

## HISTORY OF THE SITE

We will begin with William Joynson (1802-1874), manager of the paper mill at Snodland between 1823 and 1833. He moved to St Mary Cray in 1833, where he developed a large and flourishing mill. At his death in 1874 his estate was valued at 'under £350,000', but was then reassessed at 'under £500,000' two years later. In religion Joynson was a Non-Conformist and he encouraged links with the church at Chatham, whose minister was Joseph Slatterie.

The gospel was introduced into Snodland by agents of the Chatham Itinerant Society about the year 1822. At first worship was conducted in a cottage, and afterwards a chapel, capable of accommodating about 200 persons, was fitted up, chiefly at the expense of Mr William Joynson.

After Joynson's move to St Mary Cray, Snodland paper mill was shut for a time, and a number of his workforce moved with him. In due course John Clark, a member of an Independent Church in Buckinghamshire, came to manage the mill, so the Congregationalists in Snodland then revived.

Although he had not lived in Snodland for twenty years, Joynson continued to act as a benevolent godparent to the Non-Conformists here and he provided the financial support to build a new chapel and associated school. These were to be in 'Windmill Field' on the west side of Holborough Road/ The land had previously been owned and farmed by George Gorham, who lived in the old house (now no. 74) on the east side. He had acquired Windmill Field and other land in 1836, which included

A Most substantial Brick built WINDMILL ... driving two of French stones, with going gear complete, abundant stowage room, and every requisite accommodation for carrying one an extensive trade.'

In 1837 it was 'unoccupied' and was taken down and moved to



Gillingham in 1839, where it was destroyed in a fire. The picture (c.1920) shows it in Gillingham.

Joynson bought at least part of the land for his Chapel and School. The Pastor at the time, William Bresnan Love, recorded the details:

The New Chapel commenced building in the Autumn of 1854 and was opened for Divine Worship on April 6th 1855.

The Chapel remained in use until 1888 when the new one in the High Street replaced it.

In his book of 1894 John Woolmer tells of the beginnings of the new school:

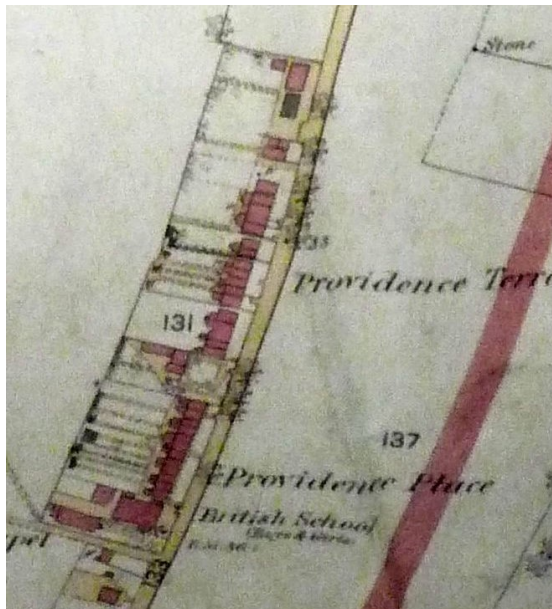
A few members of the Congregational Chapel wished for a school of their own to which their children might go, and thus be free from that class of religious instruction usually taught in Church Schools. Their desire was soon carried into effect, for in the vestry of the Congregation Chapel the Nonconformists started a small school, under the charge of Miss George. Afterwards it was fortunate when there was a great increase in the child population of Snodland, and a corresponding necessity for another school beside the National, that the late Mr. Thomas Bateman was able to prevail upon his friend, the late Mr. Joynson, of St. Mary Cray, to build these schools (in 1857). At a meeting, the latter gentleman presented them to the people of



Snodland, but unfortunately did not place them in the hands of a legal trust, or form a committee of management.

Woolmer's account continues:

For a lengthened period the working of the Schools appears to have been unsatisfactory, and ultimately a disagreement arose with some of the persons concerned, which led Mr. Joynson to have the school materials put up for sale in one lot, to be cleared away in a short time; and the house and ground in another lot. The school materials were bought by the late Mr. Charles Townsend Hook, who asked several of the leading Nonconformists what was best to be done about the school-house and ground, which had been bought by Mr. Collier of Greenhithe. In the end, the two gentlemen arranged matters, Mr. Hook purchasing the house and ground from Mr. Collier, who gave a donation for the benefit of the Schools.



