for the significant losses it was suffering), the armed forces experienced changes in leadership that saw many more ordinary middle-class (and even working-class) men achieving ranking officer status – something that was once reserved for the British ruling classes. As the war progressed, merit and deeds became a determinant for climbing through the ranks, and this was reflected in a growing number of films.
of the time such as *Went The Day Well* (Ealing Studios 1943, Director: Alberto Cavalcanti), which offers a range of class and gender representations, from the Cockney evacuee who alerts the British forces to the presence of the Nazi infiltrators, through the lower and middle-class land girls, to the lady of the manor. Despite offering heroic roles to those traditionally denied them, rank remains to the fore with hierarchies (be they military or village) seen to structure society, though with challenges that reflect the changing nature of Britain at war.

With men being conscripted into the armed forces, with fighting in North Africa and the Far East, and with servicemen stationed from Iceland to India, the social make-up of Britain during the war began to change. Women took on traditionally male jobs such as farming through the Women’s Land Army, armaments and other factory work, and roles in the armed forces such as drivers and translators. By the middle of the war nearly 90 per cent of all single women (over 18 and under 40 years old), and 80 per cent of married women with ‘grown-up’ children (over 14) were working with a radical increase in typically male occupations such as heavy engineering. The arrival of retreating allied fighters (Poles, Czechs, French) on the streets of British cities, towns and villages, and the subsequent arrival of the Americans in the war and millions of American troops stationed in Britain, exposed those left to fight on the ‘home front’ (other than those men in ‘reserved occupations’, women, the young, the old and the infirm) to peoples, attitudes and values that made them reflect on their own positions. The constant presence of imminent death (either of a loved one fighting on one of the fronts, or of those at home through bombing) also changed attitudes towards status and social position (a luxury city house was as likely to be bombed as a slum, a bank as likely as an orphanage) and barriers that had survived the First World War were now breaking down.

The resolute nature of women at war was highlighted in a number of films that often placed women in traditional male roles. In *Went The Day Well*, women (from the lady of the manor to the lower class city land girl) are forced to take up arms alongside the men to defend their village (and the country) from the infiltrating Nazi force, and even the ageing, petite postmistress reluctantly takes the life of a Nazi soldier in an axe-murder scene that must have horrified yet unified the wartime audience. Similarly, as the end of the war came in sight, diverse films began to look forward to what a new, post-war Britain might look like. *They Came to a City* (Ealing Studios 1944, Director: Basil Dearden) reflects this view as assorted individuals find themselves outside the gates of a mysterious city and have to decide what kind of future world they want to live in. An immediately post-war feature, and the first ‘Ealing comedy’ *Hue and Cry* (Ealing Studios 1946, Director: Charles Crichton), delivers a clear view of what this post-war world would be like as thousands of London’s East End boys (ragamuffins, wild, working-class) work together to prevent criminals (who are using the boys’ favourite comic to pass information) from succeeding in their crimes, and round them up in a climactic scene set against a backdrop of London’s destroyed docklands. This film depicts a world wherein even the lowest contribute to the rebuilding of a moralistic nation, where children of every class join together to defeat a common enemy,
and where cooperation and common purpose (the very things celebrated in the war films) lead to victory.

**Activity**

Compare the female roles in *The Bells Go Down*. Does one class of woman differ from another in more than superficial ways? Do their attitudes towards the war and the men get expressed in any particular scenes and ways?

How does hierarchy change across a range of films in the war and post-war period? Do you think the change reflects the political views of the filmmakers, or of their understanding of society’s views?

Do the family relationships depicted in these films differ greatly from your own experience of family life? Who holds power in these wartime families?

Are men depicted as one-dimensional in these films, or do we see a complexity of character in their engagements with enemy, family/comrades and authority? How are male roles developed in films from this period?

Many of these films are depictions of values under attack. Take a scene from one of these films and transpose it to the current period. What values would be under attack and from whom? Rewrite the scene to reflect this.

