

The Bowdon Sheaf

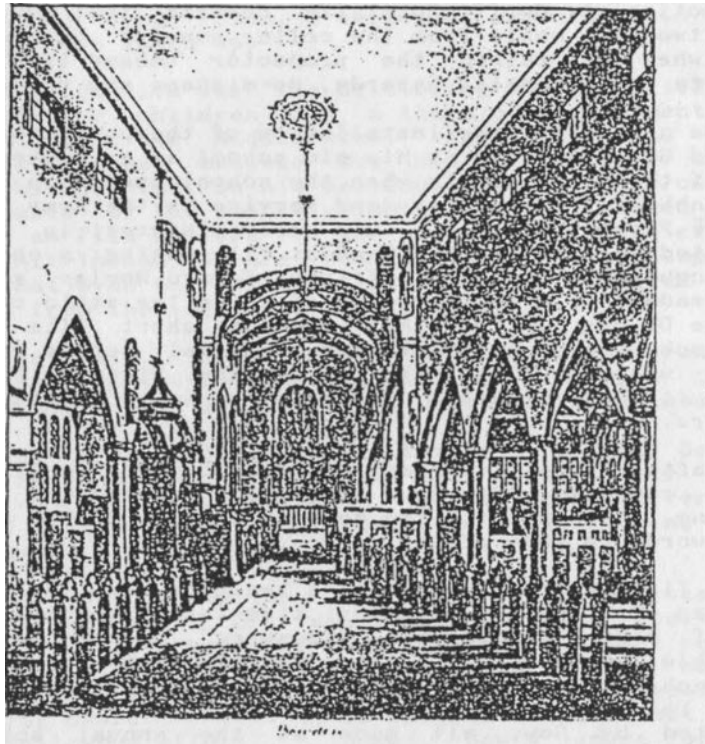
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**RONALD GOW PIONEER IN THE USE AND MAKING OF
EDUCATIONAL FILMS
by Douglas Rendell**

Bowdon, not surprisingly, never had a public cinema within its boundary, but it had a unique private one in the school hall of the Altrincham County High School for Boys. Both the school and one of its teachers, Ronald Gow, made a small contribution to the history of the British cinema.

The school was one of the earliest, if not the first, in the country to use film in education. In the early 1920s Saville Laver, the school's first headmaster, purchased a 35mm cinema projector. Because of the stringent fire precaution regulations applied to the highly inflammable film material of the period (and until the 1950s) the projector was housed in a metal projection box outside the school building. The box was erected on the flat roof of the adjoining masters room, the films being projected through a projection port in the wall on to a roller screen at the other end of the hall.

The first boy projectionist, Geoff Sutcliffe, recalls that power was supplied by a two-core cable from the cellar running outside the building and when it rained the projector became live. Fortunately, despite the potential hazards, no mishaps are recorded. It was soon after the installation of the projector in 1924 that Ronald Gow returned to his old school as a teacher. He had been one of the first pupils when the school opened in 1912, going on to Manchester University and service in the Army towards the end of the First World War. His early interest in the theatre may have led him to try his hand at film making; a cheap 35mm camera was acquired and with his friend Edward Horley some home movies were made, film shows being given in the attic of Horley's home on the Downs. In 1917 they made a short film record of the Altrincham and District War Hospital Supply Depot at Denzell which was shown at the Altrincham Picture Theatre to give publicity to the depot where there was a shortage of volunteer workers.

Soon after his arrival back at school Gow recalls Laver saying, quite casually "By the way Gow, I've bought a cinematograph machine. See what you can do with it. It may be a coming thing" or words to that effect.

Gow's first attempt at making a teaching film was a record of the opening of a sundew plant by time-lapse photography "smoking a lot of cigarettes between exposures", but finding a shortage of suitable educational films, particularly in historical and geographical subjects, he turned to more ambitious projects. There followed a series of films from 1926 to 1930 produced and directed by Gow, all made at the annual school camps with additional scenes filmed locally, some in Dunham Park. The first two established Gow as a pioneer in the use and making of educational films.

The first, as an experiment, was "The People of the Axe" a one-reel film illustrative of the life of a cave boy in the Neolithic period. This was followed in 1927 by "The People of the Lake" which showed the life of lake dwellers in the Bronze Age. These films were successful, being included in an educational film library and shown in Geneva where Gow gave a lecture on the use of film in education. Later, they were shown, with other films, in schools throughout the country as part of an enquiry conducted by the Historical Association on the use of films in education. The published report included "A Note on the Production of Cinema Films at the Altrincham County High School".

