

Jack Rockett (exhibitor) 1908- ?

by [admin](#) — last modified Jul 29, 2008 05:37 PM

BIOGRAPHY: Jack Rockett was born in Walthamstow in July 1908. He began as an office boy with the Gaumont company in Denham Street. By 1934 he was working from the West End cinema Birmingham (in Edmund Street) as a regional stock-taker and occasional mobile manager for the Gaumont-British circuit. He had become an ‘internal auditor’ around the time of the merger with Odeon, and after a period of war service in engineering factories, he spent most of the 1950s and 60s as a regional area manager for Rank, based variously in Birmingham, Newcastle and Edinburgh. **SUMMARY:** In this fascinating interview with Sid Cole and Roy Fowler at Rockett’s home in Glebelands (the CTBF rest home), Rockett gives a rare insight into the trade from the exhibitors’ point of view. He discusses the life of the Area manager, detailing particularly the gala opening of South Pacific (1958) at the Manchester Gaumont, and incidents surrounding the 1956 screening of Rock Around the Clock (1956) at Whitley Bay (in which he had to deal with a local press eager to manufacture a ‘teenage’ reaction which could have threatened the films’ local certification). Rockett talks about the importance of publicity and ‘showmanship’ and the crucial relationships between the local cinema manager, the press, the local community and the local authorities (the Watch Committees). He recalls some of the anomalies of the local licensing system (particularly in Sale, near Manchester). He gives a good description of the levels of staffing at a ‘typical’ cinema in the 1930s, and the changes that occurred in exhibition during the post war era. His assessment of John Davis (Managing Director of Rank), and of the Quota system, make particularly refreshing reading, underlining the differences in outlook between the production and exhibition sectors. (Lawrence Napper, BCHRP)

BECTU History Project - Interview No. 54

[Copyright [BECTU](#)]

Transcription Date: 2002-10-01

Interview Date: 1988-08-22

Interviewer: Sidney Cole

Interviewee: Jack Rockett

Tape 1, Side 1

Roy Fowler: Copyright 1988, ACTT History Project. The interview is with Jack Rockett at Glebelands on 22 August 1988, with Sid Cole.

Sidney Cole: Jack, you spent your life in cinema distribution - how did you get into that originally?

Jack Rockett: I saw an advert in the Daily Telegraph for office boy wanted.

Sidney Cole: How old were you then?

Jack Rockett: Fifteen.

Sidney Cole: What had you done - what sort of schooling had you had up to that time?

Jack Rockett: I went to central school, grammar school.

Sidney Cole: Where?

Jack Rockett: Oh at - in Walthamstow, Essex.

Sidney Cole: So you were sort of Londoner.

Jack Rockett: I am a Londoner yes. I was born in Walthamstow.

Sidney Cole: When were you born actually?

Jack Rockett: July 1908.

Sidney Cole: Ah, same year as I was. Yes. So you got in - went in as an office boy. What was your first job? Where was it?

Jack Rockett: In Denman Street with Gaumont company.

Sidney Cole: Aha. And how long did you stay?

Jack Rockett: Well I was there for - until Gaumont-British Picture Corporation was formed in 1930.

Sidney Cole: And that was just when things were changing over to sound.

Jack Rockett: That's right.

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Jack Rockett: Just remember that. Then I went across to - we amalgamated with PCT.

Sidney Cole: I remember, yes.

Jack Rockett: Then went across to Edmund Street in the accounts department there. And from there in 1934 I went up to the West End, Birmingham as a stock taker.

Sidney Cole: Again, holding onto that for a moment. Having come into - round about the time when the changing over from sound, from silent to sound - were you aware of the technical problems that was involved in that changeover? The new equipment and all that?

Jack Rockett: Only so far as when I used to go across to Sherwood Street, our science department, used to hear then doing the experiments with the train coming in at Waterloo or somewhere or other.

Sidney Cole: Oh really? Yes.

Jack Rockett: Nothing more than that. But I well remember. I had nothing to do with it but I remember every time I went over there, I seemed to hear this train coming in...

Sidney Cole: [Laughs]

Jack Rockett: ...that they were experimenting with?

Sidney Cole: And you didn't know anything about the early days of sound when sound was on record rather than on film.

Jack Rockett: No, I knew it was on record but I didn't know the details. No, I wasn't involved in.

Sidney Cole: You weren't involved in the technicality?

Jack Rockett: Not in the technicality side, no.

Sidney Cole: So you went up to Birmingham...

Jack Rockett: Yes.

Sidney Cole: ...and how long did you stay in Birmingham? You were Area Manager?

Jack Rockett: No, I went up to Birmingham as a stock taker, going round, operating from the West End Cinema, Birmingham. Mr Russ was the divisional superintendent and I went to roughly thirty-odd cinemas.

Sidney Cole: When you say stock taking you mean...?

Jack Rockett: Well it was checking all the stocks, petty cash, insurance cards and so on. Only a very junior position you know. One point of interest, that might be of interest - I have met here a Mr Watson, who's now 92. I first met him in Peterborough when it was the Broadway Peterborough, when he was manager of the Broadway, Peterborough.

Sidney Cole: Ah.

Jack Rockett: First met him there in 1934.

Sidney Cole: And after all these years you meet up in Glebelands!

Jack Rockett: When he retired, he retired in 1960, he knew that I was a regional controller. He called in to see me at Edinburgh, with his wife, and came and had tea with the wife and I. And then I lost contact with him again. It went from the Broadway and became the Gaumont and he went from there to the Odeon. But I was away from all that. But I thought that was of interest. And when I came here I find he's here, now 92 years of age. [laughs] Extraordinary!

Sidney Cole: So after that stock-taking job based in Birmingham, what happened after that?

Jack Rockett: Well we amalgamated with Odeon and there was a change then in the - Mr Self[?] was the man in charge and they then called us 'Internal Auditors', which I did then for a bit. And in the meantime I was going round getting all sorts of experience in the cinemas and so forth. And somebody fell ill - a Mr Mitchell fell ill, who was the - I forget what they called them there - Area Manager. And I was, almost without warning, given the task of going round and sort of doing that sort of thing. Supervising and so on, going round with the regional engineer. And it was then at that time, as I say, the opportunity arose to go into the higher management course. Oh, in the meantime I had been a mobile manager in the West End.

