

## **A personal introduction.**



### **Beginning.**

Ever since I saw the photograph in a family album of a group of kids standing round Bill Hunter in the courtyard at Foxhole titled Film Unit, I have wondered about its neglected history. I first came into contact with the Dartington Hall Film Unit when it was operating under the Direction of Tom Stobart in rooms in the courtyard next to the Barn Theatre. They had been making a film on model aircraft construction and Tom presented me with the finished flying model they had called “Spive”. My mother had returned to Dartington after the war and we were living at Vineyard. Burt Foot set up a projector and showed us a couple of films at my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday party in November 1945 at Vineyard Cottage.

I have met many of the people who were involved in Film at Dartington, to a greater or lesser extent, sometimes not knowing the part they had played. What I have discovered is there is very much more to the popular conception that it was simply Bill Hunter making a few movies at the back of his geography classroom with his pupils.

### **My Objective.**

In this account I have tried to put together some of the writings about Bill Hunter’s part in establishing the DH Film unit as a viable proposition before he joined the RAF in 1941 to use his photographic skills with the Photographic Interpretation Unit at Medmenham [later re named Central Interpretation Unit]. For the most part he is only referred to as a passing footnote in history. However David Hilton’s thesis clearly documents the influence Bill Hunter had at the time, and how his students went on to develop their own successes and in turn their influence on the world of Cinematography. The Film Unit, in various forms, continued after Bill Hunter departed and left its mark in the Dartington story.

### **The Historians.**

There really is only a small amount of coverage that Bill Hunter is given by the well-known historians of the Elmhirst’s Dartington.

Victor Bonham Carter covers the story in his 1958 book, while briefly crediting the early work of Bill Hunter, (in him was lost a man with extraordinary genius for the dual part of teacher and producer) but he seems more concerned with the post war years and the closure of the Unit.

Michael Young allows himself a couple of paragraphs. To be fair his book is about the Elmhirsts.

Peter Cox is mainly concerned with the post war period when Tom Stobart was the Director, and justifying why the Unit closed.

Ivor Stolliday, in his May 2004 document “History of the People Associated with Dartington” attributes the Film Unit to Leacock, with no mention of Hunter, such is the lack of interest in Film and historical accuracy.

But it is David Hilton that I had never heard of until a chance supper meeting at the

Gribbles last summer [2015], introduced me to Kieran Mahon, a Lecturer at London University who patched me through to his research on Film and the Dartington experience.

I have also looked at the latest publication (2015) by Mary Bride Nicholson who is the daughter of John Wales. I have known her since I was a teenage child and she did indeed consult me about her manuscript before publication. What I learnt from her some time ago was of the efforts John Wales put into supporting the continuation of the Film Unit almost to its end and that he was allowed the unusual privilege of using his car during the war, in the distribution process of the Film Library material.

### **Where are the Films now?**

In 2006 there was a DHS reunion during the year we moved to Rattery.

A year later Lynette Gribble was casting about to recruit a group who would organize the next reunion that was posted for 2011 as we were all getting older and perhaps the 10 year interval should be reduced to 5 years. I found myself involved with Film Shows and the Cine Club for people to bring their own material. Through this connection I came into contact with Heather Macintyre who was the Archivist at High Cross House and Colin Orr who was the manager of the Barn Theatre and Cinema. As the years progressed approaching the 2011 Reunion, Colin and Heather put together a program of shows both in the Barn and outside on the tilt yard terraces that would be hard to match.

Also at the time, was the ongoing Film Restoration Project. All the remaining Dartington Hall films stock had been transferred to the Film Archive of the South West and this had been retrieved by Heather and Colin and was now in the process of restoration to arrest the vinegar syndrome that eventually destroys nitrate stock and makes it impossible to view. Much of the hard work was being done by Jim Whittle who was the chief projectionist at the Barn. I did offer my services, explaining that I had been shown how to handle 16mm film at my mother's knee since our time with the EFVA at the film library in Weybridge, but it was not taken up.

Heather and Collin put on a couple of Barn Shows that made memorable viewing and a never to be forgotten open air performance over the old tilt yard laid on specifically for the DHS reunion of 2011.

### **Major set back.**

Soon after the DHS 2011 reunion Heather invited me to her farewell celebration in the Solar at the Hall and there, Colin disclosed to me that he was leaving. Sacked or Resigning I never quite found out, but my conclusion was that there were irreconcilable differences. This came as a catastrophic blow to me as I was trying to find out all I could about the history of the Film Unit and the material it had produced. At that time my hopes for the Restoration Project were back on hold.

There is a ray of hope that with the coming of Rhodri Samuel, Jim Whittle may be given more resources to continue the restoration work. Indeed archive film is being shown at the Barn in 2016.

*I understand that any surplus funds from the 2011 reunion that were not used to fund the 2016 reunion will be passed to the Film Restoration Project.*

### **A potted history.**

It was not until I discovered the work of David Hilton that so much more was revealed about the dynamics of Film at Dartington.

Cine film was being taken from the earliest days the Elmhirsts came to Dartington, when the intention was to make a record of the restoration and building works initially. With the arrival of Bill Hunter the emphasis shifted to include Class Room Films for teaching purposes. When John Wales took charge after Bill Hunter left another element was added as a distribution film library.

The final phase following the war with Tom Stobart as the Director, was to put the unit on a professional footing and seek Government sponsorship. There were a couple of commissions but both over ran and lost money. The Government decided to set up its own Educational Foundation and the COI took its library material back to London with inevitable repercussions for the DH Film Unit. With the winding up of the DH Film Unit, according to Peter Cox all their films were handed over to the Foundation.

### **Educational Foundation for Visual Aids Film Library Weybridge.**

By this time in 1949 John Wales had joined the EFVA as the Production Officer, second in command to Dr. Harrison, who was the Director in charge, based at 33 Queen Anne Street in London and my mother Maggie (Reid) Hunter also joined the organization to establish the film library facilities at Brooklands House in Weybridge. As a child I had free access to all this material and viewed hundreds of films. One I particularly recall was "Night Mail" (1936), John Grierson film with the WH Auden's poem on the commentary. Life of Edward Jenner on Small pox and Father Damien on Leprosy. But I never came across the Dartington Hall Film Unit material if indeed it was ever there.

John was making films then and I was featured in a clip having a bath in one of them. It was being made for one of the Water Boards.

With the EFVA Brooklands library established, my mother went on to join **RF Hunter Ltd** in Gray's Inn Road, London as their Export Director. This was the company of Photographic Wholesalers, Importers and Manufacturers established in the 1920's by my father's parents. She maintained her connection with friends from Dartington, the documentary film industry and the photographic trade for many years, as equipment supplier and host at her house by Primrose Hill where people from many parts of the world could always find a safe and welcome place to stay.

### **What follows is a series of extracts, interpretations, and opinions drawn from several sources.**

#### **Incarnations of Cine and Still photography at Dartington.**

1925 to 1932, Leonard and his brother Vic Elmhirst and a family retainer George Bennett undertook filming casually. This was seen as keeping records of the changes that were taking place as the Elmhirsts got down to the task of revitalizing and rebuilding the run-down estate.

## Another look at the Dartington Hall Film Unit by Andrew Hunter.

Revised 14<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

1933-34 There was an active film culture in the form of a Film Society, links with the WEA in Newton Abbot using film in education, and from 1933, starting with an amateur Cine Group. Vic Elmhirst was chairman of the cine group. Notable members of the Cine Group Executive Committee are, George Bennett and Jack Collingbourne (an electrician on the estate, who helped with the New Learning project and was active with Thomas and the WEA). Other members of the Cine Group Executive Committee were Leonard and Dorothy, Bill Curry - the headmaster - Mark Tobey and Dickey Odlin - a puppeteer also working at the school. Kay Starr was secretary and Treasurer of the group.

