

‘Limelights and shadows’: popular
and visual culture in South West
England,
1880-1914

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Abstract

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were an important period for popular shows involving the moving and projected image, yet there have been few sustained studies that have mapped optical entertainments systematically outside London or that have analysed the influence of such shows on early film exhibition. This thesis has profiled the popular and visual culture of five contrasting South West locations during this period, tracing the development and distribution of magic lantern shows and dioramas as well as identifying the local and touring companies who hosted film on its arrival in the region. Using the local press, the trade press, contemporary publications and ephemera, this thesis has reconstructed an account of local shows and culture which not only deepens our understanding of popular visual entertainments in regional contexts, but which also serves to stand as a comparison to other established urban and metropolitan paradigms and thus to contribute to a wider and more complex national picture. It advances the argument for a broader classification of such shows in response to local findings and for a more nuanced and detailed appraisal and understanding of their provenance and profiles, and the role film played within them.

In addition, this thesis interrogates early film exhibition in these resorts following the move to fixed-venue cinemas in the late 1900s and investigates the arrival of cinema and its emergence as a fledgling industry in the region. It offers an overview of investment into the business locally and evidences the varied set of partnerships and individuals responsible for financing the first cinemas here. Responses to the new technologies and local modifications to business models for cinemas and film exhibition are analysed and their diversity examined. Managerial relationships with communities are evidenced as an important contributory factor to the success of many local cinemas, permitting adaptations to the needs of patrons which boosted audiences and increased revenue. The variety of local interpretations of cinema discovered here reflects the social and cultural diversity of these selected sites, and is a key finding of this thesis.