

William Fielder (Distributor), 1893 - ?

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BIOGRAPHY: Born in 1893, Fielder was a clerk with the Baltic and Mercantile Shipping Exchange before joining up in the First World War. He served during the war, operating the searchlights at Dover, and in 1919, through a contact he'd made in the army, he joined Wardour Films as a log-book clerk. He stayed at Wardour films, and had worked his way up to be General Manager by the time it was taken over by Pathe. Fielder retained his post at Pathe until his retirement in 1957. **SUMMARY:** In this extremely brief interview conducted by Sid Cole and Roy Fowler at Glebelands (the CTBF retirement home), Fielder talks about his early experiences and how he entered the industry. He briefly touches on the reason why he retired early, and on his contact with George Elvin. He is very lucid and his memory is good. It is a real disappointment that the interview is for some reason cut short. (Lawrence Napper, BCHRP)

BECTU History Project - Interview No. 53 (Taken from side 2 of interview 54 with Jack Rockett)

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Interviewers: Sidney Cole and Roy Fowler

Interviewee: William Fielder

Tape 1, Side 1

Roy Fowler: This recording is copyright by the ACTT History Project. We're still at Glebelands. 22 August 1988. The subject is William Albert Fielder. Sid.

Sidney Cole: Well Mr Fielder you've been a long time in the film business, connected with it. When did you start?

William Fielder: In er - I think it was August or September 1919.

Sidney Cole: Ah, yes. How old were you then? When were you born for instance?

William Fielder: Oh I can't remember how old I was, you've got to work it out. Well I'm 95 now.

Sidney Cole: Ah, work it out. 1893.

William Fielder: That's it - 1893.

Sidney Cole: Good. And so in 1919 - yes. What did you do when you first came into the film business?

William Fielder: I was a log book clerk. I started with Wardour Films.

Sidney Cole: That was in Wardour Street was it?

William Fielder: That was in Wardour Street, yes.

Sidney Cole: And what did you do in that job?

William Fielder: Well what they used to call a log book clerk.

Sidney Cole: Just checking things in and out was it?

William Fielder: Sort of, yes. Films went out every three days of course to the various cinemas and the log book told you where they went. And from the log book a despatch sheet was given to the despatch department, who despatched the films.

Sidney Cole: Yes. How long did you stay there with Wardour Films?

William Fielder: Oh crumbs, I don't know but I never left, I got transferred every time there was a take-over I was in the take-over and I remained and I never got the sack until the time I retired in 1957.

Sidney Cole: Oh marvellous. So what was the first take-over you remember? What was the new firm called?

William Fielder: Er... [thinks]

Sidney Cole: Was that Pathe yet, or was it something in between?

William Fielder: Yes, Wardour Films stayed in the business until it amalgamated with Pathe.

Sidney Cole: Uh-huh.

William Fielder: And that's when I was at the time I was General Manager of Wardour Films and when we joined up with Pathe Bill Gell[?] who was the Managing Director of Pathe, being the senior, he became the Managing Director of the joint company and I was still the General Manager.

Sidney Cole: Could you tell me something about the steps in between being the log clerk and becoming General Manager of Wardour? What did you do in between?

William Fielder: Do you mean how I got into the business in the first place?

Sidney Cole: Well yes I'd like to know that too. Yes.

William Fielder: Well when I was in the Army there was a chap who used to sleep by the side of me named Thorpe. And he was with the very ancient Pathe before he joined up. And when he retired he returned to Pathe. When I returned - before that I was in the corn industry. I was on the Baltic and Mercantile Shipping Exchange. When I got back, my company who paid me half bail all the time I was away, said, "Well we're very sorry Fielder but the government have taken over our business now and we've really nothing to offer you. I could only suggest that you go and see Mr - Mr" (I forget his name, he was one of the partners of the firm I was with) and he gave me a job in the Ministry where he was, the Ministry of Wheat and something or other. And that's - and then I was in, funnily enough, in Brixton one day doing a bit of shopping and I met this chap who used to sleep next to me and he told me that he was then the General Manager of a firm called Bolton's Mutual Films. And they asked where I was and I told him and he said, "Come and have lunch with me." I had a lunch with him and then one day he said to me, "How do you like the job where you are?" And I said, "I don't like it at all. I came in in the morning and signed the book and added lots of figures and they don't mean anything when you've finished with them, whether they're right or wrong. I'm fed up to the teeth with it." He said, "Well why not join me?" So I said, "I'd like to." And I joined him as a clerk - log book clerk at Wardour Films. It had become Wardour Films the week before I joined it.

Sidney Cole: That's fascinating. Could you tell me something more about the War years, or the immediate War years? Did you volunteer?

William Fielder: I was in the - funnily enough I joined up in June 1915 and I didn't get discharged until after the Armistice, long time after the Armistice. And I went overseas after the Armistice.

Sidney Cole: Really?

William Fielder: Four days after the Armistice.

Sidney Cole: Really? Where did you go?

William Fielder: To a little town called Bershide which is near Cologne.

Sidney Cole: You mean you hadn't been on the Continent during the war?

William Fielder: No.

Sidney Cole: You were in England all the time?

William Fielder: I spent four years in the Army and never went overseas until four days after the Armistice!

Sidney Cole: What did you do in those four years?

William Fielder: Working on the searchlights at Dover.

Sidney Cole: I see - ah.

William Fielder: There used to be searchlights on the different arms and we were on the eastern arm. And we used to do that and we lived in what was an old military prison at the top of the hill.

Sidney Cole: Did you ever spot any Zeppelins?

William Fielder: Oh yes we had Zeppelins over. We used to get into the trenches for that. We built trenches.

Sidney Cole: But did you see any shot down?