Sidney Cole: Where were you in the West End?

Jack Rockett: West End, Birmingham. West End Cinema, Birmingham. And around that area I was mobile manager for some months.

Sidney Cole: Mobile manager meant that you were sort of relief...?

Jack Rockett: I could go in, yes, at a moment's notice anywhere and so on.

Sidney Cole: If somebody were ill or on holiday or something, yeah.

Jack Rockett: ...take over and so on. I never held a licence but I was mobile manager. But then this opportunity came to go into this course of higher management, which I did. And I was one of four selected. And it was then that I became an Acting District Manager and then District Manager with my office at Canterbury.

Sidney Cole: Having done that, how much were you involved in the sort of pictures that were being actually shown in the cinemas? After all these were circuit theatres, weren't they?

Jack Rockett: Yes, that's right.

Sidney Cole: So that you didn't really have - the people in charge didn't have much say in what movies were shown.

Jack Rockett: Oh no, no. They were all booked.

Sidney Cole: They were all booked from London, the circuit?

Jack Rockett: Absolutely.

Sidney Cole: Can you remember any of the outstanding pictures of those days that were in cinemas?

Jack Rockett: I don't know if I can remember the titles. [Pauses]

Sidney Cole: Some of the Korda?

Jack Rockett: The Rank one of - oh, titles!

Sidney Cole: What was it about?

Jack Rockett: Took such a lot of money. It cost very little to make. It was a Rank picture.

Sidney Cole: Who was in it? Can you remember?

Jack Rockett: Yes - Dinah Sheridan.

Sidney Cole: Dinah Sheridan, who afterwards married...

Jack Rockett: That's right.

Sidney Cole: ...er what's his name?

Sidney Cole: John Davis.

Jack Rockett: That's right. Oh, what was the film - you people must know it.

Sidney Cole: Oh not to worry too much. It will come to us in a moment. Yes, Dinah Sheridan, yes, was interesting.

Roy Fowler: Genevieve perhaps? Was it Genevieve?

Jack Rockett: That's it - Genevieve.

Sidney Cole: Yes, oh that one, yes, with Kay Kendal and Kenneth More.

Jack Rockett: Took a small fortune!

Sidney Cole: Yes - and it cost very little.

Jack Rockett: If only they could make pictures today at the relative cost that that was.

Sidney Cole: Sure, yes.

Jack Rockett: It cost very little but it took a fortune. I mean, we had terrific queues everywhere for it.

Sidney Cole: In the part of the country you were concerned with - how many cinemas all together would the chain have? Any idea?

Jack Rockett: Now when are we talking? Because it gradually - when I was in Birmingham I suppose the circuit then was something like 400, the total circuit. But it gradually, was gradually starting to go down. Some of them started to close down middle [19]50s.

Sidney Cole: What about the war years? What happened during the war years?

Jack Rockett: In the war years I was reserve for a short time and then I got drafted in - [laughs] for my sins, I don't know why - but I got drafted into a factory!

Sidney Cole: Oh really?

Jack Rockett: Yes, in Coventry.

Sidney Cole: What did they do, make munitions?

Jack Rockett: Yes, we were making - there's a long story to that.

Sidney Cole: Well come on - tell me.

Jack Rockett: Oh well, we were making parts for the torpedo boats, you know, for the submarines. But it was a very unhappy experience for me. I had lost my father in the First World War. I'd got brothers and a sister in this war - in the Second war. Photographs up all the way round - "Drive Another Nail in Hitler's Coffin". And the time that was wasted at that factory, you just wouldn't believe it.

Sidney Cole: Really? In what way?

Jack Rockett: Well if you were on night shift you went on, first of all they told me I would be months learning how to run a machine, a capstan, and so on. Well it didn't, it took me days that's all. I treated it in the same way as you'd drive a motor car and so on. But you could go in - you must know all about this because it's always in the papers. You'd go in on the night shift, your machine wasn't right, you wanted the setter to do it, well he's either having a sleep or they're playing cards or what have you. Shocking business, to such an extent that one man eventually - the idea was, too, once they had got what they called their 'day' in, they used to stop work. I remember a brand new machine coming in, I said to the fellow, he said, "Well that's my day in." I said, "Go on, do some more." I wanted the war to end, and also I felt I'd got brothers in this. And this other man, he'd got a family and one thing and another, he used to work until the perspiration poured off him. And when the foreman came round and give you the wage packet, you used to grumble, "You've got more than I'm getting." You know, this sort of thing. Anyway, he couldn't stand it any longer, as I say, men very often, once they'd got what they called their 'day' in, they just stood idly by and didn't do anything for the rest of the shift.

Sidney Cole: Done their 'quota', hmmm.

Jack Rockett: This gentleman, he wrote to - I don't know whether it was the Sunday Pictorial - one of the Sunday papers, and suddenly we get warning, all the floors are all cleaned up, white lines down. We'd got somebody coming from, (I think it was called in those days) the Board of Trade. Anyway, we got - when this gentleman comes round, is going round, everybody working like anything. There was about half a dozen of us, perhaps a dozen, we just sat back on the bench. So when the man came and said to this chap who'd written the letter, "What's this?" He said, "Oh, we've got our day in." Of course the foreman was furious. Well to cut a long story short again, what happened there, they put a Board of Trade inspector in the factory for the rest of the war.

Sidney Cole: Ah.

Jack Rockett: And that made things very uncomfortable for those of us that had brought the thing to light. And I got transferred. I was living in Birmingham and I got transferred to very near my home, to Burmetts[?]. And when I went I was surprised they said, "We're going to make you a grade two chargehand." And I said, "What!" And they said, "Yes, we know, we think you can do it." All I was doing - I hadn't got the experience of any of these sort of things but I was able to use my head. I was able to use my brain and I could organise. Anyway, I was made - and they put me in charge of a test-piece machine shop. This was where pieces of metal had to come in to be tested, before the material for the whole factory could be released to go out. So in a way it was very important. But when I went in it was a - oh! it was a shambles. Progress-chasers used to come in and help themselves and so forth and so on.

Sidney Cole: What did they help themselves to? Bits of metal?

Jack Rockett: To, well they wanted something, to get it released because they were working on bonuses and so forth and so on. Well I put a stop to all this. I reorganised the whole thing and wouldn't allow anybody in and got the thing properly organised. And this was of some considerable importance because I mean there could come a week where the material hadn't passed test and it brought the whole delivery to a standstill.