*From the 1867 Ordnance Survey map showing the Chapel, School and houses erected by Joynson from part of Windmill Field.*

Numbers increased to such an extent that it outstripped the National School and expansion was called for. Agnes and Maud Hook offered 1000 guineas for the adjacent Providence Chapel, which the congregation accepted, so this became the infant department of the school. As part of the expansion the Hook sisters also added the front part of the building with its distinctive striped decoration. Accommodation was thus increased from the former 430 places to 320 boys and girls and

190 infants. It remained busy until the opening of the Central School for the older pupils on 19 May 1930, to which they were then transferred. Those of primary school age had to wait another two years until St Katherine's was opened on 30 May 1932.

### THE FILM STUDIOS

The site remained vacant until early in 1936, when newspapers proudly announced that the first film studios were to be opened in Kent. On 15 January *The Era*, which specialised in recording events in variety and theatre wrote:

The Six Lai Founs, Chinese wonders who have been popular in variety, have just completed an enormously successful circus season at the Kelvin Hall, Glasgow. They are also the stars with Tony Gerrard of the Bijou Film Company's first film, "Chinese Cabaret," which is being booked by Columbia. Buddy Harris, of Bijou Films, tells us he is contracted to produce six more for Columbia. He has also taken the Carlton Dance Hall in Tottenham Court-road for other functions. F[rank]. W[oolf].

A longer and more detailed article appeared in the *Kentish Express* of 1 May:

#### £20,000 MEDWAY PROJECTS

##### A CHINESE IS TO BE ENGLAND'S LATEST FILM PRODUCER

Lai Foun, the celebrated variety star of the Six Lai Founs who are famous throughout the Continent, America and this country, have acquired what will shortly be Kent's first studios, and will spend on them some £20,000 in the small village of Snodland outside Gravesend.

Equipped fully with all the usual offices, theatre, two sound stages and with even a series of cottages on the lot for the use of artistes, executives in Hollywood style. Medway Studios, as they will be called, are set in 40 acres of beautiful lands, with some of the best forest and river atmosphere in England. The studios are

only an hour's run by train from Charing Cross, and will be the first to be built in that part of the country.



*Lai Foun*

#### UNEMPLOYED TO SECURE WORK

One aspect of the situation is that the villagers in Kent who have suffered from unemployment of recent years will find the studios a veritable godsend for them, and the whole village will be kept busy in some way or other by the studios.

#### FILM MADE FOR COLUMBIA

This young Chinese actor will be seen throughout the country in his first starring role in "Chinese Cabaret," which was recently made for Columbia by Bijou Films. So well was his performance received in the trails of the private showing recently, that the new studios are to [be] kept busy on a series of films to build this new British star. He is considered the best bet in pictures since the late Hayakawa.

Speaking to Lai Foun, one of the most charming men you could meet, he told us:

"There are a lot of companies in England springing up now, making a film, and then dying out in a few weeks. The reason for their failure is mainly that the exorbitant cost of hiring a studio makes it impossible to carry on with anything like a success, and unless you secure your own studios or buy another studio's output, you are practically doomed to failure. That is why we have formed this company to take over these new studios and I hope to have a great success with them, I and Mr. S. I. Hsiung, author of "Lady Precious Stream," are working on a film scenario now for production in June."

More news appeared in the *News Chronicle* of 6 May 1936.

#### CHINESE FILM FROM KENT

Studios in Snodland, Kent, are being made ready for the production of a Chinese film, which will end with a magnificent version of an Oriental wedding scene.

S. I. Hsiung, author of "Lady Precious Stream," is writing the scenario, and Lai Foun, a leading Chinese actor, will play the lead.

London and the Chinese hinterland will be the setting for a story of a young Chinese artist who after a success in London returns to marry his Chinese sweetheart.

#### DIRECTOR-STAR

The picture is to be produced by the Bijou Film Company, of which Lai Foun is a director as well as star. The company has in preparation two other Chinese scenarios. In "Shadow Sweetheart" Mr. Foun will play opposite Diana Wong, and in "Violin Song" he will be partnered by a new discovery, a young Japanese actress, Margaret Kato.

(Diana Wong was married to Roy Plomley, the creator and first long-time presenter of the BBC's *Desert Island-Discs*.)

Mr. Hsiung, who was a pioneer of film production and distribution in China, told the "News Chronicle" that the company expects a heavy demand for the new films from the provincial Chinese towns.

"The big centres still show Western films almost exclusively," he said, "but there is a big demand for the Chinese pictures up-country."

Scenarist and star both come from the district south of the Yangtse River, but their native towns are as far apart as Aberdeen and Brighton.

The Lai Founs were among 'special turns' at Eastbourne at Christmas 1936, when it was also mentioned that S. I. Hsiung 'is busy preparing a British film of that classic Chinese "Cinderella."