The Cine Group's aims clearly demonstrate its broad conception of the use of film within the Dartington Experiment.

The recording of human experience and material processes, changes and developments on this Estate and elsewhere, which would otherwise never be permanently available.

The taking of films with a specific object in view - such as artistic, or for direct teaching as explanatory of Dartington, or for deliberate propaganda.

To arrange for the taking and showing of films by request.

To discover the best economic use of the available persons, films and equipment.

To build up and preserve good films from material already collected

To collect, preserve and utilize every interesting picture we can.

1934-35. This phase of the Cine Group was to have a brief incarnation as W.B. Curry continued to bring new blood to the school. The most notable addition was William Hunter. Hunter, a Cambridge graduate whose family ran a photography business, was employed by Curry to teach Geography. In the subsequent report, filed by the Cine Group for the years 1934-35 with projected plans for 1935-36 the first statement indicates a growth in membership of the Group. A retrospective look at what has been going on in the group divides its activities into four main headings:

1. Film making. 2. Film shows. 3. Indexing the Film Library. 4. Photographic work (stills)

Under the detail of 'film making' the report tells us that Bennett has been busy filming the courtyard paving, the building of new central offices, Marley farm plantations and new houses at Churston and Warren Park. Bennett was acting as camera-man, technician and doing film shows of Dartington film material. Michael Young in a list of the Dartington Hall household includes him as: 'Photographer; George Bennett who took pictures and showed films on his always breaking-down projector. He had been Willard's batman in France. He was also doing most of the photographic work in the estate darkroom mentioned by Roger Morel, which had become a fixture on the estate. Other, more important, filmmaking was being done under the auspices of William Hunter.

Significant to an understanding of how Dartington saw itself and how it wanted to see itself in film is an item in the Cine Group report of 1934/5 entitled:

Programme for 1935-36.

Estate Film - Dr. Slater has asked the Cine Group to submit a scenario to him with a view to the production of a comprehensive film for the company's use.

Mr. Patterson (the Laboratory) has also intimated that he hopes to have the opportunity of doing some work in collaboration with the Cine Group in the near future.

The Group also hopes to build up useful films from the material collected during the past, in the same way that the Banqueting Hall film has been planned. The chief difficulty here is to obtain scenarios based on knowledge of what film is in existence.

#### Use of Existing Films.

Beside the general entertainment performances the Group expect this year to do some work with Mr F. G. Thomas (Rural Extension Scheme) and Mr J. R. Currie, Calf Clubs &c. the "Clean Milk" film made at the Old Parsonage Farm and other agricultural films purchased in America.

New Cine Room and Equipment. The Group has been asked to take up new quarters in a room below the music studio. As so many of the new members are actually working in the studio cutting, editing and titling films, additional equipment for this new studio has to be planned. A general lay-out has been submitted by Noel Florence and Richard Leacock [both aged 14] and this after some amendments by George Bennett and Jack Collingbourne, has been agreed and the suggestion that the cutting tables and chairs might be made in the school workshop has been gladly accepted. Equipment of a more Technical kind is to be bought in parts and assembled by the group.

In the first item we have Dr. W.K. Slater, Managing Director of the Estate specifically requesting the production of a film about Dartington. The note also suggests the film for the company's use is to be used for the purposes of propaganda. It seems that this did not happen. Desire to illustrate the work of the Dartington Experiment seems to have been an ongoing idea. In a letter dated March 18th 1936 Hunter writes to Slater about a scenario he has prepared for an "estate film". He encloses the scenario and is anxious to have Slater's approval of the idea so he can plan to start work as soon as the summer begins. Bearing in mind his brief (nowhere surviving to my knowledge but implied in his letter and the 1935-6 report) adopting, perhaps, the technique of filmmaking employed by Flaherty of gathering and reviewing material, he writes: In examining the material on which the scenario is based - the Estate - I have learned a great deal about it, and discovered a great deal that could make fascinating film material. But the more I have learnt the more I have become convinced that it is impossible to convey anything like an adequate view of such a complex undertaking as the Dartington Hall experiment in 30 - 40 minutes.

He goes on to explain that encapsulating the complexity of Dartington in film is not going to be easy and reviewing the material has clarified the scale of the problem: When I began, you will remember it seemed to me possible. But even as the scenario stands I am thoroughly dissatisfied with the treatment of every department, except, possibly the Textiles. The present material will take an hour to project, which will mean that it must be even more drastically cut down to be presentable. Such a relatively trivial point (in a whole film) as that only by importing raw materials can so many people be employed here will take a good many feet of film to explain, and omission will obviously create a false impression of the economic basis for the experiment. It seems to me that the type of person on whom the film will have the most permanent effect (if it is good) is not the casual enquirer, but the educated and the interested person who will not be impressed by economic half-truths. A film purporting to show economic and social basis of this experiment in half an hour must inevitably be at any rate vague in certain respects.

He proposes a series of films, each illustrating "certain aspects of the experiment", not dissimilar to Bennett's ideas penned in the letter to Leonard from Old Westbury 5<sup>th</sup>

May 1933.

Through the ambitious and focused efforts of William Hunter the Cine Group became increasingly professional in its formation and its objectives. Hunter had ambition, a double first at Cambridge and was a subscriber to *Sight and Sound*. (William Hunter, *Crisis in Production*, *Sight and Sound*, Copy from Dartington Hall Archive, date not traced but thought to be shortly before William Hunter's departure in 1941). From the very start he seems to have been aware of the potential of this group of enthusiastic amateurs to achieve more. In an undated letter, thought to be some time soon after he joined the school (September 1932 according to Polly (Church) Hunter) he writes to Leonard about the work of the Cine Group:

"I think that we have now reached the point at which any subsequent progress will be unnecessarily difficult with the status of film as it is at present, and within the present limits of the film group."

He goes on;

It seems to me that the possible future of film here is very great indeed but that it cannot be realised simply by thinking that this is so. The amount of interest in film among adults here is negligible, and I must admit that I know only a handful of intelligent grown up people who are prepared to take the possibilities of film as seriously as I am. Certainly (and perhaps deservedly) it evokes nothing like the same kind of response from people like, say, yourself, Dorothy or Curry as the more established arts, painting, poetry, drama and dance do. I think nevertheless that it is impossible to deny the very great influence for good and evil (mainly the latter) which film has exerted and will exert, especially among the children of today, to whom it is familiar in a way that it never can be to many of us. In this sense alone it is worth taking very seriously.

Hunter's comments do raise the question of how film activity was seen by those at the centre of the Dartington Experiment, and it is clearly not as important to them as it is to him. As a less established art he recognizes the need to prove its worth to those holding the purse strings. He cites the three areas of film that he feels Dartington can successfully compete in, these being documentary, advertising and classroom films.

And he continues:

I cannot help thinking that films specifically intended to advertise a new, experimental and progressive undertaking such as this must themselves be new, experimental and progressive. Film is such a new and ungainly form of expression that there is no pre- conceived mould in which expression can be cast. The forms have to be discovered.

He feels that his work on experimental classroom films has been particularly successful and sees no reason why in five years the film unit should not be as successful as any other unit. He sees the only real model for what should be going on at Dartington as the G.P.O. film Unit which itself suffers from the limitations of being a government 'propagandist department.' Not only does Dartington not have that particular hindrance but Hunter feels it is ideally suited with estate and school support services and a ready laboratory of school age audience to test classroom films on while they are being made. Indeed if someone were to set up an ideal situation 'I imagine they would produce something not unlike this'. Hunter believed that a film group reconstituted with recognized status on the estate, support and clear objectives, could produce work that would be a valuable asset.