The experience gained in making these films led to an ambitious three-reel Scout propaganda film in 1928 "The Man Who Changed His Mind" made with the support of Scout headquarters. The film included sequences of the Chief Scout, Lord Baden Powell and the Hale & Bowdon Fire Brigade who were called upon to provide a fire engine for the climax to the film. The film was acquired by Universal Pictures who showed it in over 250 cinemas throughout the country, a gala opening being given to 1,000 scouts at the Regal Cinema, London. Later, Gow received an 80 word telegram from Universal Pictures asking for a series on the lines of the American "Our Gang" films, a series of comedies with child actors an offer not taken up.

The next production was "The Glittering Sword" in 1929, described as a film for children with a theme of disarmament, the action taking place in the Middle Ages. Again the film was released commercially, but because Gow had been unhappy about the re-editing by Universal on his previous film, in this case the film was released by the school which had to be licenced by the Board of Trade as Film Renters for the purpose. A "premiere" was given at the Altrincham Picture Theatre at which a contemporary report states that even the censor's certificate received a round of applause from the large and lively audience.

Gow's final film, "The River Dart" was quite different in concept from his previous ventures. It set out to trace the course of the River Dart from its source on Dartmoor to Dartmouth. The making of the films was a combined effort, Gow having the knack of arousing enthusiasm in the boys, their parents, his colleagues and their wives. It was regarded very much as an activity for the boys, the production itself being regarded as educational.

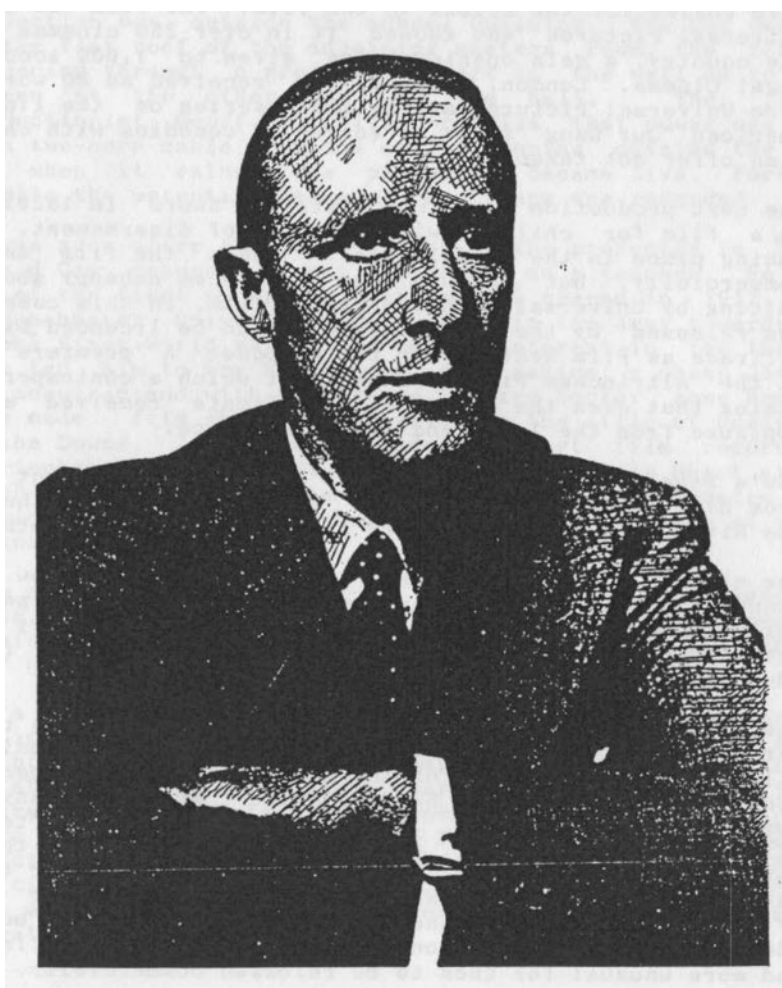
The scale of production, for amateur films, was remarkable. Large sets were built on various camp sites including a lake village for "The People of the Lake" and a street scene 50 yards long for "The Glittering Sword", while there were many props and costumes to be made. The Daily Express reported on "The Glittering Sword" "..., it is hard to realise that the film was not a Hollywood effort". Indeed, Gow's camera for the film, a Pathé studio model, had been a popular camera in the early days of Hollywood. It was unusual for amateur films to be "shot" on 35mm after the introduction of 16mm "sub-standard" film in 1925, and more unusual for them to be released commercially.

It was the theatre that had been Gow's main interest during this period and it tempted him away from teaching in 1933. He had already written a number of plays, two having achieved West End production, when he received national acclaim for his adaptation of Walter Greenwood's novel "Love on the Dole".