A brief announcement of the project also appeared in *The Era* on the same date, and, more surprisingly, at Townsville in Queensland, Australia, on 14th July, which also mentioned that Mr Hsiung and his wife had recently returned to England from the United States.

Shih-I Hsiung (1902-1991) was a distinguished academic from Beijing who translated into Chinese plays by George Bernard Shaw and J. M. Barrie. Both became his friends. In 1932 he had come to London to study at Queen Mary College, and he translated many Chinese plays into English. He was also the first Chinese person to direct a play in the West End, London. He had a smash



hit with his play *Lady Precious Stream* of 1935, based on a traditional Chinese story, which ran to 1000 performances and was adapted for television. Although his later plays were also well-regarded, none achieved the success of that first play.

On 6 May 1937, *Kinematograph Weekly* announced

“International Revue” will shortly start at the Medway Film Studios, Snodland, Kent, with Buddy Harris directing, and Lai Foun, chief of Medway Studios, as star. The cast includes Ronald Frankau, Peter Bernard, Frank Braidwood, Bernard de Gautier and Jessica Merton, with the Jackson Streamlined Eight, Marcella Salzter, the two Jays, Karl Melene and Phyllis Greenwood. Lai Foun’s troupe of Chinese acrobats and George Colborn’s Musicas from the Streatham Locarno.

Songs and lyrics are written by Marc Anthony, and special costumes and scenes are designed by Duncan Melvin. Billy Williams is cameraman.

The film first appeared in September 1936 and was included in a

programme of ‘New Offerings’ advertised in *Kinematograph Weekly* and screened at the Phoenix Theatre during the London Trade Fair which ran from 29 October to 4 November. Apart from listing the performers the notice added

Lai Foun, with his company, was the artiste chosen by Hitler to appear at his private house after the Olympic Games—an honour for which all German artistes have been craving. Lai Foun, with his six “Chinese Wonders.” is rapidly becoming famous throughout the world. Whilst he is finishing his present film, and appearing at the Victoria Palace each evening, another script is in preparation, which will star him in an acting part for the first time.

More is made of the event in *The Era* of 26 August:

A British film and variety star—Lai Foun—received a command from Hitler to appear with his company at a private party at his own home in honour of the champions of the Olympic Games. This honour was received by the British star when all German variety artists were falling over each other to secure the honour. After the performance, Hitler spoke to Lai Foun for ten minutes, and warmly congratulated him on his performance. Hitler was very interested in Lai Foun’s film appearance in “International Revue.”

It will be recalled that Lai Foun announced, a few months ago, his decision to become a film producer himself, and acquired the new “£20,000 Medway Film Studios in Kent. He will return to England in a few weeks, and will star in a second production here.

the following year advertisements show there were many places around Britain where “International Review’ was seen, always as a supporting film to the main one. At 40 minutes length this was natural. *The Era* of 11 November summarized it as follows:

**A real variety bill linked together by dialogue between manager and agent who is trying to book the acts. Well-**



**chosen acts, fairly good production, handy footage. Should be good offering as second feature all over the country, with good appeal to variety lovers.**

This is Buddy Harris's best attempt yet. He has booked some of the best acts suitable for this class of film and produced them in a cabaret setting with a conversational link between Fred Dupre, as th manager, and Edmund Dalby, as the agent, and they cause big laughs every time they come on.

The Lai Founs, in their clever potpourri specialities, the Two Jays, in funny burlesque dancing, Ronald Frankau, giving some of his usual sophisticated patter, a fine beauty chorus, and a good Hungarian band,

"International Revue." National Provincial. British. Director, Buddy Harris. 3,683 ft. "U" certificate.

**General appeal: Very good.** F.[rank] W.[oolf]

Skegness described it as 'a very attractive variety and musical offering on a spectacular scale, with a great cast which includes Ronald Frankau, Pete[r] Bernard, and other famous performers. However, In January 1937 *The Grantham Journal* labelled it as 'all dialogue, music and songs, which is variety entertainment for an uncritical audience'. A kinder notice appeared in *The Sussex Agricultural Express* in March which said the show 'offers fine all-round entertainment.'

Newspapers often give more information about the cast and their roles in the film when advertising the screenings. Ronald Frankau (1894-1951) spent his whole life in entertainment, beginning as a chorus boy in 1911. He fought in the Great War, and afterwards worked as a comedian and dancer. He made a name for himself in the early days of the BBC telling what were often risqué jokes, although he was still able to pass the strict censorship the corporation applied. He made many recordings with his pianist Monte Crick.

