

# ‘Worth Remembering’

## Why *Around Wick Harbour 1974/75* is important

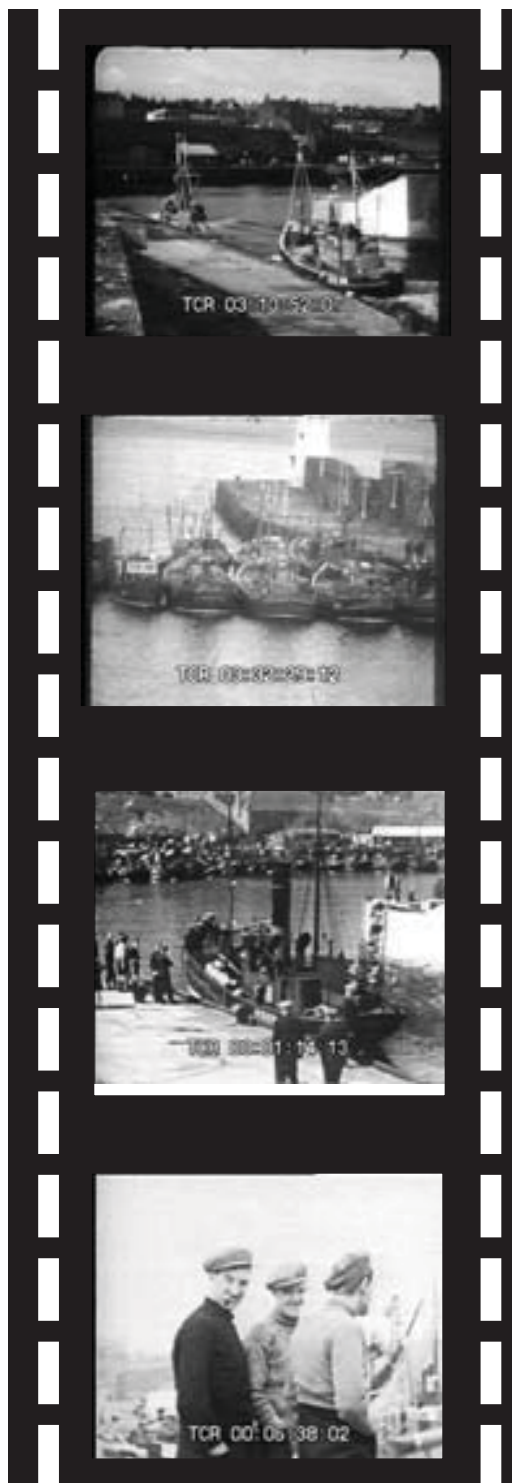
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In the rush to write ‘comprehensive’ histories of film, so much has been obscured or dismissed. This is perhaps understandable given that no history, no matter how ambitious, could possibly include every film that has ever been made or viewed. But what would happen if previously marginal works were finally brought out onto the centre stage? What would they tell us that we have forgotten?

Amateur film, for example, once so popular an activity, is conspicuous by its absence from conventional film histories. The sparse writing that does exist on amateur filmmaking popularly evokes ideas of artistic and financial freedom and often suggests a very personal, even indulgent vision.<sup>1</sup> But a look at Scottish Screen’s extensive archives presents a less clear-cut picture of this particular strand of cinema. Contrary to writings on amateur film that have tended to focus exclusively on the avant-garde and home movies, there is a middle ground and a subsequent lost history of ‘hobbyist’ filmmaking. Surely we have an obligation, as inheritors of this material, to write these works into the history of Scottish film.

Amateur film festivals provided a platform for these hobbyist filmmakers (as part of amateur film societies) to exhibit their work to a general audience, and Scotland was no exception. Every year from 1933 to 1986 a selection of shorts were shown at the Cosmo Cinema, Glasgow (now the GFT), as part of the internationally famous Scottish Amateur Film Festival. Each film was entered into one of five categories: fiction, non-fiction, colour, Scottish and novice. Judgements were made about their aesthetic quality by a panel from the professional industry: famous panel members included Michael Powell, Alfred Hitchcock and Forsyth Hardy.<sup>2</sup> These films are far richer than condescending attitudes towards ‘amateur’ activity would suggest. After all, to be called an ‘amateur’ says nothing about your ability, only your place in the market economy.