Hunter's passion is clear in this, but is he also suggesting that the film unit should more seriously re-visit the production of propaganda, or a way in which propaganda works more subtly through "good films"? Does he feel the propaganda argument will help sway Leonard to support his other more specific ideas for producing 'classroom films'? And what is his conception of experimental and progressive film? This latter

point we will discuss later. The letter was sent to Leonard 'prior to further discussion', which must have been fruitful because from 1935 the Cine Group's emphasis shifted onto a more professional footing. In an undated letter to Kay Starr, the Film Unit Secretary, bidding for production funds Hunter says:

You remember that Mr. Grierson, the director of the Post Office Film Unit, was down here last year, and expressed the opinion that one of the things we could do which would be of value to other people besides ourselves was the making of classroom films for teaching purposes. This is a new form of film-making, in which as yet there is everything to do as far, at least, as geography films are concerned. At the moment, if one uses them at all, one is compelled to use travel pictures or propaganda films intended for other uses, few if any, of which are suitable for real classroom work."

Could Grierson's visit 'last year' have been as early as 1934 shortly after Hunter joined the staff at the school? [Polly (Church) Hunter writes Bill Hunter came to DHS September 1932]. Is it Grierson who actually inspired Hunter in developing the idea of classroom film production? Did Grierson's work fit Hunter's idea of experimental and progressive filmmaking?

In a letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> March 1936 Hunter writing to Leonard tells him:

Limestone and Sheep Dip are being seen by Grierson on Friday, and are going to Gaumont British on Tuesday morning. They are likely to be for the most part out of Dartington for the rest of the term, and I should very much like to have you see them before I go much further, and to discuss the question of film with you, since it is not much good going ahead with the distribution question until I know what your whole views on film here are.

Were the films 'Limestone and Sheep Dip' produced in 1934-35 the ones Hunter referred to in his undated letter? There seems to be no other mention of Grierson's early visit to Dartington. Yet Grierson certainly contacted Dorothy later in March 1938 requesting some financial support for his new film magazine 'Film World News'. Alas, Dorothy replies that she cannot help him but takes the opportunity to express her admiration for his film work.

### **The Film Unit 1934.**

Hunter's undated (possibly 1934) letter to Leonard demonstrates that he is clearly unhappy about the rather loose arrangements for use and production of film that seem to have existed prior to his appointment.

The next report (1935-36) is not from the Cine Group but the Film Unit. There has been a name change and with it a re-structuring of the organization. The Executive committee of the Film Unit is revised to include J.V(Vic) Elmhirst. Christopher Martin. William Hunter, George Bennett. Jack Collingbourne with Kay Star as secretary. This body is only answerable to the executive committee of the Arts Department (made up of Leonard, Dorothy and Christopher Martin). Leonard has clearly acted on his "whole views on film here" solicited by Hunter. The new figure in all of this is Christopher Martin who has been appointed in 1934 as head of the newly constituted Arts Department. This was the beginning of what a number of commentators - principally Victor Bonham-Carter- have called the 'professional phase' at Dartington. The list of members of the Unit is notably missing Mark Tobey and Dicky Odlin. Did the advent of Hunter and the apparent focusing of the Film Unit on Classroom film production alienate these two particular creative personalities or were they simply more interested in other things? Both were engaged with travel in pursuit of their own interests at this time.

Although the Film Unit is firmly associated with the School, and as such comes under the auspices of Bill Curry as Director of Education, the 1935-6 report makes it clear

that it is now financed through the Arts Department and therefore clearly under the administration of Christopher Martin who became the first person to hold the title "Arts Administrator" in 1934.

The Film Unit's activities from 1934 onwards feature in Arts Administration reports compiled by Christopher Martin for the Trustees. In his first report on July 14<sup>th</sup> 1934 he finds that:

A small cine Group was found to be at work under a committee comprising Mr J.V. Elmhirst, Mrs. Starr, Mr Jack Collingbourne and Mr R. Odlin. The Committee were responsible for the apparatus and cinema room, and encouraged all those interested in cinema work? to experiment with films of the various estate activities. With the formation of the Arts Department, the committee, while still functioning, handed over its responsibility for all Trustees property to the Arts Administrator who became a member of the Committee ex officio. During the Term there has been a public showing of a film dealing with the Nursery School and a second dealing with the agricultural activities on the Estate. While somewhat slow in narrative due to the fact that the films were designed primarily for lecturing, there were encouraging signs of a certain technical knowledge and photographic skill. A third film dealing with the junior School has been in preparation during the term supervised by Mr Hunter.

The Film Unit's 1935-6 report which was requested by the Trustees (Leonard, Dorothy and Fred Gwatkin the Trust's Accountant) suggests that the functions of the Film Unit be divided into three departments but only lists two, which are Record and Film. From the activity of the group and the previous year's report it can be assumed that the other department must be Library/distribution. Still photography - previously the responsibility of Bennett in a darkroom set up for use by members of the estate in 1935 - seems to have dropped out of the report.

The writer of the report, who could have been Vic Elmhirst as chairman or more likely William Hunter, goes on to suggest three other new committees within the management of the Unit. These are:

- A Technical film committee, made up of William Hunter, Hiram Hague, Hein Heckroth (a German artist who came in 1935 and took over from Tobey what seems to have been his main duty by this time of providing Art classes for the estate), Richard Leacock and Margaret Reid as secretary.
- A Record Committee made up of George Bennett, Vic Elmhirst and Jack Collingbourne with Kay Starr as secretary.
- An Advisory Education Committee (for classroom film) made up of William Hunter, John Wales, Bridget Edwards. R.O'Malley, C E McNally (who later compiled the Archives photo-albums) and a Miss Peet.

Christopher Martin summarizes this Film Unit report in his own report to the Trustees of 15<sup>th</sup> November 1935. His summary affords some insight into the Arts Department thinking. Although he lists a comprehensive summary of the activities the main point for consideration by the Trustees is 'Alterations to the new Cine room'. This has obvious financial implications. Martin, in what he describes as his 'briefly as possible' summary does, however, more than just list the activities, as the Group's own report does, he attempts to add some rationale.

The activities of the film Group can be divided under four main headings: (1) Film making, (2) film shows, (3) indexing of Film Library, (4) Photographic work.

## Another look at the Dartington Hall Film Unit by Andrew Hunter.

Revised 14<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

Records of the activities carried on under the auspices of the Trustees have been made by Mr. George Bennet. These records are calculated as illustrations of the development of Dartington Hall and its allied ventures; they include films of the building of the new Central Offices, Marley Farm plantations, piggeries at Rattery, houses at Churston and Warren Park. The School Group within the Cine Group have been engaged on three main films: boat making in the school workshop, No work on Sundays and the School Camps. There has been, in addition, a certain amount of work put in on an experimental class room film. A number of films shows have been organized by the Group totaling in the last year fifty- seven. In accordance with the request of the Trustees, an index has been made of all films belonging to the Cine Group. All stills taken since 1925 have been filed and indexed and, where necessary, prints have been made up in book form; it will be appreciated that these stills thus form an illustrated record of progress at Dartington.

All of this pertains to the practice of using film for the broad recording and educational purposes, which underpins the Dartington Experiment, but the move towards producing autonomous films, defined and focused, seems to have come with William Hunter. Richard Leacock's *Canary Bananas* (1935) film is an example of film making as a total conception. Significantly its subject is not Dartington.