Peter Bernard (1889-1960) and Frank Braidwood (1898-1977) were both American. Bernard died in Yorkshire, but Braidwood returned to the USA, presumably when the war broke out. Fred Duprez (1884-1938) was also an American who performed in vaudeville and made many gramophone recordings. Most of the films he appeared in were British. He died from a heart attack while on board a ship travelling to England. Bernard de Gautier (1914-2002) was an English actor. Jessica Merton (1906-2006) was an English actress who also appeared in *Cabaret* (1936) as well as *International Revue*. Marcelle Salzter (1912-1968) was born in Berlin, but as an actress lived and worked in England; she also starred in *Cabaret* (1936). (Millie) Jackson's Streamlined Eight were active between 1935 and 1948. Karl Melene (a baritone from Birmingham) won prizes in the 1920s, while Winifred Bury was a soprano who often sang at the piano. Sydney Arnold made a name for himself as a comedian at the BBC. *The Yorkshire Observer* of 23 July was keen to promote a dancer from Bradford:

Miss Phyllis Greenwood, the young Bradford dancer who is now a well-known figure in the cabaret world of London's West End, has just completed her first straight part in a film "International Revue," which has been produced by Medway Productions, Ltd.

She has made such a good impression in the new film that she has been placed under contract by the company for their next film, which they are producing shortly.

Miss Greenwood made her first step on the path to fame by winning a beauty contest, which enabled her to go to London, where she studied dancing. Engagements in a number of well-known West End cabarets followed, and she is now giving exhibition dances. She had a dancing role in the films "Oh Susie!" and "Give Her a Ring." Her latest film has in the cast several well-known broadcasting and cabaret stars, such as Ronald Frankau and Peter Bernard.

## "INTERNATIONAL REVUE"



Scenes from *INTERNATIONAL REVUE*, an outstanding musical short subject which will be Trade shown in London and the Provinces with *LIVE AGAIN*, the National Provincial production which will be presented in London at the Phoenix Theatre, at 3 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 3.

*Kinematograph Weekly: 29 October 1936*

A notice for “International Revue” appeared when it was screened at the Regal, Melton Mowbray, in January 1937:

Fred Duprez is very effective as a manager in search for talent, and amongst the revue artistes appearing are: Lai Foun and His Chinses Wonders, Peter Bernard, Marcella Saltyer, Ronald Frankau, Frank Braidwood, De Gautier and Merton, Millie Jackson Girls, The Two Jays, and Karl Melene.

Another review appears in the *Flintshire Times*: Prince of Wales Cinema: 5-7 September 1937:

“International Revue” is a musical picture with a cast of international radio stars. Ronald Frankau is at his humorous best, Lai Foun and his Chinese wonders appear in more than extraordinary contortions, beautiful Marcel[le] Salzter, a Viennese star, sings attractive songs, and music is provided by George Colburn’s Musicas. A good comedy story links the various acts, Fred Duprez taking the part of an inebriated revue producer engaging new acts.

The 1938 Directory for Snodland is the only one I have found which actually lists the company here: ‘The Studios, film producers, Holborough Road’. (There was no entry in the 1934 Directory.) Undoubtedly the outbreak of the Second World War dashed any plans and hopes that the studios had for the future. It seems unlikely that we shall learn the names of any other films that were produced there, other than the four given to us by the newspapers: Chinese Cabaret; Shadow Sweetheart; Violin Song; International Revue; They are not currently found in Internet lists like those for Columbia films, probably because they were ‘shorts’ intended as partners to a main film. It is also obvious that their main emphasis was in variety entertainment rather than drama, with the Lai Founs undoubtedly featuring as the most prominent group, performing alongside other well-known acts. No doubt the war prevented the commissioning of a wider range of films, which may have been planned. I well remember an old parishioner some 20-30 years ago mentioning that she had seen a vehicle full of Chinese people travelling down Malling Road, on their way to the Studios.

Presumably there was hope that the Studios would revive after the war. Medway Studios were still owners in October 1940, when bomb damage caused an employee to be heavily fined - one hopes he was reimbursed by the company. The *Dover Express and East Kent Newspaper* of 11 October 1940 has the details:

A fine of £10 was imposed at Chatham on Friday last week on Harold Ennis, of Bellview, Holborough, Snodland, a photographer, who took photographs, without a permit, of buildings damaged by enemy action.

Inspector H. Baddeley said that Ennis was seen and asked if defendant had a permit to take the pictures. taking photographs of a building damaged in a raid of the previous night. Witness was on duty, and asked if defendant had a permit to take the pictures. Ennis replied that he had not, and added that he was taking the photographs for the Medway Studios, by whom he was employed. He also stated that he had taken other pictures of damage caused in the same district.

