

## WILLIAM HAGGAR: CINEMA PIONEER

On 19 February the Saundersfoot Historical Society enjoyed a lively and informative lecture by the Rev. Felicity Randall about her forebear, the film pioneer and cinema owner, William Haggar.

Born in Dedham, Essex in March 1851, into a humble background, William Haggar first worked as a travelling musician and carpenter. His life was to take a particular and successful direction when he met his future wife Sarah and joined her family's touring theatre company. After their marriage they were to form their own troupe, performing at fairgrounds throughout south Wales and the south-west of England. The family's motto was 'follow the coal' and William, Sarah and their growing family were to make a good living from presenting popular entertainment to colliery workers and their families.

William Haggar was quick to see the opportunities offered by the new medium of film. He had acquired a projector by 1898 and was soon operating a travelling cinema or Bioscope. Local scenes and newsworthy events proved popular with audiences, an example of which was a short film made by Haggar of a train arriving and departing Burry Port railway station.

By 1902 William Haggar was developing and filming his own melodramas. His stock company comprised the members of his own family whose theatrical background provided skills and experience readily transferrable to the screen. His output included comedies and thrillers but it is with his innovative techniques in film-making that his reputation rests, and which influenced film makers throughout the world. For instance, in 'A Desperate Poaching Affray' he uses one of the earliest examples of a panning shot in which a fixed camera tracks the action across the width of the screen. The film is also notable for the manner in which the chase scenes are developed, particularly influencing pioneer film-makers in the United States. A Desperate Poaching Affray is also surprisingly violent.

In 'Charles Peace,' an imagined biography of the infamous criminal, and shot in and around Pembroke Dock, we can see further innovation in his film-making: the realistic use of a dummy in the fight scene on board a train and the employment of narrative text to provide continuity between scenes.

Perhaps the best known of William Haggar's films is 'The Maid of Cefn Ydfa,' though some experts now believe that the surviving print is a remake made by his son, William junior. A richly nuanced melodrama, it re-tells the tragic love story of Ann Thomas, forced to abandon her true love and enter an arranged marriage.

After the death of his wife William Haggar stopped making films and concentrated his energies on developing a chain of cinemas throughout south Wales, including of course, our once local Haggar in Pembroke.

Felicity was able to conclude her enjoyable talk with extracts from some of William Haggar's surviving films held at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth and which showed clearly the skills of this film pioneer.