The great success of this play changed Gow's life as it made a name for both him and for Wendy Hiller, the aspiring young actress who played his heroine and whom he married in 1937. He remained a playwright although he spent some time working for the BBC and Pinewood film studios and enjoyed a long correspondence with George Bernard Shaw.

Editorial Note

Ronald Gow died earlier this year at the age of 95 and a plaque is to be placed on the building in Altrincham where he spent part of his childhood and which is now Barclays Bank.



BOWDON IN THE 16th AND 17th CENTURIES
THE BOOTHS AND THE TIPPINGS LANDED GENTRY AND YEOMEN
RETAINERS
by Peter Kemp

Part 2

The papers in the legal dispute over Maud Tipping's will run to 36 pages of lawyers' Latin and hurried verbatim recording by clerks, and include depositions from 13 witnesses examined by the Consistory Court of Chester on 29 July and 14 August 1613, concerning the validity of her two last wills. The depositions may well have been taken at a sitting of the Court officials convened for the purpose at Bowdon Church as all the witnesses were local to the parish, but no evidence has yet been found to verify this. Maud's first disputed will was the one drawn up on 20. February 1613, which not only made her three surviving sons beneficiaries, but also her daughter Alice, the wife of William Rowcroft, supposedly a lawyer, who drew it up, and her second was the one made on 7 March 1613, drawn up by the curate George Vawdrey, which cut Alice out following rumours that had been spread that she had died and was buried at Wilmslow. Maud Tipping was well-known for her habit of making wills and when William Rowcroft heard the rumours about his wife's alleged death, his suspicions were aroused and he decided to contest the fraudulent will when it came to probate after Maud's death.

It seems certain that at that time there was some ill-feeling towards William Rowcroft by the Tipping brothers, and in particular by Robert Tipping. Maybe Robert resented his marriage to his sister Alice, and the fact that William was a trusted retainer of the Booths and was seen as a rival to Robert's hopes and ambitions in that direction. Maybe Robert, like his mother, was very keen to ensure that the Tipping's hard-earned wealth did not leave the immediate family. We do not know. But the case against the Tipping brothers was that first John Tipping had tried to persuade his mother to alter her will to cut Alice out so that he would receive a larger share", second that Robert Tipping had initiated a rumour that his sister Alice had died after returning home sick to Wilmslow and had been buried there; and finally that, as a consequence, Robert had convinced his mother that Alice had died and caused her to make a fresh will on 7 March 1613 leaving everything to the three sons only, with them as executors.

The evidence shows that Alice Rowcroft had looked after her infirm and aged mother at Dunham Massey until, being so ill herself that she could no longer do so, she returned home lying in a cart to Wilmslow, to rejoin her husband William where he was in charge of Sir George Booth's dairy on his estates at Bollen and Norcliffe. Far from being dead she was very much alive and made a full recovery. Indeed, she lived on until 1658 as recorded in the Bowdon registers, when she herself must have been in her 70s. As did her husband also, who, as a trusted negotiator and (supposedly) a lawyer, had been instrumental in the Booth's purchase of Warrington in 1628 as Steward of William Booth, and became Steward to William's father Sir George Booth later on his burial entry in the Bowdon registers describes him as "yeoman of Carrington and once Stuard to Sr. George Booth".

The 75 year old George Vawdrey was sent for on 7 March 1613 after Robert Tipping had persuaded his old mother that she needed to draw up a new will now that Alice was dead, and the deposition shows that she said to him that her new will would not differ very much from previous wills he had drawn up, and that her sons Robert and John would instruct him about the wording. Evidence was taken about the old lady's state of mind and memory, whether the will was read out to her, and whether it was drawn up in her presence. It transpired that the suspect will was written in another room and was brought to her for sealing and signing in the presence of Robert and John Tipping, as well as George Moores, Robert Massie and William Cotterell, all cronies of the Tipping brothers. A significant piece of evidence was given by William Artenstall who said that Moores had said to him that "Roecroft was the craftiest fellow that served his master meaninge Sir George Bouthe and yett for all his Crafte they had caught him a tricke. ..."

It is difficult to know for certain whether Alice did receive her share eventually, but the family settled down in time since Robert Tipping, the villain of the piece, made a bequest to his sister Alice and her daughters in his will when he died on 1 December 1622, and furthermore, made William Rowcroft one of his executors, One wonders why Robert Tipping should have resorted to the action he took over his mother's will when he was already a gentleman of substance, owning lands at Irlam, Carrington and Mobberley, and living at Carrington Hall, having taken over occupancy when the last Carrington moved out. Perhaps he really did see William Rowcroft as a threat to his own dominance in the Carrington area and any relationship he had with the Booths.