Roy Fowler: What sort of wages were you getting in those jobs?

Jack Rockett: Oh, about 20 pounds a week I seem to think I got. Then I got made a grade one chargehand and eventually they made me Foreman [laughs]. Then the time came for my release. I wanted to come back into my business.

Sidney Cole: At the end of the war?

Jack Rockett: Yes, the end of the war. Again I went up for interview by the Ministry. And when I went in they interviewed me and so forth, said they'd got my record and so on. When I tell you, I'd stayed at that factory some days because we'd got a breakdown, that sort of thing, and perhaps didn't go home for three days. I don't say I didn't sleep at all, might put my feet up, but at least I was there, sort of, keeping the thing going. All sorts of things happened there that were what I'd call sabotage, but that doesn't matter now. Anyway, when I went for this interview they, sort of, talked to me and one thing and another and they said, "Well Mr Rockett, we're now going to

transfer you to building." I said, "You're going to do what?" I said, "I don't know anything about building." They said, "Well you didn't know anything about anything when you went to Burmetts[?]." I said, "Well I know nothing about building." They said, "No, but we think you've got the energy and so on. This is what we want." So I was dumbfounded. I said, "Well gentlemen, I think this is very unfair. If I had been nuisance, not turned up and generally not got on with the job, you wouldn't want to know me. Because I've tried to do a job now you're going to take me onto something else." "Will you wait outside for a few minutes Mr Rockett?" When I came back the Chairman said, "Well Mr Rockett, in view of your record and in view of what you've said, we have agreed to release you." I said, "Oh thank goodness."

Sidney Cole: What sort of year would that be?

Jack Rockett: That would be [19]48/'49.

Sidney Cole: Oh as late as that?

Jack Rockett: Yes. Burmetts[?] wanted me. They offered me the earth, they wanted me to stay there [laughs]. Again I had no knowledge of all the materials and so forth, other than what I picked up while I was there. But I just had this ability to be able to organise, I suppose, this was the thing.

Sidney Cole: But you wanted to get back into films.

Jack Rockett: I wanted to come back and then I came back to - it was still Gaumont-British. Have I got my dates right? I don't know. But anyway it was still Gaumont-British. Then soon after that of course came the link. I went back to my old job.

Sidney Cole: So you were entitled to your old job weren't you after the war?

Jack Rockett: Yes. And I went back to my old job and then came the amalgamation with Odeon and I was then made a - what did they call us? I gave you the name earlier on.

Sidney Cole: Area Manager?

Jack Rockett: No, no, that was before - I'd done that. It was really on much the same thing under the Odeon style of visiting the theatres for stock, petty cash, insurance cards and all that sort of thing. Then came this opportunity to go on a higher management course. In the meantime I had been taken off from that and I was on as mobile manager. Got the opportunity to go onto this higher management course. As I say I got selected and then was made Acting Area Manager with my office at Canterbury, and did 6 months there while the man from there, he went onto the higher management course. I did 6 months there and then I was promoted to Area Manager at - with my office at the Odeon Warley, which was a very lucky break for me because I was still living in Birmingham! The Odeon Warley not very far from - it's in Birmingham of course.

Sidney Cole: What sort of salary did that job - can you remember what sort of salary you ended up with?

Jack Rockett: I seem to remember I started at about 20 pounds, something like that.

Sidney Cole: You enjoyed doing that?

Jack Rockett: Oh yes. Yes, yes.

Sidney Cole: It took you around quite a lot.

Jack Rockett: I was.. then I had about - when I became Area Manager I had about thirty-odd cinemas under my control. Went out to Wolverhampton, out to Stoke on Trent, out to Peterborough, Norwich, Ipswich.

Sidney Cole: How often would you visit any individual cinema?

Jack Rockett: Hard to say. I never worked to any set routine. Whilst - I'm proud of the fact that I never went in any back door, I always felt that if there was something wrong I could smell it or find it out by going in the front door. I never went in the back door. But I never worked to any strict routine. In other words, if I went to say the Odeon Stoke, or the Gaumont Hanley, the Hippodrome Stoke, I wouldn't necessarily have come back to Burton.

Sidney Cole: Uh-huh.

Jack Rockett: In other words it was never the same routine so that, other than people who had to be notified, nobody else knew where I was going. But as I say, I never went in any back door, I always went in the front door. And then I went from there - I was promoted to Newcastle, with my office at the Odeon Newcastle. I was there for - I lived at Whitley Bay - I was in Newcastle roughly three years - [19]50-'53, three years. And then I went to the Gaumont Manchester as Regional Controller in 1956. As I say, we had the opening of South Pacific there.

Sidney Cole: That was a great occasion was it?

JC: Yes, oh! Marvellous, because we playing concurrent. We were the only two theatres in the country playing it. We were playing. We had Mitzi Gaynor there and fifty mayors from all the surrounding towns and so on. It was a wonderful opening. I had Spyros Skouras and his people over from America - they all attended. It was a wonderful night.

Sidney Cole: Did you have a lot to do with the organising of that affair?

Jack Rockett: The organising of the night? Oh yes, very much. I was responsible, I had other people doing it of course, but I was the one held responsible. I mean of course, we had a very good manager there at that time, who was a very good showman. But we hadn't sold any tickets. It didn't matter how we tried, we couldn't sell these tickets. They wouldn't sell. And he was an excellent manager, he'd got many, many showmanship certificates. And I remember, I rang the Theatre Controller on the Sunday night, a thing I'd never done before, and said, "I'm very worried." "What's the matter?" I said, "Well tickets just aren't..." "That's your worry Rockett, the

theatre's got to be full. How it's full that's up to you." All I did was through various contacts - we gave complimentary away.

Sidney Cole: Why was that then? Because I would have thought people would have wanted to go.

Jack Rockett: I'll tell you in a moment. All the nurses we got there - all sorts of people. And we had a full theatre. I said the manager was a showman - he had great bills out - "Sold Out", "Box Office Open Tomorrow" and so on. The mere fact that we were so full and nobody - there were queues that night and nobody could get in, that was the best selling angle we could possibly have! And from then onwards - and we ran the film then for two years.

Sidney Cole: Wow.