### **Ricky Leacock** [DHS:34-38, d:2011] has reported:

Dartington was not interested in film as an art. [Leonard] Elmhirst just saw it as a way of recording events and not very well at that. Bill Hunter was interested in teaching Geography and Anthropology with film. I was just a nutty kid that wanted to make films "that gave you the feeling of being there..." but did not succeed till the fifties.

For me, it all started when I was 11 years old. at school here in England, we were shown a documentary film, *Turksib*, directed by Victor Turin. A silent film about building the Trans- Siberian railway. My reaction to this film was ecstatic; I said to myself. "I can do that! All I need is a cine-camera!" Ricky was at Bedales at the time but came to DHS in 1934 after his mother died.

### Ricky writes

"So three years later [1935] with the help of school friends Polly Church and Noel Florence, armed with our detailed scenario which included drawings of each shot, a 16mm Victor camera and an elegant Thalhammer Tripod we made a 14 min. black & white, silent film. *Canary Bananas*, a film I am proud of that can still tell you all you need to know about growing Bananas but it fell far short of giving you the feeling of being there. It informed you but it didn't involve you.

### Ricky continues

Bill Hunter brought me to his room and introduced me to Mr. Flaherty and his wife Frances. Hunter had shown them my film *Canary Bananas*, and they said some nice things about it, though Mrs. Flaherty mentioned that they were not that impressed by the chop-chop editing of the water sequence. Mr. Flaherty concluded by saying that "Someday we will work together..." or some such, which I took with a huge pinch of salt. However it did happen.

In 1938 at the ripe old age of 17, I went as photographer-film-maker to the Galapagos Islands as a member of David Lack's expedition to learn more about Darwin's finches. We lived on a "desert island", isolated, not even a radio. I spent most of my time with the Angermeyer brothers who had listened to Hitler and fled; it was a bit like Robinson Crusoe. I loved it. I did what I was supposed to do and filmed the birds and just about everything else that moved but the result gave you no feeling whatever of being there.

Having shot the film in the Galapagos Islands he went to Harvard to study Physics so the film was put together by William Hunter and David Lack, the first biology film produced by the Film Unit.

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### 1938 Tom Stobart comes to Dartington as a “student”.

Extract from chapter 1 I TAKE PICTURES FOR ADVENTURE by Tom Stobart.

“It was indirectly through the thankless little reviews I did that at last I got my first chance. I was reading through the *Film Institute Journal* one day, admiring my work in print, when I came on an article outlining the production plans of the Dartington Hall Film Unit. I had never heard of it, but a number of geographical films were listed in the schedule, including one on nomads in Russia. I did not know that this was going to be edited out of existing material for the film *Turksib*. It sounded exactly what I was looking for; among other places, I had always wanted to go to Russia—well, of course anywhere, so long as it was travel.

Dartington Hall was an estate in Devonshire where a social experiment in rural rehabilitation was going on, a community inspired a little by Rabindranath Tagore’s *Shantiniketon*, and a beautiful home for the arts in the English countryside. It had been founded as a trust by an American millionaire, Dorothy Elmhirst, and had attracted a number of advanced and energetic people who had naturally pushed their own interests far beyond the needs of the original project. This makes a short description difficult. It contains a modern school for children, a school of ballet, painting, music—everything a young artist might require, or even dream about. Apparently, also a film unit. I wrote, asking if I could go there as a student.

It so happened that the timing of my letter was exactly right. The Film Unit consisted of one master at the school, the late Bill Hunter, one of the pioneers of the educational film. Bill had the help and encouragement of Robert Flaherty, whose children he had been teaching, and in between his work as geography master he was making 16-mm. films of a very high calibre. His films were just achieving recognition, and someone’s writing and asking to work as a student seemed a feather in his cap indeed. I did not tell him till later that I had never heard of him before and that I had read the notice quite by chance.

I met Bill on his next visit to London and liked him at first sight. He was young and full of enthusiasm. He did not, however, hold out much hope. He would need a grant of one hundred pounds for film stock if he took me as a student, and to add to the difficulties, I needed to have some job to support me while I studied. I was therefore surprised and enormously relieved a few weeks later when I received a letter saying it was all arranged. I was in.

Dartington Hall Estate lay in a bend of the river Dart in that fat Devon countryside that bursts it seems with vegetable growth. On the top of the hill, near the tower of the old church, was an ancient manor house of grey stone. The buildings surrounded a large courtyard and had been largely restored with splendid oak beams from the estate. The plumbing was perfect. Everything was lovely in the garden, which was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen.

Some distance away were the new buildings of the school where I worked. There was no special room available for films, and the editing had to be done at the back of Bill’s classroom. Quite apart from the fact that Bill was a fine photographer with a great feeling for motion pictures, the films grew up in the room where the children were taught and could hardly fail to be right for the job they were intended to do.

My official job, for which I earned two pounds a week, was acting as assistant guide on the estate. Because it was the home of a *modern* experiment, there were many visitors, but most of the work came during the holidays, and if nobody turned up for the conducted tour I was free to go back to my studies. Bill, who was an excellent teacher, had simply thrown a roll of film at me—it was material on canning fish in Norway—and told me to get on with it.

To be honest, I did not find photography an interesting occupation. People have two sorts of interests, the primary one which fascinates them because they enjoy it for itself alone and like playing with the materials, and secondary interests acquired in order to pursue the primary ones. Here enjoyment may give way to the determination to get a boring task done. It was rather like this with my photography. My first interest always lay in the subject itself, which I hoped would one day be expeditions; my second, in the direction and editing. A long way in the rear came photography, and I looked with envy at those people who took photography because they enjoyed it. To me a camera was a bore and photography something that had to be done but got in the way of the full enjoyment of the scene and surroundings. How lucky a writer is; free of apparatus, he has only to use his eyes and let the impressions soak in.

Film work came very easily to me, and it was fine training to operate on such a small scale that one literally had to do everything. I do not much believe in the departmentalization that is the rule in our century, and certainly not that if I attained my ambition to become a film director I should know nothing and have no interest in anybody’s job but my own.

It was not long before Bill suggested I was ready to start work on a film that was absolutely mine, and I chose the subject of *Rivers*, which was not only useful in teaching geography but also gave me the chance to begin to travel, to film in the mountains and the wilds, off the beaten track.

## Another look at the Dartington Hall Film Unit by Andrew Hunter.

Revised 14<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

As soon as the autumn rush of visitors was over and I again had time to devote to my studies, I planned an excursion up to Scotland. There was so little money that I had to hitchhike. This suited me well, as it meant that I had to carry all the equipment on my back, which was good practice if I wanted one day to get my camera into unusual places. The fact that I started off in this way and got used to managing on a shoestring was to stand me in good stead later on. With a different sort of start I might have been lured by big cameras and large units with the usual documentary work was being done at that time and still is.

It was midwinter when I worked up into the Cairngorms, and there were some bad blizzards. There are people who do not realise it can reach arctic ruggedness in Scotland and that every year rash or inexperienced people die there of exposure.

The cold on the peaks was so intense that it stopped my camera and gave me a first taste of the kinds of difficulties I have had to face so often.

It was on my return just after New Year's, 1939, that fate grabbed me and set me off on my first travels-which were almost immediately interrupted by the second world war. During the next six years there were interesting moments in Rumania, Turkey, and Arabia, but the big adventures still lay ahead. By 1945 I was in India.

The period from 1935 to 1939 might be described as the zenith of the Dartington Hall Film Unit. During this time the Unit under Hunter's guidance developed its skills base and professional practices and settled down to a productive period of work. A Brochure of Films available for hire in 1939 has an introduction written by Hunter.