Sir George Booth had married Jane Carrington the orphaned daughter of John Carrington and heiress to the Carrington estates, when he was 17 and she was 15 years of age. When she died without issue, Sir George took possession of all the lands of Carrington by a lawsuit (he already owned the whole of the manor of Partington), and may well have put the Tippings in to run the estates for him. At his death, Robert Tipping of Carrington Hall was one of the richest men in the area, leaving in his will and inventory of 1622, besides land in Carrington, Flixton, Irlam and Mobberley, goods, chattels and debts owing to him of over £500. He would seem to have acted as principal banker or moneylender for the whole of Carrington and its surrounding townships where 56 people owed him sums of money ranging from 12d. to £68. The ready money float used in those transactions amounted at his death to £52. 10s. 6d. in gold and silver. The inventory shows none of the items many wealthy men accrued, such as books, pictures, musical instruments, etc., but it does show a very productive farming operation.

This is where Robert Tipping's strength lay, and it would seem that as William Rowcroft became more and more involved with official duties for the Booths and less of a rival, Robert patched up their differences and was content to continue with his successful sphere of influence and power in the Carrington area. The inventory of his farming activities list, for example, 68 cheeses, 22 gallons of butter and 2 gallons of honey, as well as considerable quantities of hemp, flax, wool, cloth, corn, barley, wheat, rye and malt. There were herds of cows, bulls and calves, 6 draught horses and 3 colts, and a family of 10 pigs at Carrington with others at Irlam.

The old Hall at Carrington, where Robert Tipping lived and died, was said by Ormerod to be an Elizabethan structure with part of it considerably older. Apparently Robert Tipping added a new building, recorded in his inventory of 1623, consisting of a dining chamber and a bed chamber. Ormerod goes on to say that all this old Hall was demolished about 1858-9, when its replacement called Carrington Hall Farm, which appears on Ordnance Survey maps, was built. He says that, inserted below the eaves of one of its barns, was a long piece of dark oak carved with the armorial bearings of the Carringtons, the only remnant of the old Hall then remaining. The Victorian farm buildings have now in turn been demolished.

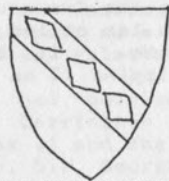
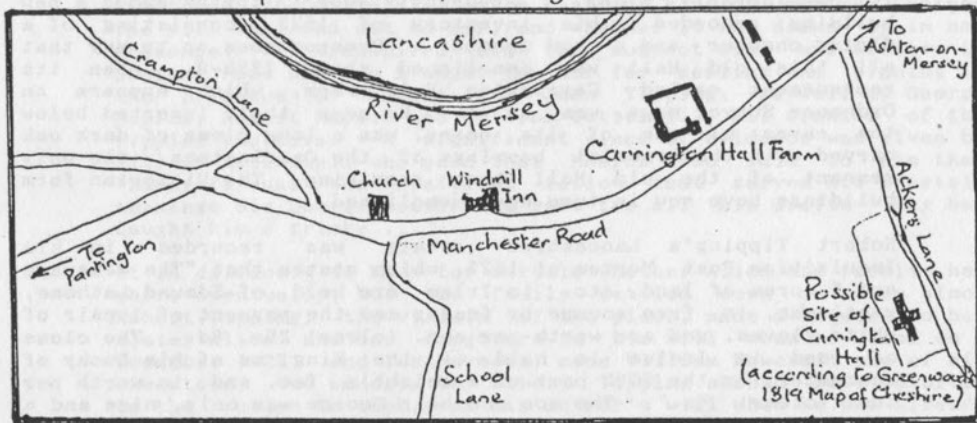
Robert Tipping's Lancashire estate was recorded in his Inquisition Post Mortem of 1623, which states that "The messuage and 5 acres of land, etc. in Irlam are held of Edmund Lathome, gentleman, in free socage by fealty and the payment of 1 pair of white gloves, and are worth per ann, (clear) 26s. 8d. The close of land in Irelam is held of the King, as of his Duchy of Lancaster, by the 50th part of a knight's fee, and is worth per ann. (clear) 4s.". The son and heir George was only nine and a quarter years old at the time of his father's death, so he would have been made a ward of the Crown, and the close of land in Irlam would have reverted to the Crown until he came of age, when he would have had to pay a tax called a relief in order to take possession of his inheritance. It is interesting that this Edmund Lathome owed Robert Tipping £3 as one of the debtors listed in the inventory.

Note:

- (1) These valuations could be far below their actual value,
- (2) The old method of holding land by Knight's Fee (or fief), being the area of land which could support a knight and his family for one year (with much variation according to quality of land), was abolished in 1660 after gradually falling into disuse. Mildred Campbell "The English Yeoman".

(To be continued)

Sketch Map of Carrington showing location of Carrington Hall Farm 1936, and possible site of Carrington Hall.



CARRINGTON