Jack Rockett: Ran it for two years to fabulous figures.

Sidney Cole: So what else happened during your time in that particular era?

Jack Rockett: Well I was at Manchester of course that was a different area altogether. I went out to Sheffield, Doncaster, Barnsley, Liverpool - whole of Liverpool, of course the whole of Manchester and the suburbs. I was there for four years. And then I went to Scotland. I was made Regional Controller for Scotland.

Sidney Cole: Where were you based?

Jack Rockett: My office was at the Gaumont, Glasgow, my home was at the flat at the Odeon Newcastle - er [corrects himself] Odeon Edinburgh. When I say the whole of Scotland I mean that's all the Rank theatres.

Sidney Cole: How far north did Rank go in Scotland?

Jack Rockett: Aberdeen.

Sidney Cole: As far as Aberdeen.

Jack Rockett: It went - see if I can remember - Perth, Dundee, Aberdeen. And also included Carlisle. That was in [19]60.

Sidney Cole: I suppose it wasn't - thinking of Scotland, Jack, you didn't come within the purview of the outer islands - the Hebrides and places, because they didn't have any cinemas did they?

Jack Rockett: No, didn't go there at all, no.

Sidney Cole: SO after Scotland you went on...

Jack Rockett: Then I came back down to London again then. I'd gone the complete! And was made Circuit Manager. I took the place of Mr Hopman.

Sidney Cole: That was Circuit Manager for the whole of London?

Jack Rockett: For the whole of the country.

Sidney Cole: The whole of the country - ah.

Jack Rockett: Yes. I'd got other executives over me of course, but I was Circuit Manager for the whole country.

Sidney Cole: And did that involve having any say in the kind of pictures - were you consulted at all?

Jack Rockett: No, no. Nobody really had any say. This was all done by our booking department, all done by booking department. Mr Hamer, it was.

Sidney Cole: Oh, I remember, yeah.

Jack Rockett: Well when he went, Mr Pinches. Occasionally I - on one occasion when I was in Manchester I had to go to Blackpool to see a premiere and I can't tell you the name of the film now but it was the man who plays the ukulele...

Roy Fowler: Formby.

Sidney Cole: George Formby, yes.

Jack Rockett: Yes it was a George Formby picture and I had to go and see this and then make my observations down to the Booking Controller as to what I thought of it. But again of course, Formby's all right in the north but didn't mean a thing down south. But other than that, generally speaking, we had no say in the - We could ask for a picture to be - sometimes had to - perhaps to be cut. On occasions we'd try to get it for an extra week. But even that was very, very limited due to all the bars and so on and so forth.

Sidney Cole: Oh yes, the barring clauses, yes. Couldn't be shown outside [a certain time/area].

Jack Rockett: No.

Sidney Cole: Of course you must have found that when you were going around that certain cinemas and rather their audiences had certain tastes which didn't operate in another theatre.

Jack Rockett: Oh yes this is very true. I mean while I was in Manchester, or rather when I was in Newcastle we had Rock Around the Clock. This is quite interesting - Rock Around the Clock. Now lots of areas, local authorities could either say you could show a film or you couldn't in those days. And we were very anxious as an organisation, because it was taking a fortune you

see, we were very anxious that we should try and get it shown in as many places as possible. But the thing to do was to make sure you had no trouble. When I played it at only a small theatre - the Gaumont, Whitley Bay. I went down to Whitley Bay, saw the manager there and I said, "Right now, nobody getting out of their seats." And I posted with him two of the tallest Assistant Managers that I'd got on my region, they were both six-foot, to give him a hand. And I said, "We've got the Mayor coming in the evening," I said, "I'll be back in the evening for the evening show." Just as I was leaving my office in the Odeon Newcastle my secretary came in to me with a paper. Headlines to the effect of 'Policemen were seen standing at the doors of the Gaumont, Whitley Bay' and making a real story. I was furious. So I went down, of course it wasn't, it was my two Assistant Managers. Anyway, we didn't have any trouble but the Press, in order to get their pictures, believe it or not - I wouldn't allow anybody in, anybody - only people who I knew. And one doesn't like to lose faith with the Press of course because they are our bread and butter very much. But I wouldn't allow anybody in, I said, "Yes you can go in but your camera must stay outside." I wouldn't allow anybody in with a camera. And so when the show was finished and coming out, they then whipped the people up and they were chasing them down the promenade and that sort of thing in order to get their pictures. They couldn't get anything inside. I had made arrangements with the Superintendent, he had got police nearby, but they never came in the theatre while we had the show on, and they were nearby and didn't show themselves. They did show themselves when this business happened. Now the purpose of telling you the story is - when I get back I go to the CEA, you know of the CEA of course.

Sidney Cole: Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association.

Jack Rockett: And all the exhibitors there were very anxious to know what all this was all about. And I sort of stood up with this newspaper, "This printed in the newspaper is lies, complete lies." And I made the point there was nobody there. [NB There is an account of this CEA Northern Branch meeting in Kinematograph Weekly 27th September 1956 p.26] Again, we still don't want to lose faith with the Press. They were very good to us in Newcastle in the normal way. I rang the Editor up and he wouldn't listen to me. He said, "My man knows, he knows Whitley Bay." And so forth and so on. And I said, "Well I'm sorry you're quite wrong." And I was very worried. I also get a call from our Publicity Manager, er Controller in London, "You must do something to restore our good faith." I just didn't know. I expect you've heard of Lord Westwood?

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Jack Rockett: Who had cinemas up there. He rang me and he said, "Jack" as he called me, "I've made arrangements for you to see the Editor. I'll come along with you on Saturday morning." I said, "Oh good." In the meantime I rang the Chief of Police, told him what I was going to do. I said, "If necessary can I ask the Editor to give you a ring?" "By all means" he gave me the telephone number. When we get there - so we talk about this and couldn't convince the Editor and I said, "Well look, can I do it this way? There's the telephone number." He said, "Who's that?" I said, "That's the Chief of Police for Whitley Bay. If you will give him a ring I'm sure he will confirm to you that there were no police on duty." "That's not necessary, is it Mr Rockett?" And within two minutes we were talking football! I merely tell you how one has to try and keep faith with the Press. The other thing I - I hope I'm not talking too much...

Sidney Cole: No, no, no. This is absolutely what we're here for.

