Linda Kaye describes the BUFVC’s research project dedicated to David Lean’s early career as a newsreel cutter and looks at the range of events that have marked the centenary of his birth.

2008 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of David Lean, one of Britain’s greatest film directors. Across the country organisations and individuals have seized this opportunity to celebrate aspects of his career and life, from the restoration of his first ten films to the re-development of Carnforth railway station featured in Lean’s classic BRIEF ENCOUNTER (1945). The variety of different projects and activities, together with retrospectives playing out across the world, has ensured that Lean’s legacy has become more accessible thereby providing greater scope for the assessment that accompanies any major anniversary. This article will focus on the David Lean and Gaumont Sound News project, which explored his early career in news production, before looking at some of the other projects and events that have taken place over the last year.

David Lean and Gaumont Sound News

At the beginning of 1930 David Lean had just earned his first credit as an editor on the early sound feature THE NIGHT PORTER. He seemed to be successfully working his way up the features editorial ladder when he moved to a very different part of Lime Grove studios working as a cutter on one of Britain’s first sound newsreels, Gaumont Sound News (1929-1933). What motivated this seemingly abrupt change of direction? Once he was there, where did he work, who did he work with, what did he learn and what was this news that he helped to create? These were some of the questions that informed the David Lean and Gaumont Sound News project (2007-2008) at the BUFVC which aimed to explore why Lean entered the news industry as well as piecing together the history of the newsreel itself.

The history of both the newsreel and Lean’s time there were characterised by fragments – of films, documents, memories...
explores why Lean became a newsreel cutter, how sound revolutionised the news, through the history of Gaumont Sound News and the coming of newsreel theatres, in which the change is how people experienced cinema news. Thirty minutes of newsreel footage can be seen via the website's timeline with stories ranging from pre-election addresses in the autumn of 1931 from all major parties, including one by Oswald Mosley, to Madeleine Carroll's visit to a Yorkshire colliery prior to making the film BLACK DAMP. Although we cannot be certain what stories Lean worked on from 1930, these films help us to understand his part in creating the news at this time and view his later career in a different light.

necessitated by the heavy sound equipment. At this time, in the autumn of 1929, Lean was still working in the world of features at Lime Grove assisting the director Sewell Collins to cut a film called THE NIGHT PORTERER (1930). Collins had cut silent films but found the process of cutting sound very problematic because it required different skills and way of working with the material. With silent film you could literally cut it using your hands. You could run a length of it out, know how long that would run and match the two pieces of film up and, as Lean recalled some fifty years later to Kevin Brownlow, hold them together very tightly moving them sprocket by sprocket through your fingers and actually be quite co-ordinated and mechanical. It required a synchronised approach that Sewell Collins did not possess and this led to a pivotal moment in Lean’s career.

There was only one person in the studio who could cut and synchronise sound and picture, and he was called John Seabourne who cut the Gaumont Sound News. Seabourne said to Collins, ‘I can spare you an hour.’

This quotation from Lean really encapsulates the degree to which newsreels were literally at the cutting edge of this new technology and when Seabourne left Gaumont Sound News around January 1930, going on to become one of Michael Powell’s main collaborators, Lean walked into the vacancy left in the editing room. The newsreel team he joined was led by news editor Keith Ayling, an ex-Fleet Street journalist, and alongside him was Roy Drew, who had been working as a cutter since June 1929. They were also based at Lime Grove, which was on the verge of major re-development at this time. When the new studio building opened in 1932, the cutting room was in the ‘Penthouse’, the top floor. Lean joined in a period of expansion – more cinemas were converting to sound and newsreels were proving a popular part of the programme. It was in this fluid, experimental environment at Gaumont Sound News that Lean learnt how to cut negative film at speed. It was always tight in newsreel production and you didn’t have the luxury of cutting a print and then matching it to the negative. The exposed film would be rushed to Shepherds Bush, straight from the cameramen if they were in London or often from a railway station. The negatives would then be sent up to the cutting room. The cutters would sometimes work well into the night, shaping the story, synchronising the sound and literally ‘faking’ it with library footage if they didn’t have it.

These early years of sound were actually a period of great creativity as sound and picture went through this difficult process of convergence. Early Gaumont Sound News issues were strange auditory hybrids reflecting this slow transition. They often had bursts of natural sound, followed by a snatch of commentary and then a story in silence. It would take a couple of years before they settled into a carefully tuned ten minute drama that we’re more familiar with, narrated in clipped tones to an orchestrated background of natural sound and music. Certainly as more cinemas converted to sound, companies felt more confident about investing in the technology and advances, particularly in dubbing, helped stories to regain something of the fluid visual movement that they had had in the...
silent era. Lean served an intense technical apprenticeship at Gaumont Sound News and it was in this experimental environment that he learnt how to cut film and turn actuality into ten-minute dramas.

**Centenary Events and Activities**
The main event of this anniversary year was British Film Institute’s painstaking restoration, funded by the David Lean Foundation, of Lean’s first ten films stretching from *IN WHICH WE SERVE* (1942) to *HOBSON’S CHOICE* (1953). These formed the backbone of a two-month season of Lean’s work at the BFI Southbank in June and July. Their distribution life was then extended via the Digital Screen Network, a Film Four season and DVD release as the *David Lean Centenary Collection*. This process of increasing access naturally fostered awareness of his lesser-known work, particularly *THE PASSIONATE FRIENDS* (1949) and *MADELEINE* (1950), catalysing an ongoing assessment of his legacy – whether through Guardian podcasts, the director Joe Wright’s perceptive assessment of his vision, and the price he paid for it, or the centenary conference held at Queen Mary, University of London in July. This brought together academics, archivists and enthusiasts to view Lean’s work through a prism that included the process of adaptation, the role of colour in *BLITHE SPIRIT* (1945), Britishness and the role of designer John Box. Viewing Lean from these different perspectives encouraged connections to be made that not only deepened our appreciation of his work but also our sense of the man behind it. Something that the recent online publication of the Sir David Lean Showcase by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) (www.bafta.org/archive/david-lean/) has fostered, highlighting his seminal role in its founding and development through documents and interviews. In the late 1960s Lean donated his profits from *BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI* (1957) and *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* (1962) to the Academy. His accompanying letter, which outlines the idea behind the inception of British Film Academy in 1947, illuminates a side of his nature seemingly at odds with this reticent personality. One which valued the creative nature of communication between filmmakers and sought to provide a nurturing environment for it.

The idea of The British Film Academy was started by Sir Alexander Korda and he insinuated me into being its first chairman. His idea was to have a society for film makers. We started off in a small top floor office in Piccadilly with Judy Steele taking notes and Roger Manvell keeping us more or less to the point – us being Powell, Pressburger, Launder, Gilliatt, Olivier, Reed, Balcon, and other enthusiasts. At one of our early meetings Alex said he could not only see the day when we could hire the Albert Hall for award ceremonies – at which we all chucked politely – but that we should aim at the purchase of a building where we could show films, eat, drink and talk with our fellow film makers.

The importance of communication also informed part of his vision for the David Lean Foundation (www.davidleanfoundation.org), which took this one stage further, aiming to promote collaboration among different organisations involved in British film production and its history. The events of this year, many of which were forged in partnership and funded by the Foundation, have realised this wish to foster dialogue as well as increase knowledge and understanding of both Lean and his work.

**Linda Kaye**
Research Executive, BUFVC