It is perhaps worth quoting at length:

The Dartington Hall Film Unit was founded in 1934. It exists to meet a demand for teaching films which are specifically for teaching rather than adopted for teaching purposes, which are made by people in daily contact with children and with teaching problems, but which are at the same time technically and photographically of the highest standard. The Unit is attached to one of the leading progressive schools in the country and is organised as a section of the Arts Department, Dartington Hall, which includes such well known enterprises as the Ballets Jooss, the Leeder School of Dance, Music Theatre Studio etc.

The films produced to date have met with a very wide success, and the number produced increases annually. Films have been purchased by the Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham Education Authorities, the L.C.C., the Scottish film council, the Egyptian Ministry of Education, etc. The Unit has also made films on behalf of Visual Education Ltd, the Timber Development Association of Great Britain, the Forestry Commission, etc.

This obviously promotional material clearly demonstrates the success of Hunter's ideas and professionalism in developing this particular branch of filmmaking.

The introduction details hire and sales prices then goes on:

The outbreak of war has seriously affected the production plans of the Dartington Hall Film unit. A number of sound films, which were nearing completion have unfortunately had to be abandoned. One production unit was about to leave for France when war was declared, another was already in Rumania but had to return without exposing any film. This has meant that the production of about ten films which were already half completed and would have been ready for distribution to schools by Christmas have had to be temporarily abandoned.

We have decided, therefore, to issue this temporary list of films, which are available now for schools. We shall endeavor to proceed with our production plans as far as possible, and hope to have further films ready shortly, particularly the series of biological films dealing with the vanishing bird and animal life of the Galapagos Islands, the material for which series has already been photographed. The films in this list are ready now, except where otherwise stated. A further supplementary list will be issued, if and when further films become available.

William Hunter, Director.

Hunter was having success with production and distribution of the Film Unit's work but the question of what to do with the Film Unit, operating efficiently within a small budget, staffed part time by people working on other jobs, seems to keep on cropping

up.

Hunter in 1940, mindful of the relative success of the Unit, is requesting more support and more autonomy. The grant of £400 in the first year of the Cine Group has because of its financial success over the years been reduced to much less. Hunter wants to set it up properly and produces a proposal requesting again £400. Christopher Martin is uncertain and Leonard (or Martin) has checked the goods out with Elton.

From the birth of the Film Unit in 1934, out of the amateur efforts of the Cine-Group, the main production of film was focused, through Hunter, on Classroom Films. The growth and re- structuring of the Dartington Experiment had introduced an Arts Department and the country's first Arts Administrator. Leonard it seems had delegated responsibilities and in so doing had become less involved in actual filming, although his film record of his visit to Russia in 1933 and other material demonstrates his continued use of film. He retained, as Trustee, overall responsibility but others had been left to develop the work.

The desire to explain the Dartington Experiment in film was acted upon but not realized except in so far as particular films -classroom films - used as example of their subject some of the Dartington enterprises. The Film Unit's outlook was to the wider world of education not the reflexive documentation of the Dartington Experiment.

**The outbreak of war** at the end of the thirties changed everything. Christopher Martin's Arts Administration report of 7<sup>th</sup> February 1941.

In the summer, Mr. Elmhirst proposed setting the film Unit on its feet with a grant sufficient for it to show what it was made of. The film unit, which consists of Mr. Hunter and any students he can get to work with him, has in the past drawn small sums from the Arts Department to make educational and documentary films. Though it had made many mistakes and had produced films of varying quality, it seemed to us that Hunter's tenacity and enthusiasm deserved some recognition. Mr. Elmhirst offered £200 if the Arts Department could produce another £200. Plans are now all made and scripts written for the production of a historical educational film in collaboration with John Wales, a number of shorter educational films and a film for Penguin Books Limited on "Milk Production" in collaboration with Jock Currie. Already since September the Film unit has brought in some £200 from sales and bookings of previous films from schools, institutes, and Local Education Authorities all over the country.

Other changes to the operation of the Film Unit were also positive. In a 1944 memorandum John Wales recalls that by 1940 about twenty films had been produced and a dozen were in general circulation. Hunter's brochure from 1939 lists 28 separate titles, although some of them are parts of series. His list of purchasers of Films is further indication of the success of his work: Films have been purchased by the Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham Education Authorities, the L.C.C., the Scottish film council, the Egyptian Ministry of Education, etc'

The Unit had built up production expertise, a successful distribution base and a reputation. The war meant that materials were harder to get, and with restrictions on movement, production more difficult. The school carried on but with very reduced numbers which had a knock on effect. The next Arts Administration Report [7<sup>th</sup> February 1941] of Martin demonstrates his good judgment in support of the Film unit, but there are reservations:

Another war-time child of the Arts Department is the expanded Film unit. A year ago we took on Mr

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Hunter half time and gave him a budget of £400 with which to produce educational films. We were a little tentative about doing so and our difficulty was with Mr. Hunter himself. Here again, however, the experiment of giving him his head seems to be showing positive results. The function of the Arts Department Film unit is two fold. First it is to produce educational films for distribution and sale. Since September last year 60 films have been sold outright and 200 loaned. On the production end 6 films are under way, of which 3 will be completed by the end of the year.

The uncertainty of things in 1941 was also offset by the newly created Film Council of The South West, formed under the auspices of the British Film Institute and located in Exeter, who asked the Unit to manage a small educational film library. The Petroleum Films Bureau added their instructional films to the growing distribution library at Dartington. The Ministry of Information, which was considering the establishment of regional circulation centers for their films also made use of the developing expertise of the Dartington Hall Film Unit. The Film Library of the South West started as a side-line of the Film Unit but was to become an important part of its operation. Martin relates how taking on the distribution work for Ministry of Information was a tall order. He gained very favorable terms starting with a grant to the Trustees from the Ministry of £550. He explains:

...the bait, of course, to which the Ministry were rising, was the chance of making use of Mr Hunter, for whose work and knowledge they have a considerable respect.

We gain glimpses of the Hunter character, a very intelligent man, devoted to teaching and education, an inspired amateur with the discipline to develop successful professional practice whilst working half time at two jobs. He who had gained respect in high places for this work and was, it seems, grudgingly respected by his employers, who in this illustration see him as a pawn in their game. Perhaps it was his single-minded determination and dedication to film and developing this art form in the face of its low-brow profile around Dartington that irritated Martin.

William Hunter, according to Victor Bonham-Carter, also put a lot of effort into supporting young men who felt themselves to be conscientious objectors. Polly (Church) Hunter also told me [AH] of the time Bill Hunter spent defending CO's in the Bristol Courts.

Ironically in 1941 according to John Wales:

Hunter decided that it was impossible for him to remain in civilian life, and he volunteered for the R.A.F., hoping to have his specialized abilities used there, as indeed they soon were, in photographic work.

Christopher Martin also lamented Hunter's joining up and reflected in his 17th April Report of 1942 that:

Last autumn it was the only enterprise left in the country making educational films and its work, therefore, was rousing the interest not only of Mr. Elton (who has always fathered it) but also of Mary Field, Basil Wright, Oliver Bell, and other people of eminence in the documentary world. As soon as they learnt that Hunter was departing they all told me how much they hoped that the Arts Department could continue making educational film, and how valuable they regarded our contribution in this respect.