Jack Rockett: Well there are no secrets. It's going back to Manchester - well we showed Bill Hayley at the Odeon, Manchester. And we were there and the place was absolutely packed and they were stamping their feet and so forth and so on. This was the first house. My engineer, his wife was coming. It was so bad he wouldn't allow his wife to come. We could see this circle and it wasn't cantilevered as many circles are. But we could actually see this circle moving. It was in the Daily Mail the next day that Rank executives were seen standing in the front stalls in the exit in the front stalls, anxiously watching the circle.

Sidney Cole: Was it moving?

Jack Rockett: We could see that it was actually moving, yes.

Sidney Cole: Wow.

Jack Rockett: Anyway that was printed in the Daily Mail the next day. The next day my engineer had it all examined, there wasn't any trouble but... Eventually, as a result of all our efforts we were able to show the film, which had been banned up to that moment at the Odeon, Gateshead - a 2000-seater. So, you know, our efforts were worthwhile.

Sidney Cole: You said something earlier Jack which is interesting for the record - that certain local authorities had some powers to ban a film, even if it had been passed by the Censors.

Jack Rockett: Oh yes, yes.

Sidney Cole: Can you remember an example at any of your places where that happened?

Jack Rockett: Oh well this applied in many - it applied in Gateshead. I think it could have applied almost anywhere in that day an age. I remember when I was again in Manchester, Sale - which is separate from Manchester. They were very, very difficult. And often you could show a film in Manchester and it couldn't be shown in Sale.

Sidney Cole: Mmm.

Jack Rockett: Now I can't remember the names of any films of course, but that did happen. Oh yes, the local authorities had considerable power in those days. To a certain extent they have now I think, but not to the same extent.

Sidney Cole: Because they could do it the other way round too if I remember rightly that they could show a film under a local licence even if the censors had not given it a general licence.

Jack Rockett: Yes, that is true, that is true. Very often we had to get a - oh very often, for Sale, we had to get a film up and show it to the watch committee.

Sidney Cole: Ah yes.

Jack Rockett: And then they would pass it.

Sidney Cole: And most I suppose, most local authorities didn't bother, I mean they accepted the certificate on what was being shown.

Jack Rockett: Lots didn't, but some did. Sale I remember particularly as a watch committee where we had to get the copies for them to see.

Sidney Cole: Can you remember the name of some of the more famous pictures that were shown during your time with the Rank Organisation? You mentioned Genevieve earlier. We were talking about some before we started, weren't we, like Scott of the Antarctic.

Jack Rockett: Yes.

Sidney Cole: And The Man in the White Suit.

Jack Rockett: Yes. What was the one, the school film.

Sidney Cole: Oh, The Happiest Years of Your Life.

Jack Rockett: Yes, yes. And there was another one.

Roy Fowler: The Guinea Pig?

Jack Rockett: No, don't remember that one.

Sidney Cole: No, St Trinians, the St Trinians series were very good.

Jack Rockett: Yes, but..

Sidney Cole: Oh do you mean a serious one?

Jack Rockett: Yes. But a very good film.

Sidney Cole: The Boultings, not the Guinea Pig you just mentioned... um

Roy Fowler: Goodbye Mr Chips?

Jack Rockett: Goodbye Mr Chips. That's it!

Sidney Cole: Goodbye Mr Chips was a big success wasn't it - yes.

Jack Rockett: I've forgotten them - I've been retired twenty years myself.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes.

Jack Rockett: I've certainly - I've got out of touch now.

Sidney Cole: So you retired. When you retired were you still in the circuit manager job?

Jack Rockett: Yes I retired SO. Well I was in the - we...no I won't record that! Mr Quilter came, Mr Winkles - can we take this off just for a second?

Sidney Cole: Yes sure. [break in recording]

Jack Rockett: It was something they regretted afterwards because they realised they'd thrown all the experience out of the window and just hadn't got the [laughs] - well the expertise wasn't there then.

Sidney Cole: No, no.

Jack Rockett: You asked me and so I just - that's why we haven't recorded that.

Roy Fowler: No, fine.

Sidney Cole: Can we record if, I was going to ask you what your relations were and what you felt about Mr John Davis. Would you mind recording that?

Jack Rockett: No, not at all.

Sidney Cole: Right, so let's plug in again, let's switch on again.

Jack Rockett: I have the highest regard for Mr Davis. I think if it hadn't been for him the Rank Organisation would have gone to the wall. I don't think there's any doubt about it.

Sidney Cole: What was the situation then before he came and took charge? What would you say? What was the situation would you say?

Jack Rockett: Well of course he'd been with Odeon, and don't forget, I'm a Gaumont man, so I only know him from the time we amalgamated with Odeon. He was thought to be a ruthless man but you know, as I see it, when a man is dealing with all the capital, you know, that is involved and so on, he has to be ruthless. Yet on the other hand I know of cases which were submitted to him - I remember one about a cleaner, where a note was put in and, his note was, "Well could you manage on this?" This was his - he was the man, I felt he was the man, if you took over, made the most of your opportunities, then he was prepared to help you. But if you wanted to sit back and take advantage of other people, then as I see it, he didn't want to know you. I think the Rank Organisation has an awful lot to thank him for.

Sidney Cole: And you always got on well with him?

Jack Rockett: Well, I had him up to - when I was Regional Controller in Scotland he came up. We'd had a fire at the Gaumont Edinburgh and I had to take him round and so on. Wasn't - it was a very nervous experience if I can put it that way!

Sidney Cole: Sure, sure.

Jack Rockett: But I found him very fair. I can't say otherwise. And he was [pauses] I can't put it any other way. I found him very fair indeed and these people who talk so badly of him, and there are those that do so, I say that they had some reason for saying that and it wasn't a good reason.

Sidney Cole: Did you meet, during the course of your career, any of the people who were on the production side, like Alex Korda, or Michael Balcon or any of these people?

Jack Rockett: No - I met Mr Balcon. I did take press shows, press parties down to Pinewood Studios several times.

Sidney Cole: Who was in charge of Pinewood then, was it Earl St John.

Jack Rockett: Earl St John, that's right. Yes. Took press parties there several times.

Sidney Cole: Looking back, what was your most exciting or interesting experience you had in - about people, during your career?

Jack Rockett: The most exciting thing that I ever did was the showing of South Pacific.