From our present day vantage point these films fascinate for reasons altogether different from their obvious artistic merit. For example, in 1940 a young professional photographer from the town of Wick, in the far north of Scotland, submitted a non-fiction film documenting the industrial processes which took place after fishing vessels returned to shore. Alex Johnston’s remarkably sophisticated (from a formal point of view), *Around Wick Harbour*, drew on and developed work in John Gierson’s 1929 film *Drifters*. Johnston’s film enacts a basic narrative of industrial capitalism common to documentary films of this era as it documents the transportation, gutting and auctioning of herring at the height of the international trade. This industrial practice was common on the east coast of



Scotland during the 1930s and was fictionalised by Neil Gunn in *The Silver Darlings*. While the study of non-fiction films such as these might seem to reproduce discourses of 'authenticity' and 'factuality' that have long been dominant in the study of Scottish professional filmmaking,<sup>3</sup> it could be argued that they in fact reveal trends long dormant in writings on national cinemas. The discourse of the 'local' runs through Johnston's film and opens the work up to the viewer in a way that is unusual in professional film. The title is revealing in itself: *Around Wick Harbour*. The spectator is invited on a visual journey around this particular work place in a way that would be inappropriate in a similar film made for a mass audience. The geographical specificity of the work is significant, and is likely to have prompted two filmmakers to remake this film using the same 16mm camera almost 40 years later, but the question remains: why?

*Around Wick Harbour* 1974/75 was made for no obvious artistic intent. It was not entered into the Scottish Amateur Film Festival and the filmmakers had no intention of doing so. The original was 11 minutes long, while the remake is around three times that length. It fails to impress on either artistic or formal grounds, yet it is graded as 'Historical Value 1' (the highest grading) in the Scottish Screen archive catalogue. Why is this film so important? A look at the filmmakers behind the camera is revealing.

The Wick Society was formed in the 1970s, its initial objective to save the Thomas Telford designed buildings on the lower Pultneytown side of the town from demolition by the council. They were unsuccessful, yet continued into other areas of local interest, such as the Wick Heritage Centre. A non-profit organisation run by volunteers, the centre acquired many items of historic value such as clothing and furniture and made exhibits out of period recreations. In short, its mission became one of recording a vanishing local culture.

One of the Wick Society's most significant interventions was the rescuing and preservation of the vast collection of photographs from the Johnston archive: a family photography business that as well as specialising in portraiture, also took many still photographs of the local fishing industry. Part of this collection included the negative of *Around Wick Harbour*, along with the original 16mm camera that was used during its production in 1937. It was in this context that two founding members of the Wick Society, Iain Sutherland and Ian Mackenzie, started producing non-fiction films of the area.

It is understandable from a pragmatic point of view why these men choose to make non-fiction films rather than the elaborate fantasy films typical of Enrico Coccozza and Frank Marshall, both prominent amateur filmmakers in Glasgow during the 1950s and 60s. Quite simply it is less expensive to find material in the landscape that surrounds, rather than trying to recreate an imaginary fictional one. But in line with the aims and objectives of a heritage society, non-fiction

film is often seen as having a privileged relationship with history: something a consultation of Scottish Screen archival documents and cataloguing policy bears out. This historical impulse fed into their numerous film projects around Caithness, including a moving image record of the last cooerage in Scotland just before it closed its doors for good.

The potential benefits of instead studying this material from a historical and ethnographic perspective are great. From a formal point of view the remake of *Around Wick Harbour* may be considered overly long, featuring much repetition of subject matter and digressions from an exclusive focus on the fishing industry. Parts of the 1970s version, in fact, attempt to remake shot for shot sequences of the original. This is evident in the opening sequence when the camera tracks the fishing boats entering the harbour from the same positions as the 1937 version. However, the



historic intentions of the filmmakers become clearer when the changes that have taken place in the local industry over the last 40 years are noted. The catch is mostly white fish instead of herring. There has been a vast reduction in the workforce, as can be seen when the fishermen unload and gut the fish, before packing the produce themselves: rather than following a strict division of labour that we can see in the 1937 version. During the height of the international trade of herring at the beginning of the twentieth century, lines upon lines of women were employed to gut herring, a process done at high speed in the Johnston film. By contrast, the Wick Society film shows that the downgrading of the industry had meant that the workforce had become exclusively male. The strength of this film as a companion piece to the 1937 version of *Around Wick Harbour* now becomes obvious. The Wick Society consciously re-made the Johnston film so that a compare and contrast model of historical examination could be attempted. The film may look formally naïve: when for instance the camera seems to aimlessly follow local men walking around the harbour area and chatting in groups. However, these seemingly random and unmotivated shots actually serve to highlight the changes that have occurred in this particular geographic area over time; these artistic ‘flaws’ are its strength as visual evidence.

This film attempts to document a town in economic decline during the downturn in North Sea fishing since the 1950s. Instead of a film of fevered industrial activity, the remake presents an image of relative inactivity. Men who would have been working hard as fishermen when the industry were in good health, have experienced a vast reduction in potential income as the stocks of the North Sea have so dramatically decreased. This is partly as a result of over fishing by an earlier generation: the generation filmed with such awe and admiration in the first *Around Wick Harbour*.