**Social and political institutions**

It was not in the interest of Britain at war to have its social and political institutions directly questioned during the war, and the Ministry of Information ensured that Parliament and the Ministry for War were never criticized or seen in a negative light. However, part of Britain’s national identity was rooted in the gentle mimicry and direct mockery of the Music Hall tradition, and while public favourite George Formby continued to make his traditional musical fare of feel-good-working-class lad-makes-it-good stories, in films such as *Let George Do It* (Ealing/Basil Dearden 1940, Director: Marcel Varnel), and stage knock-about comics The Crazy Gang tried to unsuccessfully translate their acts into film, others used their comedy to parody Britain’s institutions (and still show them to be preferable to those of the Nazis). Comedian Will Hay defeated the enemy through comic ineptitude in *The Black Sheep of Whitehall* (Ealing Studios 1941, Director: Basil Dearden) in which he plays the role of an incompetent teacher who is mistaken for a government economics expert, saving the real expert from Nazi spies who want to kidnap him.
This role was reprised in *The Goose Steps Out* (Ealing Studios 1942, Director: Basil Dearden) where the incompetent teacher is sent into Nazi Germany to replace his Nazi double and steal a secret weapon. In both films the Nazis are easily defeated by an incompetent, while the British institutions and authorities are portrayed as comically inept, yet the gentle criticism of ‘Britishness’ offers a message that is also testament to its critical strength – even if inept, British institutions are still strong and effective enough to defeat the Nazi systems.

Similarly, Ealing’s wartime mocking of institutions became sharper in the immediate post-war period with *Passport to Pimlico* (Ealing Studios 1949, Director: Henry Cornelius), and with a film that looked back to the wartime period, *Whiskey Galore!* (Ealing Studios 1949, Director: Alexander MacKendrick). A wartime cargo of whiskey bound for North America is wrecked off a small Hebridean island, and the islanders unite against the (English) army officer and the customs officers sent to retrieve the salvaged bottles, in a sharp critique of the inflexibility and inherent weakness of institutions when faced with a united population.

**ACTIVITY**

Do you think comedy was an effective way of commenting on social and political institutions? If so, why?

Discuss the messages about social and political issues filmmakers have placed in the films of the period you have watched. What values are they trying to promote? What values are they criticizing?

Take one of the issues you have identified and list the cinematic (micro) techniques the filmmakers have used to bring it to your attention. What techniques would you have used if you were making the film?

**Ealing comedies**

While Ealing Studios had experimented with the comedy genre both pre-war and during the war, and had produced some reasonably successful work, it was not until the post-war period that they began producing a product that was recognizably branded as an ‘Ealing comedy’. As a brand, the Ealing comedies had a set of recognizable conventions that defined them, the key being the battle between the ‘little man’ (the ordinary, everyman/everywoman) against the giant (the bureaucrat, the state, the criminal, the industrialist), and it may be that the release of three films in quick succession in 1949 (*Passport to Pimlico*, *Whisky Galore!*, and *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Ealing Studios 1949, Director: Robert Hamer)) allowed audiences to recognize this feature (and others) in them. Of course, Ealing’s familial way of working will have played a considerable part in developing
a consistency of product in these comedies, with many being written by the same writers, and most sharing some or all crew under different directors.

Case study
PASSPORT TO PIMLICO (1949)

Passport to Pimlico (1949)

Passport to Pimlico was made by Ealing Studios, which, after their wartime effort of producing morale-boosting comedy with films such as The Foreman Went to France and stirring propaganda pieces such as Went the Day Well, had already turned their attention to the post-war period with films such as Hue and Cry. The end of the Second World War heralded a period of great political and social change, with returning servicemen and those who had served on the home front determined to rebuild Britain as a ‘land fit for heroes’.
A post-war Labour government was voted into power with a landslide majority and began a programme of social change that established many of the institutions underpinning today’s society, such as the National Health Service and the Welfare State. However, on the ground the privations of war continued, with vast tracts of cities such as London laid waste by Nazi bombing remaining as bomb-sites, rationing (where ‘luxury’ items such as fuel, chocolate, silks and even bananas could only be purchased by saving up ration coupons) was still in place, and where the black market (the illegal trade in goods – largelyrationed goods, but often simply stolen or ‘liberated’ from bomb sites) was touching all levels of society.

Henry Cornelius uses this melting-pot of social directions as the backdrop for his story of a small part of central London (Pimlico – bordered by Victoria railway station to the north and the Thames to the south) where an accidental discovery of ancient treasure on a bomb-site leads to it declaring itself separate to Britain and as part of the ancient kingdom of Burgundy. The innocence and expectation of this act is soon forgotten as opportunists and bureaucrats bring a harsh economic and political reality to the Burgundians in Pimlico.

