

## John Legard obituary

Documentary film editor and producer whose work conveyed the spirit of Britain during the Second World War, provided a window into a newly nationalised coal industry, and extolled the pleasures of travel with British Rail.

John Legard is remembered as the Supervising Editor who enlivened the perception and public screen image of British Rail from a war weary steam and coal driven transport system to a sleek and clean 125mph railway with an electric future.

Having suffered from polio at a young age, John Legard who has died aged 92, had been unable to join the front line during World War II but instead found purpose in joining the Crown Film Unit, in 1943, as an assistant editor where Stewart McAllister (co-Director and Editor with Humphrey Jennings) presided.

In the role of apprentice, Legard learnt from those steeped in the traditions of the sponsored documentary and bore witness to the production of many of the wartime documentaries now considered to epitomise the mood of the British people during the war. Humphrey Jennings (*Fires Were Started, 1943*), Jack Lee (*Close Quarters, 1943*), Pat Jackson (*Western Approaches, 1944*) and Basil Wright (*This Was Japan, 1945*) were all names that graced the credits of Crown during their wartime residency at Pinewood studios. Exposed to both feature film and public information film-making Legard studied the craft of his fellow editors with great care, spending equal time observing the productive nature of a positive relationship with a film's director.

Under the wing of McAllister, Legard had impressed the founder of British documentary film, John Grierson, with his editing technique, and completed many public information shorts often without credit. The immediate post-war years provided an intense but varied production schedule with many informational shorts completed as part of the Government programme for rebuilding Britain. He found himself editing films for the Central Office of Information and the Ministry of Agriculture, working on titles such as *Breeding for Milk (1947)*, a film on what to look for when buying a cow and *A Family Affair (1950)*, for the Home Office on foster parenting. The newly nationalised coal industry provided opportunity for newsreel film-making and he cut the first six episodes of the celebrated touring newsreel for coal mining areas, *Mining Review (1947)*. A deep passion for music and its use in the sponsored film blossomed upon witnessing Muir Mathieson in the recording studios of Pinewood alongside the renowned documentary sound engineer Ken Cameron. In the role of editor, Legard ensured that from there on, he would be present for all of the scores specially composed and recorded for his films.

In 1952, he was persuaded by McAllister to join him at the newly formed British Transport film unit. Established in 1949 as the Film Service of the British Transport Commission, this unit, with Edgar Anstey as Producer in charge, was set to take up the documentary tradition, established by Grierson

with the Empire Marketing Board in 1929 and continued by the GPO film unit and Crown, producing a wide-ranging documentary output under the aegis of a nationalised public service.

When Legard joined BTF he was told by McAllister, "...we're now going to make films where we are not constantly pressurised by deadlines; I want you to take time over this, and, if you want to take the morning off and go and do some shopping...you know, get in the right frame of mind, then that would be fine... really!" Having left an intense system of working at Crown, BTF was a welcome change that encouraged creative thinking. Legard was even given opportunity and holiday leave to try his hand at cutting feature films, *Child's Play (1953)*, directed by Margaret Thomson for Group 3 and *The Bosun's Mate (1953)* starring Barbara Mullen for Anvil.

For BTF, Legard worked on many of the theatrical touring travelogues produced to entice a holiday by rail to destinations around the British Isles. *West Country Journey (1953)*, *East Anglian Holiday (1954)* and *Yorkshire Sands (1955)*, now epitomise the British holiday of yesteryear but this was serious publicity and travel promotion in an age when few families had a motor car. The promotion of a public transport undertaking provided a wealth of film-making opportunity and the classic *Snowdrift at Bleath Gill (1955)* in which a train frozen and snowbound is dug out with pick and shovel is revered even today by railway enthusiasts nationwide.

Travel promotion was often about the destination and *The England of Elizabeth (1957)* provided a colourful and artistic pilgrimage through Elizabethan England revealing the memorials to Drake, Raleigh and Shakespeare that could be visited via nationalised transport. For Legard it provided opportunity to work with Ralph Vaughan Williams who composed a score especially. In the recording, it was said that Vaughan Williams became so animated that he lent back too far in his chair and fell off the sound stage, a premature end prevented only by Legard's shouts and Edgar Anstey's quick reflex. The film won many awards and accolades and gained prestige for an organisation destined for rapid modernisation.

The opportunity to promote the wildlife destinations of Britain brought Legard into contact with Peter Scott and the Slimbridge Wildfowl Centre. The subsequent film, *Wild Wings (1965)* won the unit an Oscar in 1966 for best short film and cemented Legard's reputation as a leader in his field.

An exceptionally kind, thoughtful and helpful man, Legard understood the language of documentary film and loved it with a passion. Often gently mocked for his old 'Crown unit ways' by the younger freelance editors there was always a deep respect for his work and often a dazzle of fresh technique; reminding the juniors why he was so respected within the film industry. His ability to turn his hand to any subject served his unit well for internal training films and public facing prestige films. His guiding hand to a young director's work was often a welcome reassurance. Occasionally a Director and a Producer, he always returned to editing as his first love. Legard edited the 1974 film *Wires Over the Border*, directed by David Lochner, a tale of the completion of British Rail's West Coast Main Line electrification and of the sheer grit and determination on the part of the railway electrification team who were out in rain, sleet, snow and blizzard. The film's Technicolor coat couldn't hide the harsh reality of the cold weather but its beauty in the contrasting foundry scenes is all Legard. *Wires Over the Border* represents everything that is great about the prestige industry sponsored documentary and is the pinnacle achievement of a film unit steeped in documentary history.

Towards the 1980s, as Legard's contemporaries retired, he embarked upon a series of travel promotion films for British Rail; the occasional cricket scene a sure sign as to who might be on the editing credit. *Landscape with Castles (1976)*, *England's North Country (1978)* and *The Beacons and Beyond (1979)* served the railway's needs well and endorsed the new age of the train with their flagship Intercity 125. For Legard however, it became clear that BTF would eventually be shunted into a world of corporate video tape and audio visual aids. Legard left the unit in 1983 to take up an opportunity to edit a series of films for the National Cricket Association, a sport he remained passionate about until the very end. Sponsored by the National Westminster Bank and produced by Athos Films the series, featuring many famous players of the day, focused on technique and provided valuable training material for young aspiring players.

An early member of BAFTA and an avid supporter of the British Film Institute's archive work, he played a crucial role in the union driven BECTU History Project, interviewing and recording the many film practitioners he worked with, knew and had been associated with. It is because of Legard that we are so well informed today about the wealth of non-fiction film-making activity that took place in post-war Britain. He provided a last link between documentary's founding Father, John Grierson, and the wealth of documentary scholars today.

- John Legard, documentary film editor: born 28<sup>th</sup> November 1924, Laughton, Gainsborough. Died 14th January 2017, London.

**Steven Foxon.**  
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