Sidney Cole: The one you were telling us about - right.

Jack Rockett: That really was. I thoroughly enjoyed all my - it was hard, a responsibility, sometimes seemed to get you down but I have no regrets. The only regret I have... [to sound recordist] off for a moment? [break in recording]...knew how certain things got very much improved for us. I have no regret over the way I was treated, so financially when it came to - when I retired.

Sidney Cole: Well Roy, anything you want to...

R F: Yes, what I'd like to hear is perhaps a typical day in the routine of a cinema in the '30s, the capacity, how you promoted a picture, the number of people you had on staff. If you could describe a day because I have a feeling that it's all changed a great deal.

Sidney Cole: Well can we switch on again then. Are we running?

Roy Fowler: Yes. A high street cinema of the '30s.

Jack Rockett: Of the '30s? Well it was still much the same. You had the blurb came out from your publicity department in London, they sent out all the various blurbs. This would go to the various managers and they were responsible for doing their own campaign. What I would do,

when I was in that position, I would also be 'geeing' them up to making sure they were in fact taking all the action possible. As you know we had many showmanship campaigns. Showmanship functions down in London, I've been to the Dorchester many times where we'd have the champion showman down through where he'd won through showmanship he became the Chief Showman and John Davis would then give this luncheon at the Dorchester. I went to that half a dozen times I suppose. So the exploitation of the picture is really done by each manager.

Sidney Cole: That was his main thing?

Jack Rockett: Well he was expected to do that. Like everything else, some were showmen and some weren't. Some did it much better than others. In some cases too, one has to be fair, very difficult when you were judging folders, you had to - this is where it paid to know your press. Some press would give you press much more easily than other people in other towns and so on. And so you had to take all that into consideration when you were marking a man's folder it was important that you really knew, was the press co-operative, weren't the press co-operative. I mean there were some towns where you couldn't get a line out of the press.

Roy Fowler: A manager then was in much closer contact with his community than he would be today I imagine?

Jack Rockett: We expected him to be - yes.

Roy Fowler: He would be, I mean generally there was a community feel was there not?

Jack Rockett: Yes, yes. A manager too was expected to know - I never had any difficulty getting hotel booking, for instance, because the manager would know. I never had any difficulty of if I wanted to go by train from Manchester I used to be seen off by the station master, if not by the reservation. I'd have a compartment given to me free. My assistant would arrange all this but these were the sort of things we were expected to be able to do so that we never had - Now that sort of thing wouldn't apply today I'm quite sure.

Sidney Cole: You had more showings of films then really, per day, didn't you than we have now?

Jack Rockett: Yes. Depends on your second feature of course, I mean, of the programme. Normally it would be three programmes a day, perhaps two and a half.

Roy Fowler: What would the programme comprise?

Jack Rockett: Feature, second feature and news at one time. Perhaps a short.

Roy Fowler: Cartoon?

Jack Rockett: Cartoon, yes.

Roy Fowler: Coming attractions?

Jack Rockett: And you'd do coming attractions of course yes.

Roy Fowler: Organ interlude generally?

Jack Rockett: Until we got rid of it, organs, yes. But they all went eventually.

Sidney Cole: Of course the thing that had disappeared now it the Saturday children's matinee.

Jack Rockett: I never mentioned those of course. Yes we had some wonderful children's matinees. And some of them very successful indeed.

Sidney Cole: Yes. They used to get big audiences I can remember going because I knew the director of a film, he'd probably made for the Children's Film Foundation, I think to an Odeon and I was amazed - an enormous audience.

Jack Rockett: Yes we had very big attendances to the clubs.

Roy Fowler: Are we talking now of the [19]50s, or earlier?

Jack Rockett: Mmm...yes...

Sidney Cole: Oh right through, twenty years or so.

Jack Rockett: Soon after the war they started and then they gradually built up. And there hadn't been any real decline. It had started when I retired in '59 - [corrects himself] what am I talking about? - in '67! There had been quite a few closures then but the mass of it came after that.

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Jack Rockett: And of course I saw the start of bingo. I saw a number of theatres turned into bingo of course.

Roy Fowler: Was there such a thing as a typical high street cinema in the '30s? How many seats for example?

Jack Rockett: Very difficult, but if you took as a rough I would have thought 1500.

Roy Fowler: Right. And how would the cinema be staffed? What would you have on staff there?

Jack Rockett: Again, you're asking really an impossible question - do you use the front stalls entrance, do you use only one entrance, has it got a circle? All this.

Roy Fowler: Assume it's got a circle. Let's assume that it's the front entrance.

Jack Rockett: Only?

Roy Fowler: I'm thinking of projectionists, of cleaners, of all the people who then went to make up the cinema itself.

Jack Rockett: In those days, I can only talk about our circuit. We reckoned a Chief, a Second, a Third, a Fourth and a boy. But that was eventually cut down, right down almost to two and three but in the '50s there would be five in an operating box.

Roy Fowler: No, the heyday of movie-going in the '30s and when there weren't all the problems of labour in the '40s during the war. In the heyday.

Jack Rockett: Those days - yes. Well there'd be five operators in most places. Four anyway, but five in many of them.

Roy Fowler: How many at the box office, how many usherettes - people like that?

Jack Rockett: Yes - according to the number of seating and so on, ooh...

Roy Fowler: Say for a 1500 seat cinema.

Jack Rockett: Oh it would probably be eight usherettes I should think. You'd have - I can remember the day when you had two fairly smart doormen on the front, you know, wonderful uniforms with lapels on. And he would come forward if it was a wet day with his big umbrella and hold his umbrella up for you. I can remember those days.

Roy Fowler: Jack. All that's gone and it's largely forgotten, this is why it's important to then remember it.

Jack Rockett: Before the war I can remember the West End Birmingham, marvellous man there, and he's step forward as I said with his umbrella and so forth and had got all his medals on and so on. Well all that gradually disappeared. You lost your front of house men and so on.

Sidney Cole: Did you have anything to do with labour relations, industrial relations with...?

Jack Rockett: Well only with NATKE.

Sidney Cole: With NATKE, oh Tom O'Brien. Did you meet Tom?

Jack Rockett: I met Tom O'Brien but the man I had most trouble with was Mr Keenan, who is I believe now - who took his place, but he was in charge up in Scotland.