When greengrocer Arthur Pemberton (Stanley Holloway) has his dreams of turning a local bomb-site into a lido (an open-air swimming pool and leisure complex) for the people of Pimlico rejected by Local Council planners (they want to sell the site), his peacetime world suddenly reflects the recent wartime one when an unexploded bomb on the site detonates to reveal (among the riches of uncovered buried treasure) a parchment decreeing the land around Miramont Place, Pimlico, as belonging to the Duke of Burgundy. Innocent, middle-class Pemberton sees this simply as a means to bypass the Council and get the lido built, but it soon becomes apparent that with Pimlico as a separate state the rule of British law is no longer relevant. Initially this is to the advantage of the people there who, in a spirit of unrestricted free enterprise, can buy what they like, drink when they like and do what they like, but this advantage is short-lived as hordes of ‘barrow boys’ and ‘spivs’ descend suddenly and rapidly on their peaceful area to sell ‘off-the-ration’ and illegal goods, both to locals and to lines of Londoners descending upon them.

A wartime unity of spirit is evoked as the locals have to face not only this immediate enemy but also one embodied by Whitehall, a British government determined to crush a tiny, independent state that asserts its rights and stands up for its community values. It is interesting to see how Cornelius separates state and people: penned in and blockaded (water cut off and no food allowed across the border), the children of Pimlico are ‘evacuated’ and return to the border to throw food parcels across to their families – an act of kindness that is soon taken up by the ordinary British people.
The film’s key message is encapsulated in its ending, where the British (and Burgundian) spirit of ‘fair play’, of community and of cooperation is highlighted in a compromise as Pimlico rejoins the United Kingdom, the bureaucrats are defeated, and the people of Pimlico get their lido. The damage inflicted by the free market (the criminals undercutting local prices with their illegal trade), the privations of independence (a worse rationing than that inflicted by the British ration card system), and the breakdown of social structures (families torn apart, law and order crumbling) are replaced by the lesser of evils (government-organized national rationing and restrictions) and the triumph of communal values over individual benefit.

**ACTIVITY**

*Passport to Pimlico* sets up groups in opposition to each other. What groups are represented and which groups are they placed in opposition to?

Arthur Pemberton and his family are central to the structure and relationships within the film. What class do you see them as, and what class boundaries do they cross or break?

What style of filmmaking can you see on screen? Does this affect the way you perceive the story?

Swap Arthur Pemberton’s role with that of either the bank manager or the policeman. Does this affect the messages and values expressed? If so, how?

Discuss the underpinning political messages and values expressed in this film. Where on the political spectrum would you place the filmmakers? What leads you to this opinion?

Look at the role of women in this film. What is being said about women in post-war Britain (or Burgundy)? What power do they have, and how is it expressed?

How do you think this film affected audiences at the time of its release?
Ealing comedy was relatively short-lived with several more successes such as *The Man in the White Suit* (Ealing Studios 1951, Director: Alexander MacKendrick), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Ealing Studios 1951, Director: Charles Crichton), and *The Ladykillers* (Ealing Studios 1955, Director: Alexander MacKendrick), and some, such as *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (Ealing Studios 1953, Director: Charles Crichton), showed that a formula was becoming tired and the audience was shifting.

**The end of Ealing**

Despite its history and long success, Ealing’s films began to prove less popular with the audience who were coming out of the despair and desperation of the immediate post-war years, and emerging into an affluent 1950s. The shifting audience meant that the gentle whimsy of the Ealing comedy was lost on many, and the other stalwart of post-war British film – the war film – was beginning to see fatigue set in.

The company had already been taken over by the Rank Organization in 1944, but this did not affect them materially. As Rank’s post-war fortunes soured they looked to reduce their overheads, and Ealing Studios became the focus for downsizing. In 1955 the studios were sold to the BBC, but Michael Balcon signed a deal with MGM allowing Ealing Studios to produce films out of Elstree Studios. This was a short-term measure that saw the company founder and then fail only two years later. In 1995, the BBC sold the studios on to the National Film and Television School.

**References and Further Reading**

Useful Websites

http://www.screenonline.org.uk – a wonderful set of articles and visual resources on Ealing Studios, related genres and specific films/people.