Mr. M. V. Mackey, for the defence, said that Ennis's employers, the Medway Studios, were instructed by an evening newspaper to take photographs of the damage. The whole case was due to a misunderstanding between the firm and the newspaper. The latter thought the Studios had a permit, and the firm thought the newspaper held a permit, and that as agents of the paper, they had a right to take the pictures.

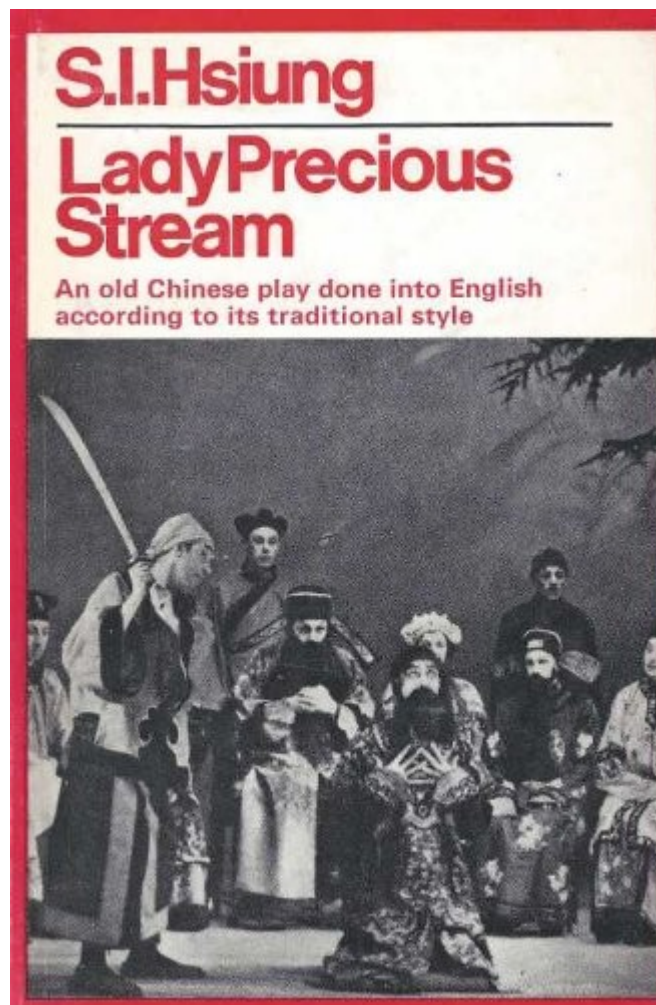
The Chairman said that the case might have been a very serious one indeed, and the least the Bench could do was to impose a fine of £10, plus 9s. 6d. costs. They ordered the confiscation of the plates and photographs, but allowed the return of the camera.

Older parishioners will remember Mr Ennis, who had his shop at the east end of the former Post Office; he was the village photographer for many years.

**ARCHIVE VIDEOS**

“International Revue” exists, so one day it may perhaps be revived for us to see in some way. We do have a 3-minute performance by the Lai Founs: <https://www.youtube.com/britishpathe>: search for ‘Lai Founs (1942)’ to see their extraordinary contortions and plate spinning.

There are also very many British Pathé videos of Ronald Frankau via Youtube.



## ADDENDA

**QUESTION. What became of the Medway Film Studios I saw being built in Snodland, Kent in 1935. Were films made there?**

This question appeared in the *Daily Mail* on 7 April 1998, heading a response by Carol Peters, Faversham Kent, I am not at all sure that she is correct in what she says, so will examine part of her reply. Ignoring details about the site, she writes:

Anna May Wong starred in *The International*, made there in 1936. Screen versions of the famous Aldwych farces —featuring Ralph Lynn — were also made at Snodland, beginning with *Rookery Nook*, written by Ben Travers and produced by the British and Dominions Film Corporation in 1930.

Other stars involved were Robertson Hare, Alfred Drayong [*recte* Draycon] and Tom Walls. Lynn's last film was made in 1937.

'Anna May Wong' (1905-1961) was a Chinese-American actress who worked in both silent and sound films in the 1920s and '30s. She was actually on a visit to China in 1936 and is wrongly identified for 'Diana Wong' (see p.6). 'The International' is also wrongly labelled for 'International Revue'. The Aldwych farces were all made into films between 1930 and 1935—too early for them to have been made by Medway Film Studios.

Also mentioned is a note by Frank Wright, Rochester, Kent (perhaps the original questioner) which says

The one film which I know was made at Medway Film Studios was called *Old Bill Of the River*, some shots being taken on the Medway.

So far, I have found no trace of it'

