

The British Federation of Film Societies - a brief history

On 25th October 1925, The Film Society held its first meeting at the New Gallery Kinema in Regent Street, London. Founder members of The Film Society included Anthony Asquith, Sidney Bernstein, Ivor Montagu, H G Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Augustus John and Maynard Keynes. The first show included the feature film *The Waxworks* (directed by Paul Leni) and *Champion Charlie*, a Chaplin short.

That first season of The Film Society consisted of ten performances with a total number of 39 films, 20 of which had never been screened in England before. This was one of the primary objectives of the society: to screen more of the avant-garde material which had not found an outlet in the commercial cinema. Screenings were only part of the meetings with exhibitions of artwork, lectures and discussions all contributing to the ethos of the event.

During the late 1920's and the early 30's, more film societies were set up in Billingham, Cambridge, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Ipswich, Manchester, Oxford and Southampton. Cinemas began to follow the societies by showing foreign films and by 1932 there was conflict - The Leeds Film Group was prevented from showing films by the film trade and their venue, the Savoy Theatre, was taken over and opened as the Leeds Academy Cinema.

First attempts to federate

The first attempt to form a Federation of Film Societies was at a meeting in Welwyn in 1932. Despite the best intentions this never really functioned successfully. In 1936, a further attempt was made following a meeting in Leicester, but again, this failed. However, Scottish film societies had succeeded in banding together with the purpose 'to protect their interests and encourage the formation of new societies' in the autumn of 1934 and the independent Scottish Films Council was set up through the initiative of the societies in the same year. They appointed a London booking representative, J.S. Fairfax Jones (who later became well known through his Everyman Cinema in Hampstead). Finally, in 1937, a British Federation of Film Societies came into being with Barbara Frey, the secretary of The Film Society, as its first secretary.

After WWII

After World War II there were two fundamental changes to the operations of film societies. Cinemas now began to operate on Sundays, and societies could not match the revenue to be gained from commercial screenings. However, the technical advancement of 16mm, which had been developed during the war, was now available on a large scale. Its cost and suitability for small venues made it ideal for use in film societies. Gradually, more and more societies used this as the primary format and some societies continue to use 16mm today.

The war had again disrupted the initial progress made in the formation of the Federation. In 1945, societies in England came together, while a small number in Scotland (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and North Ayrshire) did likewise. At the British Film Institute (BFI) a booking agency was started to run in conjunction with the Federations, the 50 film societies and other renters. The Central Booking Agency had Leslie Hardcastle and David Meeker among its staff in the early days.

First viewing sessions

The first Viewing Session organised by the English Federation was in 1946, to assist member societies to select film titles for screening, whilst the Scottish Federation had organised events at both the Everyman in pre and post-war in London, as well as in Scotland. The first National Viewing Session, in conjunction with the Scottish Federation, was in 1949. The following year the BFI took over the presentation providing separate 35mm and 16mm sessions. The National Viewing Sessions have continued ever since, under different forms of management, and are one of the highlights in the Film Society calendar.

During the late 1940s the BFI had provided staff and accommodation for the Federation, but financial difficulties forced these services to be withdrawn in 1950. At this point Margaret Hancock took over the work of Honorary Secretary of the Federation from her home in Sheffield.

During the 1950s a regional group structure was introduced in order to aid the development of societies local-

ly. There were now around 250 societies and 1954 saw the first issue of FILM - the Federation's own magazine. Innovation continued with an advisory council to the Federation being appointed (including such august people as Benjamin Britten, Thorold Dickinson, Paul Rotha) followed by the staging of two international conferences.

The 1960s

By the early 1960s, the number of societies was nearing the 500 mark, and the amount of work required to maintain the services, as well as the finances to provide it, was stretching the goodwill of its voluntary helpers and members. The Federation realised that it had to become more firmly established from the financial point of view and that some form of full time staff was required. In 1965, The Andover Agreement was ratified between the BFI and the Federation, whereby the former again provided offices and a Film Society Liaison Officer, who was also to act as Secretary of the Federation.

In 1969, the Federation of Scottish Film Societies amalgamated with the English Federation to form (once again) the British Federation of Film Societies. Two years later the BFI, in a general policy of devolution, decided that the Federation should become a Grant-In-Aid body with its own full-time secretary and staff. Jean Young was subsequently appointed as the first General Secretary followed by Peter Cargin as Information Officer in 1973. With their assistants this brought the total staff to four.

Impact of home video

Over the next 15 years the film environment underwent various changes. Cinema audiences fell, home video made its presence felt and Channel 4 had the strong impact of forcing TV programmers to look again at the presentation of their films - as well as production. These, as well as other factors, contributed to a decline in film society numbers.

At the beginning of the 80s a further policy review brought Dave Watterson (who had succeeded Jean Young in 1977) and the other members of staff back inside the BFI. Under that structure the Film Society Unit had a budget to carry out its work while the Federation retained a small annual grant as a separate body. In 1987 Tom Brownlie took over as the third General Secretary.

The 1990s and the new millennium

During the 90s the BFI's finances were strained to the limit. Severe cutbacks were made in many areas, and after a period of negotiation the Federation once more became a Grant-In-Aid body. The grant was, however, cut drastically so that paid staff could no longer be afforded. Tom Brownlie continued as General Secretary through these difficult times. The number of film societies reduced as the impact of video, satellite and cable television was felt. A general return to the cinema in the mid to late 90s was reflected in increased support for film societies.

In the early 00s BFFS entered a phase of crisis and a period of difficult relations with the newly-established UK Film Council, who were now its sole funder. Membership sank temporarily, as film societies questioned the level and quality of services the federation provided, and BFFS's management committee were forced to face some difficult decisions. With UKFC funding no longer secure, BFFS was forced (in 2004) to dispense with the post of Chief Executive. In the period following this low point, BFFS has been working through a substantial re-organisation which is already bringing considerable advantages. Membership of BFFS now brings more benefits than ever before, and, at the time of writing (2006), relations between BFFS and its partner organisations, including UKFC, are markedly improved. Membership is rising, and there is a strong sense that BFFS has found its direction once again.