Martin had presumably been in contact with such people through his new role in developing the Arts Survey about which more later. This contact between Dartington and the documentary film movement establishes a link. Martin comments on Elton's 'fathering' interest in the unit. It seems that Mary Field was working at British Instructional Films adding commentary to the 'Secrets of Nature' series and must have known of Dartington's work with these films in the 'New Learning' project of 1931

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### John Wales' memo goes on;

His (Bill Hunter) final departure at the end of the year [1941] created a serious problem. First, there was the pioneering work in educational film production, which was just beginning to bear fruit; if the unit ceased to exist, the ground work would be lost, and the experience almost entirely wasted. Second; there was the work that we had undertaken for the Ministry, and this was growing rapidly. I myself, during that year, had become increasingly interested in the work, and had been consulted by Hunter in various ways that had given me some idea of it; I had been instrumental in interesting Penguin Books in it with the result that Allen Lane had made a production grant. Looking at the Unit as an outside but sympathetic observer, I had come to the conclusion that it was important for the work to be kept alive: that the paper side of it in the preparation of subject treatments, and the composition of teaching notes to accompany the films - could be improved; and that the distribution end could be considerably extended - an end that Hunter, through his concentration on production and his almost excessive disregard of money matters, had rather left to itself. I accordingly volunteered that if a technical assistant could be found to keep the production side going, and to fulfill the commitments on which we had entered for the care of the M.O.I. Library, I would undertake the general direction of the Unit until Hunter's return.

Largely due to the efforts of John Wales, Penguin Books commissioned a series of 'Puffin Films' on agriculture. These films are not evident in a 1979 catalogue of films in the Archive holdings; presumably they would have used the Dartington farms and practices as illustration of the topics. Taking over the running of the Unit Wales needed a technical assistant and was joined by Sydney Sharples, described as a 'gifted amateur who was sufficiently enthusiastic about the work to throw up his business in the North and transport his family to a new and speculative environment with no guarantee of permanence. The Archive holds some dramatic footage, presumably shot by Sharples, of conditions and food relief of the people of Exeter after heavy bombing. The War saw the Unit flourish as a viable commercial concern if not by making much money - producing work for the Ministry of Information and others and running its extended film library. Much has been made of the growth in importance of the factual film, its use in training, information and education during the war years. No doubt Dartington's distribution work played a part.

The war also saw the death of William Hunter.

While one may be critical of the practical running of the early Film Unit, it is true that remarkable developments were made and this is more so when one considers that most of the people involved were, at the same time actually doing other jobs. Perhaps this fact is important in evaluating the Unit in comparison with other activities in the development of factual film in Britain at the time.

At Dartington an enthusiastic group of amateurs had turned themselves into a small but successful production unit making films with a particular relevance to themselves and their educational work, selling and distributing these films to schools, universities and a range of educational institutions. Distribution played a central part in the success of the Unit and the scale of its work with the Film Library of The South West meant that there was a respectable income and developing expertise both of which were clearly visible to the Dartington Trustees.

### Peter Cox writes

With the outbreak of war and the partial closure of the School, the unit was transferred to the Arts Department, Christopher Martin giving it an annual grant of £400, which rose to £1000 by 1945. In 1941 Bill Hunter enrolled in the RAF but the Unit carried on under the supervision of John Wales. The status of the unit was then substantially increased when the Film Council of the South West, the

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Petroleum Film Board, and the Central Office of Information (COI) decided to hand over their 16mm Films for distribution in the South West.

It is a testament to the ideas of William Hunter in shaping the Unit, and to the management skills of Wales that the Unit survived at all.

Extract from the minutes of the Factual Film group dated 21<sup>st</sup> May 1943

At the outbreak of the war, the British government was in the unique position of having at its disposal a large group of technicians experienced in the use of the film for national and international propaganda, as well as for training and instructional purposes.

As the war got into its stride, wide use has been made of the film medium by Ministry of Information, the British Council and the Services Departments. The M.O.I. took over the G. P. O film unit and re-named it the Crown film Unit. At the same time, it contracted with numerous documentary film units for many of its productions. Some of its films were distributed to the public cinemas by arrangement with the Film Trade, while others reached the public by the M.O.I.'s own channels of distribution in the non-theatrical field. [Notably via Dartington].

During the production of the Factual Film report the future of the Dartington Hall Film Unit was again brought into question. Martin's death in 1944 had brought about a change of administration in the form of Peter Cox and he was obviously trying to rationalize the Arts Department. Perhaps under pressure from F G Gwatkin the trust's accountant who suggested bringing in professionals to produce the films and keeping on a committee, librarian and accountant to carry out the distribution work for the MOI and others.

A meeting at PEP [Political and Economic Planning, an independent body formed to collate and provide access to information on industry and social policy formed around 1931], through whose offices the Report was published, in early 1945 recommended holding a conference to discuss the matter and this was organized at Dartington in June of 1945. The conference attendees included many of the notable people involved in producing the Factual Film report: Arthur Elton (Film Centre). Edgar Anstey (Film Centre), Paul Rotha, Sinclair Road (Chair of Arts Enquiry Factual Film Group).

Other delegates were; Alfred Kazin (American Office of War Information) William Farr (Central Film Library), Marjorte Wise (Head of Cambell School), Russell Barland (Scottish Film Council), G.P.Meredith (Visual Aids Department, University College Exeter), James Beveridge (National Film Board of Canada), Francis Ropleka (Shell Film Unit), WE Phillips (Director of Education —), Dorothy Greyson (BFI) and from Dartington Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, John Wales, JBE Patterson (Laboratory), WE Hinley (Woodlands Dept.), JR Currie (Agricultural Economics Department). Peter Sutcliffe (Bursar of Dartington Hall Trust), Tom Stobart and Peter Cox.

The conference arrived at the conclusion that Dartington should revise the structure, but should continue to support a film production unit. With war-time stimulated appetites for instructional and documentary film and the strong likelihood of Government sponsorship for such material, it was seen as potentially economically viable.

Peter Cox writes

The question we faced as the war drew to a close was how did such a Unit fit into the new kind of department we were beginning to develop.

This lead us to organize a conference in June 1945 to consider first, the national film scene then to turn

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its attention to the particular issue of the Dartington Hall Film Unit.

The documentary film producers were confident of government sponsorship continuing, and the Ministry of Education was going to establish an official system for the production and distribution of educational films. It seemed therefore that there could be a bright future for our Unit.

John Wales suggested that Tom Stobart be invited to run the Unit and LKE himself put up the £7000 finance.

### **The Film Unit Post-War**

Perhaps against the advice of the Trust's accountants, Leonard made a grant of £7000 available which made possible the setting up of a new Film Unit as an autonomous department under Tom Stobart.

Stobart took office the following year but it seems the whole of the first year was a difficult one. Quoting from Chapter 7 of Stobart's Book "I take Pictures for a living"

*I was going back to Dartington Hall to reopen the film unit as producer. I had been away for over six years, and I was looking forward to picking up where I had left off.*

*I realized it was a mistake as soon as I got there, I was grateful for their kindness-it is wonderful to be welcomed and remembered- but the place was full of ghosts. Now it was just sadness to walk through those beautiful gardens. Bill was dead, like so many friends. Others were scattered, others no longer full of fun. The war was no sleep, no gap in life continuing on the other side. It was six years of life gone by, and everything had changed. Even I myself was a different man.*

Stobart on starting the post war Unit had optimistically outlined the aims of the unit's work, summarized as:

To produce educational films and films for specialized groups

To use Teachers and teach elements of film production

Create a body of technicians who can produce educational films

Study the needs of groups and audiences - research

Experiment with high standards at a reasonable price

Continue to edit existing material

Experiment with new types of film making

Produce the kind of films that need to be made over a period of years.