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Jack Rockett: But I battled with him. [laughs] I battled with him.

Sidney Cole: Because wages weren't very high for some of the staff were they?

Jack Rockett: No, no, but I don't think we want to sort of...

Roy Fowler: Oh yes.

Sidney Cole: Yes, we'd like to know.

Roy Fowler: It's history. It's important that these things are remembered.

Sidney Cole: I mean, what was your view of Tom for instance, Sir Tom as he became? He was a very genial person.

Jack Rockett: Oh yes, yes.

Sidney Cole: But how did you find him in...

Jack Rockett: Great friend of Mr Davis of course.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes.

Jack Rockett: I had more to do. As I say, with Keenan.

Sidney Cole: The successor, yes.

Jack Rockett: His successor.

Sidney Cole: You were actually in negotiations with him?

Jack Rockett: The main things were done by the CEA.

Sidney Cole: Yes of course, and they had general agreements then, yes.

Jack Rockett: But parts of it would come up and I'd have to go to a meeting with Keenan and perhaps certain other exhibitors. And he was a tough man to crack. But I can only say when I left he did come in to see me and shake hands and said, "Well you were a very hard man Mr Rockett but at least you were honest with us." I'm proud of that fact.

Sidney Cole: Yes I suppose that's good, yes.

Jack Rockett: But [laughs] a very difficult man to get on with.

Sidney Cole: Can you remember what sort of money projectionists were earning in those days?

Jack Rockett: Very difficult, very difficult.

Sidney Cole: Depended on the cinema I suppose.

Jack Rockett: Oh yes it depends yes because you had Grade A, Grade B, Grade C. You had Grade A, Grade B, Grade C in the national agreement.

Sidney Cole: Yes. But do you remember what the Grade A figure was for instance for a projectionist?

Jack Rockett: To be really honest I can't. I'd only be guessing. Wouldn't be fair.

Sidney Cole: No, you can't really remember.

Jack Rockett: No.

Sidney Cole: Do you have any family and if so were they connected with the business at all?

Jack Rockett: No, no, no. I get connected with the business because apparently there's a number of Rocketts. When I first went north, one or two people tried to say they knew me, I said, "But you don't." There was a Rockett apparently who was something to do with the CTBF who lived up north, but no relation of mine. No.

Sidney Cole: No family.

Jack Rockett: I have a son and daughter but nothing to do with the business.

Sidney Cole: Uh-huh. They didn't want to go into the business.

Jack Rockett: No, no [laughs]. I remember saying to my son, "Look Geoff," (this is when I was in Manchester), "I can get you in, but you've got to..." He said, "Dad, I wouldn't work all the hours you work, no fear. Not for all the hours you work. That's not for me." [Laughs]

Sidney Cole: What does he actually do then?

Jack Rockett: Actually I got him, through one of our contractors, he was mad on motor cars and so I got him a proper apprenticeship at a garage and he [laughs] came to me, sat down after a year and said, "Dad I'm fed up with this." I said, "No good you being fed up my lad. You've got another four years to do." But it's paid off. He's now in charge of a big garage in London now. But he's got a company car and so on and done very well. But it all came from a small beginning in Manchester.

Unknown sound recordist: Can I just stop you there a second?

Sidney Cole: Yes. [break in recording] Well let's go to the - we were talking about the amount of staff that you had then in a cinema compared to what is now.

Jack Rockett: As I say, first of all you had your licensing laws. You had to comply with them. And in those days there was always sufficient staff to be able to show people to their seats because of the tremendous attendances that we were getting.

Sidney Cole: Ah that's the point isn't it because people were going regularly to the cinema which in later years now they're not.

Jack Rockett: That's right. Dropped off.

Sidney Cole: Nowadays you don't get anybody to show you to your seat usually. You're lucky to be able to find it yourself.

Jack Rockett: And so you know. But there was always good staff in the projection box. There would be at least four, in many cases five.

Sidney Cole: And you had people in the front of the house.

Jack Rockett: And then you had, as I say, I can remember the day when you had a very smart doorman on the front with the medals on, in a very smart uniform, give us a link to the various people as they came in. At the West End Birmingham I well remember if it was a wet day a car would draw up at the front, the doorman would step forward with his umbrella and see the people inside, they didn't get wet. And we had these very smart doormen in most of the theatres in those days. But of course they gradually went. I mean uniforms and so on, they became more expensive. But...

Sidney Cole: Because films were much more - cinemas were bulked much more largely in the whole social situation weren't they?

Jack Rockett: You hadn't got television.

Sidney Cole: You hadn't got television, you hadn't got bingo.

Jack Rockett: Yes bingo came after.

Sidney Cole: It came after, yeah.

Jack Rockett: But you hadn't got television and people were flocking into the cinemas in those days.

Sidney Cole: And also the publicity stunts were more related weren't they to what was happening?

Jack Rockett: Oh yes.

Sidney Cole: You mentioned something in our conversation about the tram business.

Jack Rockett: I remember when the last tram ran in Sheffield. Our manager there managed to get on it and he got quite a lot of space in the newspaper about it.

Sidney Cole: Ah yes. And did that tie in with any particular picture?

Jack Rockett: It did, but I can't tell you the name of the film.

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Jack Rockett: Can't remember. Can't remember.

Sidney Cole: There was a lot of ingenuity than wasn't there in commercial stunts? Can you remember any others?

Jack Rockett: Some of the managers were very, very clever. They really were. They got up to street stunts.

Sidney Cole: Such as? What do you mean?

Jack Rockett: Ooh [laughs]. [pauses]. They'd have perhaps a cart and a horse all dressed up and so forth and so on.

Sidney Cole: Going round the streets?

Jack Rockett: Going round the streets - yes. Again that's barred now by - couldn't do it if you wanted to.

Sidney Cole: You mean the police object or the local councils?

Jack Rockett: Yes, I would think so.

Sidney Cole: Oh, that's a shame.

Jack Rockett: And you must remember I've been retired 20 years and a lot of things happened in that 20 years.

Sidney Cole: Yes, sure. Yes.

Jack Rockett: But some of them were very good showmen.

Sidney Cole: DO you think the decline in cinema going was largely due to television or do you think there were other circumstances?

Jack Rockett: I think we have to be honest and say television made a big difference. I do feel this: that with the younger people who've come in and seeing television all the time, I think this could be the hope of the cinema. In other words it could go the complete circle.