The effect this economic downturn was having on the lives of the local fishermen is apparent 20 minutes into *Around Wick Harbour 1974/75*. In a sequence with no equivalent in the Johnston version, the film documents the events of the local fishermen’s strike during what came to be known as the ‘Cod Wars’ of the 1970s. A handwritten sign says ‘Fisherman’s Meeting: All Requested to Attend’, but what actually happened at this meeting is not shown. Instead, what we see is a scene reminiscent of one of the first films ever shown, *Employees Leaving the Lumiere Factory* (1885), only this time it is fishermen leaving a meeting. This is filmed by framing the entrance to the hall and letting the camera run for two minutes. A steady procession of fishermen of various ages walk into frame. Some acknowledge the camera some do not, before walking out of shot. Both films are silent, but inter-titles are never used for explanation. An answer to our questions about what we have just seen is provided 40 seconds later, when we are shown a number of boats blocking the entrance to the inner harbour. This blockade was motivated by Iceland closing its waters to British boats within a twelve mile radius, and the Wick fishermen complained that foreign fish landings were undercutting local prosperity. Therefore, this

protest was a retaliation to sanctions that threatened the fishermen’s livelihood. Fishermen such as Iain Sutherland’s brother James, took part in this three day protest: an event into which the Wick Society’s cameras give us a unique insight. This kind of action is in stark contrast to the internationalism that was a feature of the fishing industry in the area during the thirties, but this is a consequence of an industry in decline.

This sequence would have been explained during Iain Sutherland’s lectures at the screenings he regularly organises. As a local historian and writer, he is in a perfect position to put the events projected on screen into an appropriate context by providing a running commentary. The Wick Society has held numerous screenings throughout Scotland, ‘from Lerwick to Glasgow’.<sup>4</sup> He would act as a mediator between the past on screen and the contemporary audience who had come to see the screening in town halls and public spaces across the country. Therefore, the remake of *Around Wick Harbour* becomes the visual ‘evidence’ of Wick’s past that is only completed by Sutherland’s historical explanations. *Around Wick Harbour 1974/75* is then best understood as lecture film made as part of the more egalitarian side to the heritage movements of the seventies. The film is thus, an aid to personal and community memory.

At the end of the remake, we as spectators are presented with a 360-degree view of the town from a high vantage point, something without narrative or artistic motivation. This may, on first viewing, seem unusual. However, if we consider the idea of the ‘view’ aesthetic as has been developed by the film scholar Tom Gunning, in relation to early non-fiction filmmaking, we can better understand the motivations of a sequence such as this. Gunning notes:

‘The camera literally acts as a tourist, spectator or investigator, and the pleasure in the film lies in this surrogate of looking ... In a “view” the world is presented to the camera, and therefore to the spectator.’<sup>5</sup>

In this idea of the camera acting a ‘tourist, spectator or investigator’ there is a resonance to what is happening in Wick. Their ‘view’ aesthetic was part of an almost scientific effort towards a comprehensive ‘mapping’ of the landscape. The camera captures the changing geography of the town, including its suburban developments out towards the coast, as its sweeping pan freezes the image in time. This film represents a bridge between their present and the retrospective viewer of the future, (namely, us).

What was intended as a companion piece to *Around Wick Harbour*, in fact, through its idiosyncrasies, builds on and develops the *latent* historic and ethnographic impulses of the original. Together the two films give fascinating insights into the culture that they emerged out of. And for all their ‘local’ nature, they have quite rightly found their place in the national film archive.

The variety of landscapes (outside of the metropolitan

centres of Glasgow or Edinburgh) that could be studied, using amateur film, is considerable. These histories are waiting to be written. For the moment, both versions of *Around Wick Harbour* provide a unique document of a time and place that would have otherwise been forgotten, if representations of small communities were merely left in the hands of media professionals. For this, the Wick Society's intervention into its local history is worth remembering.

#### Endnotes

1. Deren, M. 'Amateur Versus Professional' in *Film Culture* (New York: vol. 39, Winter 1965).
2. McBain, J. 'And the winner is...A Brief History of the Scottish Amateur Film Festival (1933-86)' in Kapstein, N (ed) *Jubilee Book: Essays on Amateur Film* (Belgium: Association Europeenne Inedits, 1997).
3. See Murray, J. "Keep your head down and save your breath": 'Authentic' Scotlands and British Cinema in *The Brave Don't Cry' The Drouth* (Glasgow; Clydeside Press, Autumn 2002).
4. Personal correspondence with Mr Sutherland.
5. Gunning, T. 'Before Documentary: Early Nonfiction Films and the 'View' Aesthetic' in Hertogs, D & De Klerk, N (ed) *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film* (Amsterdam: Strichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997) p.15.