This was an ambitious plan, perhaps outstripping the finance available and underestimating the post-war climate for production. It is interesting to note aim 6 and its implication that the process of re-constituting existing film material into new forms was established practice in the Film Unit.

This makes sense as a commercial procedure, but also points to the possibility that some of what remains of the Film Unit's material had a number of incarnations.

Certainly the 1935 film *No Work on Sundays* is cited in the Unit's 1939 brochure but has not been traced. Extant in the archive is a film called *Dartington Hall School*,

which seemed to include a lot of the material from the former but which was

produced in 1937 (dated by a shot of a newspaper from that time). The Galapagos

film from 1938 has two versions in the holdings now at TSWFTA: one, presumably the finished version, concentrating on wildlife with numerous identification titles cut in, the other seeming to be more of a narrative/record or out-takes of the expedition.

This practice of reusing material as 'stock-shots' was and is common in production companies of most complexions including contemporary TV companies.

### **COI and Min of Ed commissions.**

Changes made to the accommodation in the old Dance School, took longer and cost more than expected.

There was COI sponsorship for a film on Artificial Insemination of Cattle. The commission was brought about through John Wales, who himself had at this time along with Sydney Sharples gone to work on secondment for Paul Rotha's 'Realist' production company. It was a film, which was needed and Dartington with its own AI centre and a Film Unit, was the obvious place to make it. But there were innumerable delays in finalizing the commission, the budget had to be radically reduced, and, then the Ministry of Agriculture insisted that the film was done at its own centre in Reading. The film itself was successful and shown all over the world, with the commentary translated into over 20 languages. The Trustees were delighted but the delays in commissioning and changes to location meant that the Units first sponsored film went over budget by £100.

The experience with the Ministry of Education was no better. The Unit was commissioned to make *Animals of the Farm* on a shoestring budget of £800. Delays and "political correctness" prevented the film being completed in one season and the Unit again lost money.

### **1947.**

The anticipated flow of M.O.I, commissions did not materialize and two years into this incarnation the Film Unit of Stobart was without paid work. In February 1947 the Trustees mooted the idea of commissioning a film about Dartington Hall and the ideas of rural reconstruction. Stobart replies on 10th of February 1947:

There is already at least a local demand for a film on the subject of Dartington and admitting the probability of an increase in the international demand for British Educational and documentary pictures it seems probable that the film could obtain a wider distribution than has so far been envisaged. Organizations express a wish to hire such films as may be available concerning the Dartington scheme. There are none at the present time.

In 1947 the new Film Unit was finding its feet. Stobart is optimistic. Peter Cox, as the new Arts Administrator is also finding his feet. In a report to the Trustees dated 20th October 1947 he discusses the remnants of the Arts Department, which included Music in the form of Imogen Hoist. Theatre, the Northerners Theatre Group, and Film 'with the visual arts and the Dance as subsidiary activities'. In his report on the 'Post War Programme' Cox summarises:

Finally, there is the film, which in the non-theatrical field is more a means of communication than an art. Yet we have decided to develop the film unit, building on William Hunter's work and on the film library of the South-West. These came under the auspices of the Department by accident but, having established themselves without encouragement, it seemed wise to continue with them as long as they could support themselves and not draw upon the Department's allocation of endowment.

I (Hilton) do not think it is making assumptions to read Cox's evident disdain for the lesser art, which is after all more a 'means of communication than an art'. This does echo Hunter's earlier perception of prevailing attitudes in the Dartington hierarchy. To describe the unit as having come under the Arts Department auspices 'by accident' also conveys a sense of resentment. In Cox's detailed analysis of the elements of his

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department he gets to the Film Unit on page 8 and while extolling the longevity of Hunter's actual films, he is careful to qualify by commenting:

Hunter's films, of course, lacked technical quality which undoubtedly made them less valuable educationally than they would otherwise have been, but professional production was uneconomic before the war; there were too few projectors in the schools, too few teachers interested in the films and too few good films to make it worth the L.E.A.'s buying projectors or teachers interesting themselves in films.

In fairness, his view sets the unit's activity in the context of a very real economic climate, not just a problem for Dartington, but other producers of classroom films. His report goes on to summarize the 1945 conference findings, the setting up of the new unit. Stobart's appointment and the first troubled year. His analysis of the Unit concludes with a ray of hope.

It appears that our overhead expenditure may be far too high. Fortunately, we now have an excellent business manager in Alec Stafford, who came as assistant editor, and I hope that between us we may be able to get things straight.

His final overview cautions:

We are pioneering with somewhat inadequate resources in a highly unsuitable location for this particular job. We may fail, and if the Film Unit does, it means a financial loss to the Trustees of £4,000-£6,000. We may succeed temporarily, but can we then keep it up permanently? These are the sort of questions the Advisory Committee has every right to ask.

Perhaps Cox is being justly cautious or perhaps he has his own agenda to be rid of the troublesome Film Unit.

### 1948.

The Unit began producing for the open market and completed several short films during 1948. The film-making course held at Easter 1948 yielded *How to make a School Aquarium* that was widely circulated and members of the film unit helped to establish a flourishing film society on the Estate.

At this time Burt Foot who was once bar-man at the White Hart pub on the estate was acting as Stobart's cameraman and assistant. Burt Foot was camera man shooting Coast as early as 1947. It seems he intended to leave and Stobart suggests holding off on the production until a new assistant arrives, a Mr Berko. There was more delay and still no real outside commissions. In a report to the Trustees in 1948 by Peter Cox tells them:

Stobart has done a good deal of work on the treatment of the Dartington film which the Trustees commissioned, but he now recommends the Trustees to withdraw the commission since he does not believe it possible to make a really good film on Dartington. A good film needs a simple and compact story and it is almost impossible to make such a story out of the numerous and to some extent unrelated activities at Dartington. Some of the individual activities would make good film stories, but this would mean giving a one-sided view.

Again a Dartington film was asked for and developed but for a variety of reasons no specific film was made. The new Unit attempted to develop the idea of the Classroom film produced by teachers themselves and at Easter 1948 they held a training course for teachers. The result of this course was the production of *How to make a School Aquarium* produced on 16mm, a copy of which now resides amongst the Dartington Films held by TSWFTA in Plymouth. Despite considerable investment the benchmark turnover of twelve thousand pounds per annum required by Slater, the Estate Bursar, to represent viability, was not being met. The Unit was in trouble again. Peter Cox's report continues:

The Unit is, therefore, without paid work. We have to consider the future with greatest care and we cannot offer trustees much hope that, if the Unit could exist another six months or so it would turn the

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corner.

John Wales, now working mainly with Paul Rotha, attempted to cultivate contacts and commissions but without notable result. Approaches were made to the Ministry of Agriculture and Central Office of Information, Elton at the Film Centre, a Mr Thom at the National Commission for visual aids and to John Grierson on survival strategies for the Unit. As a result of these stirrings a Mr John P Maxton of the Institute of Agrarian Affairs contacted John Grierson and Grierson's response survives:

John P Maxton, esq, Institute of Agrarian Affairs 3, Magpie Lane, Oxford.

4<sup>th</sup> November 1948

Dear John. (Maxton).

I am in any case late with thanks for your previous note, but your letter gives me a second chance. Of course there is space for independent unit of the Dartington type, if it is guaranteed that there will be brains behind it, organizational good sense and a really specialized outlook on the use of film. The Dartington unit has been regarded less as a specialized unit of that kind than a sort of mixture of amateur and professional. I think it has missed a bit by taking too long to make its last picture and by getting into confusion - which may have not been its fault - over the costing of the film involved, (it dealt I think with AI). The min of Agriculture will be making their films through us and there is no reason why the D unit, properly constituted, should not be the sort of unit we could use to make their pictures. It depends entirely on the sort of people they have and the outlook of those responsible for the unit's governance.

