Although British cinema didn't really come to life until the middle twenties, its development forestalled initially by the war, then by other economic problems, general short-sightedness, a tardy emergence of really good and creative directors, and an obstinate refusal to acknowledge the worth (or even the necessity) of good screen writers, in the pre-war period it was at least on an equal economic footing with America. The pre-1934 years were lively and inventive, stronger on humor than the rest of the British silent period was to prove to be, but vital, lacking any sense of urgent progress or intense vitality. For Griffith, Lyne, Somerset or the output of such studios as Biograph and Edison over here, because so much remains for reappraisal. At best, we have landmarks and representative works from Britain, and it is obviously unfair to judge, on a firm basis, from these. Nevertheless, today's compilation offers key films from such major pioneers as Hepworth and Urban, and yet at the end of it, one has nowhere near the sense of progress that one would have from a similar American compilation beginning with 'The Great Train Robbery' and ending with 'The Musketeers of Pig Alley'. All along the line there are constant signs of discovery; imaginative lighting here, careful stop motion there, but all largely underexploited. The 1904 'John Gilpin's Ride' for example makes maximum use of a tracking camera in another vehicle -- but like the similar long tracking shot in Edison's earlier 'Bicycle Police', it's there only because it's the easiest way to handle the shot. There are even a few false starts when the motorist takes off before the actor is ready, and has to come to a halt again! A director realizing the dramatic possibilities of the device would have shot the galloping rider from the rear, not from the rear -- and to blazes with the theory that tracking was "unrealistic" and betrayed the presence of the camera. One advantage that these British melodramas have over their American counterparts is a much greater use of natural landscape and less reliance on the studio. Of course, these short British films were often historical dramas, or reconstructions of actual events, and they had the unchanging British countryside and many still extant buildings and landmarks as authentic locales. Also of course, most studios in those days were open-air affairs relying on sunlight for illumination; the British sun has never been too reliable, and overcast "interior" scenes might tend to predominate, whereas against exterior scenes would at least be acceptable and more related to reality! The films, in order, are:

• "The Life of Charles Peace", the NFT credits it as 1903, but it would actually appear to be the 1905 "remake" by Walter Haggard. (Peace was a major criminal, frequently of British silent and sound melodramas - though never given the deluxe treatment of Jesse James or Jack the Ripper). The enthusiastic NFT foreword is certainly justified, even though the film is slightly less than "realistic". "John Gilpin's Ride" is actually a delightful little film by Cecil Hepworth, made with the Hepworth family - remarkably similar in construction and mood to Griffith's "The Adventure of Dollie", which it predates by four years.

• "A Bicycle Robbery" (1903), "The Life of Charles Peace" and "John Gilpin's Ride" is another 1904 Hepworth of interest, and this is followed by Charles Urban's 1910 "Possibilities of Future War in the Air", or "The Love Story of the Inventor of the Aerial Torpedo". Amazingly prophetic in its predictions of modes of warfare of both World Wars one and two, it is also a little on the primitive side; some of the miniatures in it are no further advanced than much earlier R.C.S. Police work in films like "Uncle Tom's Cabin". Finally a charming Griffithian all-chase thriller, "Lieut. Daring Captures a Spy", 1912, directed by Dave Aylott and starring Harry Lorraine. One of its basic story plays was used again much later in Paullette Godard's "The Lady Has Plans", while the backgrounds involved in the Charing Cross-Folkestone-Boulogne trip are especially interesting in that they haven't changed one iota in the intervening years. Lieut. Daring, a kind of Naval Dick Tracy and a popular character in a whole series of 2-reel thrillers, is admittedly a little cavalier in his treatment of civilians, from whom he commandeers cabs, bicycles etc., all of which he proceeds to wreck and abandon in his mad chase after the spies!

• "DRAG HARLAN" (Fox, 1918) Directed by J. Gordon Edwards; scenario by H. P. Keesler. From the story by Charles Alden Buitzer; 5 reels With William Farnum, Jackie Saunders, G. Raymond Nye; Kewpie Morgan.

We have little space left, but fortunately little comment is needed. Pre-Mix, the influence here is straight Bill Hart and Zane Grey; a traditionally austere old-fashioned Western, with short jobs, without Alec Guinness and no unrealistic elements on either side for its own sake. Farnum, as always, overdoes it a little, and considering the simplicity of the plot there are too many long titles; but it's good to see both a Farnum Western and an Edwards-directed film, both extremely rare. Decomposition is setting in at the very end, and this preservation print was made literally in the nick of time...