Sidney Cole: Uh-huh.

Jack Rockett: You know, they're so fed up with television, perhaps this is the time to go back to - go to the cinema.

Sidney Cole: Makes more of an event of things doesn't it - going to the cinema?

Jack Rockett: That's right - yes. An interesting point. Oh, you've asked me where and I can't remember. We had - where we had - we didn't have many in Gaumont but in the old days where they had the quilted seats, a double seat.

Sidney Cole: Oh yes. That was mainly in the north. But there was no arm between the two seats, so...

Jack Rockett: That's right, yes.

Sidney Cole: ...the boy and girl could do a bit of canoodling while they were watching the movie.

Jack Rockett: [Laughs] that's right - yes. I found that in one or two theatres when we took over other theatres, that happened.

Sidney Cole: Yes. And that was mainly in the north I think.

Jack Rockett: Yes, yes. I never saw any in the south. I remember them in Wolverhampton, I remember them in Manchester. But they weren't Gaumont halls in the first place.

Roy Fowler: Was there a big difference, in those days, between a hit movie and a so-so movie? Would the theatre always be full each week?

Jack Rockett: Oh no, you had what you called your real box-office winners of course. I mean, I'll tell you another one that comes back to me of the olden days now - Jesse Matthews in Evergreen.

Sidney Cole: Oh Evergreen, that was a big...

Jack Rockett: Took a lot of money.

Sidney Cole: That was a big hit wasn't it - yes.

Jack Rockett: Took a lot of money.

Sidney Cole: She was a big star in those days.

Jack Rockett: Oh yes, it took a lot of money.

Sidney Cole: I suppose that's again another difference though isn't it Jack that there were many more names that attracted cinemagoers into the cinemas probably in those days than is the case now. Would you think that was true?

Jack Rockett: Maybe, maybe, yes.

Sidney Cole: I mean people would go and see what - did you run Gracie Fields pictures?

Jack Rockett: No, they mostly went to ABC.

Sidney Cole: Oh. ABC they were, weren't they.

Jack Rockett: I'll tell you the other one - the dancing people that took a lot of money.

Roy Fowler: Fred Astaire.

Sidney Cole: Oh Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Jack Rockett: They took a fortune. But not only on the first runs but on your second runs and even on your third runs.

Roy Fowler: Jack, you had to show films for exhibitors' quota. Were they dreaded?

Jack Rockett: Oh yes. Well no, whether you dreaded them or not every manager had to keep a quota book.

Roy Fowler: Yes.

Jack Rockett: That was another thing I did when I was an auditor, I had to check the quota books and check that the arithmetic was correct and so forth.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes. Some of those probably did quite well didn't they?

Jack Rockett: We called them B class pictures.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes. And they were - ran as second features.

Jack Rockett: Yes they ran as second features. You had occasions where a manager would say could he show the second features as the feature. He wasn't allowed to do so because of contractual - but sometimes it could turn out that the second feature was in fact better than the feature as far as the public were concerned. Then you'd got others that were 50/50, where you could show either way.

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Roy Fowler: Did you ever have special shows at nine-thirty in the morning just to get rid of quota obligations?

Jack Rockett: No, I never did, never did so. No, no, because of the management each keeping their own quota book and our booking department, it was watched too closely. I don't ever remember doing that.

Sidney Cole: No I think those were things that did happen Roy, and they were strictly against the spirit of the Act if not the letter and they were soon put a stop to.

Jack Rockett: As I say I don't ever remember that we had to do that.

Sidney Cole: Do you think that was a good thing? To have such a quota?

Jack Rockett: [pauses]

Sidney Cole: Or did you not think about it particularly?

Jack Rockett: Well I hadn't thought about it particularly. Thinking about it now I suppose to some extent it did help some film producers.

Sidney Cole: Yes.

Jack Rockett: You know they wouldn't have had a chance.

Sidney Cole: Because predominantly the kind of movies that were shown were American weren't they on the circuits?

Jack Rockett: Oh yes, but you'd still got to show your percentage.

Sidney Cole: Yes. And the idea was to help British production.

Jack Rockett: That's why I was saying, it probably helped some producers who are probably doing very well today as a result of it. I don't know.

Sidney Cole: Right. Anything else Roy?

Roy Fowler: No, I think not. Taffy - how about you? This is an area you're interested in.

Unknown speaker - "Taffy": Jack doesn't know much about what happened when they put Todd A-O in and there was something different and how much of period you had to close down or what?

Sidney Cole: So Jack is there anything else you'd like to say that we haven't touched on?

Jack Rockett: No, but just to answer you on that. I had a regional engineer. Now if I went into a - we're not recording now?

Unknown speaker - "Taffy": Er, yes.

Jack Rockett: Right, yes, because this isn't really of interest so don't record it. But if I went into the theatre I knew if for instance there was a bad overlap - you know what I mean by an overlap? You know, a white showing down on the side of the screen.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes.

Jack Rockett: Well I would complain about that.

Sidney Cole: Sure.

Jack Rockett: And if the operator couldn't put it right then I would say to them, "Well get hold of Mr Newsome" - or whoever it was, the regional engineer - "and get it put right." If the sound wasn't right. I knew if the sound wasn't right it wasn't my job to do it, I knew it wasn't right. And therefore I wanted it put right [laughs]. So you asked me about Todd A-O, the engineer did all that. I remember when we - we're not recording now are we?

Unknown speaker - "Taffy": Well...okay, yes.

Sidney Cole: Right Jack, well it's been very interesting indeed and will be interesting to a lot of people apart from us that are here. So thank you very much. It was very enjoyable.

Jack Rockett: Well, [laughs] I never knew anything like this was going to happen.

Sidney Cole: There you are - it's a new experience.

Jack Rockett: I've often said I could write a book and I still think I could! [laughs]

Sidney Cole: Well you should do - yes. This could be a kind of rehearsal for you.

Jack Rockett: [Laughs]

Roy Fowler: You're the first person we've done from the exhibition side.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes.

Roy Fowler: All the others have been production.

Jack Rockett: Right well I've taken you at your word what you've said - anything I've said, well you've heard what I've said, none if it's - I've not said anything defamatory [laughs].

Sidney Cole: Believe me some of the people that we've talked to have said some very...

[end of recording]