William Fielder: No.

Sidney Cole: Because it was mainly airships then, wasn't it, rather than planes that came and did a little bombing.

William Fielder: Er...well there was a little of each of course. But it was mainly balloon type.

Sidney Cole: Yes, yes. What did you do before you went into the Army? What were your first jobs - can you remember?

William Fielder: I was with a corn merchants. That's what I say I was on the Baltic and Mercantile Shipping Exchange.

Sidney Cole: And that was your first actual job was it?

William Fielder: Oh no, before that I worked for three years in a solicitor's office as an office boy.

Sidney Cole: Uh-huh, yes. How did you like that?

William Fielder: Well I learnt a lot there, I used to go to night school and learnt shorthand and typewriting and all that kind of thing and that allowed me to get jobs afterwards.

Sidney Cole: Yes, very good, yes. So leaping forward again, there you were, become General Manager of Wardour and then that was taken over by Pathe. And you stayed there...

William Fielder: I stayed there as General Manager, under the Managing Director.

Sidney Cole: Yes. That was - because Pathe made films didn't they as well as having a newsreel. Were you connected with the newsreel at all?

William Fielder: No, they used to distribute the films made by the corporation - the Associated British Picture Corporation, of which they were a subsidiary of course. And we used to distribute American films as well.

Sidney Cole: Did you have anything to do with labour relations and the negotiations with the trade unions in this job?

William Fielder: Er - when I, yes I did, quite a lot. I used to - I used to come across...oh...he's dead now.

Sidney Cole: Sir Tom? Tom O'Brien?

William Fielder: No not Tom.

Sidney Cole: George Elvin?

William Fielder: Who?

Sidney Cole: George Elvin.

William Fielder: George Elvin.

Sidney Cole: George Elvin - you had a lot to do with him. How did you get along with him?

William Fielder: I used to fight with him across the table when we were discussing anything and that kind of thing. And then at the end we used to go down to the local pub and have a drink together. [laughs]

Sidney Cole: Very nice.

William Fielder: We were dead pals, really!

Sidney Cole: Oh how nice, yes. That's good. Which pub did you go to? Was it the one in Soho?

William Fielder: Just in Soho Square.

Sidney Cole: Soho Square - yes, just off Soho Square.

William Fielder: That's it.

Sidney Cole: The Highlander. Was it The Highlander?

William Fielder: I can't remember.

Sidney Cole: Okay yes. Well that's nice. What else do you remember - who else did you negotiate with? Mainly with George I suppose.

William Fielder: With George only, yes. Because it was mainly I was concerned with - those people that were in the ACT.

Sidney Cole: Sure, yes.

William Fielder: As it was then. ACT.

Sidney Cole: Yes, before the other 'T' was added. Yes.

William Fielder: That's right.

Sidney Cole: Do you have any special memories of those days? About any of those negotiations or any stories at all you recall?

William Fielder: No I can't remember anything. I suppose - my memory, I can't remember what happened this morning let alone forty or fifty years ago.

Sidney Cole: [Laughs] Well you're doing very well there. So you stayed there. When did you retire? '56?

William Fielder: 1957.

Sidney Cole: '57 uh-huh. And by that time things already then had begun to change a bit in the industry from your earlier days?

William Fielder: I could see the changes that were taking place and that's why I left as a matter of fact. I left six months before I needed to. But the Managing Director of the corporation in those days was C.J. Latta and he was very, very kind to me. And the company - I retired and the company were very, very good to me, very good to me. I don't just mean pension-wise but a lump sum they gave me when I left. They were, very.

Sidney Cole: That's very good. What were the changes that you felt were coming at that time? Was it because of television for instance?

William Fielder: Warner Brothers were taking over and there was going to be amalgamations. I didn't think it would be so good. But almost immediately after I left it became Warner-Pathe. In my time it was Associated British Pathe.

Sidney Cole: That was when Max Milder came in was it?

William Fielder: Max Milder, well that was quite - after Dr John Maxwell died they came into the business. Mrs Maxwell had to sell the controlling interest to pay for the death duties.

Sidney Cole: Yes. So, what did you do with yourself since then?

William Fielder: Since then?

Sidney Cole: Since you retired. Did you have other jobs outside the business or have you just enjoyed your retirement?

William Fielder: No, no, I didn't have any more jobs. No I retired. I moved down to Angren[?] near Worthing. Then I subsequently moved to Worthing.

Sidney Cole: Do you have a family?

William Fielder: Only a son.

Sidney Cole: Did he go into the business?

William Fielder: No I'm sorry, he was a mongol.

Sidney Cole: Oh, I'm sorry to have touched on that. Yes. So what was the main thing you enjoyed - would you rather have... Are you glad you went into the film business instead of staying with any of those other things looking back?

William Fielder: Would I what?

Sidney Cole: Looking back on your life - would you have liked to have done something other than what you mainly did?

William Fielder: Oh no, no. I had a happy life in the film industry, a very happy life. Got on well with everybody and the company threw me a lunch when I retired and invited all my old friends and mostly exhibitors of course, because I used to deal with exhibitors.

Sidney Cole: What were the main points in the agreements that maybe you had a friendly disagreement with George Elvin on - can you remember?

William Fielder: Oh I can't remember.

Sidney Cole: It was mainly the question of conditions and wages.

William Fielder: Mainly money of course.

Sidney Cole: Money yes, sure.

William Fielder: That was the only thing that concerned any of us [laughs].

Sidney Cole: Your job was to give away as little of it as possible and George's to get as much of it as possible.

William Fielder: That's right.

Sidney Cole: Right, yes, good. Roy - anything you want to...?

Roy Fowler: Can we pause please?

[end of recording]