So far as I am concerned, I have no temptation towards a single central unit whatsoever. I have run it both ways; with a total monopoly in Canada and with the divided system which obtains here.

Undoubtedly the best way is to have a central single unit with a planned and integrated approach to certain parts of the field, and to have, over and above the central unit, a number of specialized units each of which has its own individual character and quality. No top producer could be expected to foresee all the creative qualities, which this varied system, if properly encouraged, is liable to provide.

All the best to you.

Yours ever (signed) John Grierson.

The letter was copied either to Leonard or John Wales at Dartington and seems to be proof of a favorable view of the Film Unit, if with reservations. The correspondence continues with a second letter from Grierson 27<sup>th</sup> Nov 1948. In this case I believe it is being sent to John Wales, perhaps now more a part of the elite documentary filmmakers movement than part of Dartington. Wales had evidently invited Grierson to visit Dartington.

Dear John, (Wales).

I was very interested in the Dartington Film Unit and this was before you sent me your letter. I liked the Stobart man and I am sure he is competent, but I have an impression of a sort of cotton wool surrounding that doesn't make it easy to make proposals unless the whole film outfit is to be under proper disciplines and plans. In their favor I would say that they got a clumsy contact with the ministry of agriculture and that the maturing of their first film was difficult. But even under other circumstances I would doubt if they have the makings of a cutting edge now. All this talk of COI's power in the field is beside the point in the sense that although we have maybe two hundred films a year to order, there is in fact a universal lack of really first rate specialized units. If, for example, the Dartington Film Unit, were as good on the scientific agricultural side as the Shell Film unit is on the industrial scientific side, there would be no question about orders. Where the COI must feel diffident is that, as in so many cases, it is really being asked to finance the development of a unit, the choice of personnel of which it cannot control, and the quality of which it is in no position to guarantee. It has been happening time and again. Little independent groups that want to be independent and have a nice time in their own time, find themselves tuppence worth of capital and a big company name and then expect the COI to come through with orders. Dartington may be different, but I have still to be convinced of the seriousness of its intentions as a film unit, and its quality as a technical unit and of the disciplines it is prepared to impose to make it one of the ambitious first-raters in the field. Film business to me is film business. They had a chance in a thousand, and still have, to build up a scientific agricultural unit because there's no such thing in this country today, but it means that they must plan to do so and pick

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the kind of people who know what this would involve and have the willpower to carry it through. That would be worth Dartington's investment and it would be a great thing for the country, but the amateur approach has to be gotten out of it from the start. I have put this pretty sharply because the argument applies to so many other efforts I see around and I am shocked at the many opportunities in the fields that have been missed. If I pay a visit to Dartington would it be just for some more conversation? On the other hand is there a real will in higher quarters there to do something about films in the specialized agricultural field? If there is I shall be glad to help in setting out a plan. It would involve primarily a system of contacts with all organizations likely to want scientific agricultural films, and a proper sense from the beginning of what work could progressively be expected from them. It is not only the COI that is involved. The vacancy in the field is so apparent that I have been appealed to from the Min of Agriculture and the Scottish Agricultural Office to set up separate units simply to record their agricultural experiments for reporting and teaching purposes.

But enough of that. Fix me an invitation which would involve a proper discussion of possibilities, and with you present, and I shall be glad to go down, but please do not get me involved with any dark eyed young men of the sonnets.

Yours, (signed) John Grierson

Despite the desire to continue, post war conditions, the lack of commercial commissions and perhaps the prevailing attitude at Dartington (identified by Hunter in 1934) of not taking film too seriously, (despite Leonard's investment) led to the winding down of the Film Unit in 1949 and its final closure in January of 1950. This happened despite the efforts of John Wales and the ministrations of Peter Cox who was central in the discussions surrounding its demise. While the final Film Unit of 1946 to 1949 with Tom Stobart as Director, under its commercial contracts, shot much material, little of it pertains specifically to the Dartington Story.

Peter Cox wrote his version of events of the final years of the Dartington Hall Film Unit in his book "The Arts at Dartington 1940-1983".

He writes;

To cap all the mishaps on production, the Central Office of information decided to disband its regional library and centre all distribution in London. Thus the library side of the Unit's work had to be wound up, with a loss of staff, skill and overhead funding.

Dartington's own films were handed over to the Educational Foundation to distribute.

[I take this to mean the Educational Foundation for Visual Aids (AH)].

With hindsight Tom and I came to realize that our basic mistake was to have accepted the proposal that the Unit should become professional in order to meet Union requirements. Because of the distance from London the Unit had to maintain a full-time staff when there was not sufficient work coming in to justify it. For the same reason it was not possible to get locally the level or variety of services which professional and sponsored production required.

Tom was not a born administrator and there was no-one in the Arts Department with the necessary financial and administrative experience to over see the running of an educational venture within a commercially viable framework. There was then little recognition of this as an issue as there is today in all forms of Arts Administration.

Cox goes on to tell of the "the final straw to break the camel's back" when they bought a mobile generator, to run lighting for filming in dark buildings, that was vastly too big and never used.

By this time resources were running down and in January 1949 it was decided to abandon the whole venture. The doors finally closed a year later in January 1950.

Tom Stobart who was a film student under William Hunter from 1938-39 and who Ricky Leacock recalls teaching how to use the camera, gained a grant from

Dartington to produce a film on Microbiology after the Unit closed down. His pinnacle of achievement was as cameraman on the successful Hillary Everest expedition of June 1953. At least that is as far as he appears in the Dartington archive.

### **Conclusions.**

The growth and change and final demise of the Film Unit at Dartington is a story of dedicated amateurs, tantalizing in its missed opportunities. As Grierson commented 'they did have a chance in a thousand' to build something of importance.

My view (Hilton) is that the personalities who actually made films were focused too intently upon their art and lacked the political skills or power to play the emotional ego driven arts administration or commercial /government commission game.

The work of Bennett, while not being particularly remarkable actually demonstrates his passion and survives as important historical record. The shaping of film shots into coherent films was learnt and expertly practiced by William Hunter and his development of "Classroom Films" whose work even Peter Cox concedes was often used in preference to other more 'professional' films.

Indeed the Hunter Film Unit films stand the test of time well and are remarkable documents of educational interest. Perhaps his tragic death was also the death of the Unit's credibility and true potential. Ricky Leacock with his intuitive sense of cinematography and film construction went on to become an internationally important filmmaker. What might have happened if he and Hunter had had inclination and free rein to develop the work at Dartington? The war ended Hunter's life and saw dramatic changes in the young Leacock's.

Without John Wales's intervention in 1941 the Unit would have closed then. He too went on to work with the "Documentary Film making Elite" as Hilton put it.

Stobart's subsequent achievements demonstrate the poor hand the post-war economic climate dealt him and hopes for a future of film production at Dartington.

My [AH] view is that Tom Stobart, who I got to know quite well, was essentially an adventurer and an explorer. Everest made him world famous and he continued to explore. Looking for the Abominable Snowman in the Himalayas, his expeditions to Antarctica, the search for King Solomon's Mines in Ethiopia, demonstrates this. In his own words his heart was not in it on his return to Dartington after the war.

Peter Cox had sincere regard for Tom Stobart as a person and laments the advice that led to the Film Unit becoming 'professional' rather than continuing the more flexible and successful one-man band affair it had been previously. With the close of the Film Unit in January 1950, the commercial exploitation of film as part of the Dartington Experiment and serious 'home grown' production at Dartington ends.

**END.**