



Tim Ray (left) is a founder of Hitchin Films, currently bringing Cinema back to the town with regular showings at the Queen Mother Theatre and North Herts College. Sam Hallas (right) has become an accomplished expert at digital picture and sound editing. Between us we have so far produced three different programmes of old films, all of which played to full houses. Plans for a second DVD are already under way, so if you are able to add to our growing collection of films of Old Hitchin do please get in touch with the Society's secretary via our website, www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/secretary

Richard Whitmore,
Film Archivist for Hitchin Historical Society



www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/secretary



A HITCHIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRODUCTION

A Century of Old Hitchin VOLUME ONE on Film



The **PICTUREDROME**
HITCHIN.
SOLE PROPRIETORS:-
NIGHTLY 7 & 9. **BLAKE BROS**

COMPILED & PRESENTED BY
Richard Whitmore



A small National Treasure

Although 'National Treasure' is a rather overused cliché I had no hesitation in applying the version above to describe *The Hitchin Coronation Celebrations of 1911*. There can be few, if any towns that possess such an enchanting film of this memorable day in the lives of our Edwardian forebears. A film the more remarkable because it was shot with a hand-cranked camera by Ernie Blake, whose whirling thumb appears for a split second in the early moments! The film lasts little more than ten minutes but in that time we see the streets filled almost to bursting point by performers and spectators celebrating the Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary.

In the morning – a Grand Historical Procession of colourful horse-drawn floats.

In the afternoon – The Procession of the Children in which, as the souvenir programme tells us, 3,000 youngsters took part. The Blake Brothers, who built Hitchin's first cinema the *Picturedrome*, later donated their film to the town as 'a permanent memorial of a unique pageant and procession.' but for many 21st Century viewers the pageant may well take second place to the sight of a long-gone generation of Hitchin families enjoying themselves on this special day.

What a delight to be able to see so many elegant women in their finest Edwardian dresses, marshalling the rows of youngsters while trying to keep huge floral hats in place on a blustery summer's day; a delight tempered by the thought that not a single person in this film is alive today to see it. Similarly, one cannot look at the eager faces of the young men, jostling to cheer 'King and Country,' without wondering how many were among more than 350 from our town whose lives were later sacrificed when they went off to fight for that same cause.

The film is not new to Hitchin audiences. The version you will see is a print made from the original in 1935 and shown at the Hermitage Cinema to commemorate the King's Silver Jubilee. More recently it has been seen at film evenings organised by Hitchin Historical Society and the Museum. What nobody knew was that the original camera negative was still in existence. It is the re-discovery of this that has excited archivists at the British Film Institute. For it seems that, although there is film of the King and Queen on their Coronation Day, ours is the only one showing their subjects celebrating the event in a typical English market town.

So we are especially grateful to John Ray, whose family built the *Hermitage* and *Regal* cinemas, for keeping this little gem of movie history safe during the past few decades. Its re-discovery came not a moment too soon because the highly-inflammable nitrate stock from which all early films were made had started to disintegrate and the final moments of the film had already dissolved into a fine brown powder. Now the surviving footage is being stored in a special vault at the B.F.I.'s Silent Film archive. When it has been restored by experts it will be copied onto safety film to be preserved for future generations.

Although the other films on this DVD were made several decades later they too were 'silent.' Now, all have commentaries – apart from the 1911 Coronation Celebrations. To stay true to the period in which that film was made we have used old-style decorative captions to guide viewers through the proceedings.

Not surprisingly *Images of War-time Hitchin* is altogether a more serious affair. I came across the haunting picture of Hitchin Grammar School boys being subjected to a Nazi salute quite by chance while researching another story at the Museum. The image provides a chilling prelude to this evocative collection of films and still photographs recording life and death in the Hitchin area during World War II. A few lighter moments are provided by scenes of residents being trained for Civil Defence and fire-fighting.

The exuberant *Spirit of Youth* was made in 1948 by members of Hitchin Youth Centre to send to their pen pals at a similar club in Australia. One day news came through that the Australian Club had had to close after its headquarters was destroyed by fire. Because of that misfortune the film stayed in Hitchin. Over sixty years later it provides a lively illustration of how the young people of our town channelled their energies during the post war years.

It was *The Story of Tilehouse Street* that first set me thinking about the need for a film archive. Having remembered it being made by Hitchin Ciné Society in the early 1950s, I eventually traced it to Jonathan Sampson, whose parents were members of the film society and had kept the original preserved for over 50 years. Jonathan's grand-father Harry Cannon was also a keen amateur cameraman and some of his work is seen in *Festival of Britain Celebrations 1951*, the final film of this volume. This features the memorable Historical Pageant, which boasted a cast of 1,300 and was seen by Her Majesty the Queen. The commentary includes a 1951 recording of the prologue spoken by Michael Robbins, the first Hitchin actor to become a familiar face on television when he secured a leading role in the long-running ITV series *On the Buses*.

The collection in this volume is only part of a surprising number of Hitchin films that have come to light since I became Film Archivist. Throughout that time it has been my good fortune to work with two colleagues who not only share my enthusiasm but have the essential technical know-how to get these historic films enhanced, edited and shown to Hitchin audiences once again.

