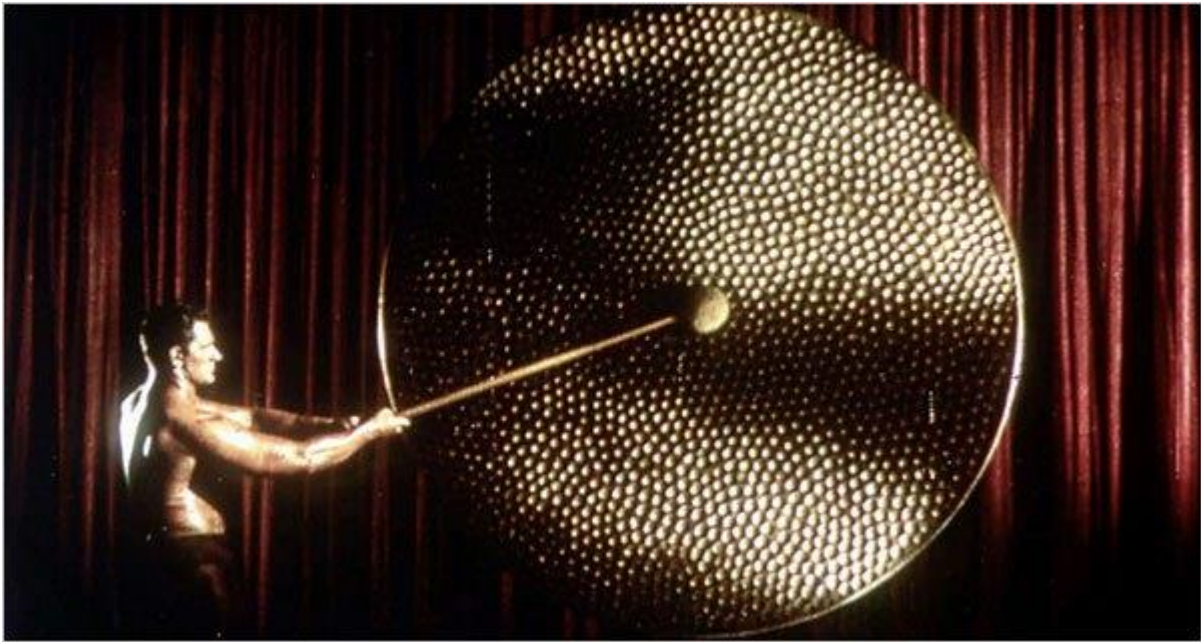


A Brief History of The Rank Organisation



Classic film buffs will fondly remember the thrilling sight of the famous “Gong Man” which preceded the opening credits of every movie produced by The Rank Organisation, England’s biggest and finest film production, distribution and exhibition company. The mere presence of this studio icon at the beginning of the film had the effect, much like the proverbial Pavlov’s dog, of wetting the theatre audience’s appetite, while assuring that they were about to share another brilliant movie experience. The Gong Man simply epitomized the best in filmmaking.



J. Arthur Rank was born in 1888 in a decidedly Victorian England. He was the son of Joseph Rank, who owned a successful flour milling business. Young Rank eventually inherited his father’s business; however, it was never seriously his cup of tea. Rank was also a devout member of the Methodist Church and even became a Sunday school teacher, to which he often showed religious films. Disparaged by the lack of quality religious films, he began to produce his own, which he also then distributed to other churches and schools and eventually led to the formation of the Religious Film Society.

In a momentous turn of events, the Methodist Times newspaper began to editorialize about the negative impact that British and American movies have on Britain’s families. The London Evening News countered with an editorial which suggested that instead of complaining, the Methodist Church should provide a solution for the problem. It was at that moment; J. Arthur Rank committed himself to take up the challenge. Rank, together with a young film producer named John Corfield and Lady Henrietta Yule of Bricket Wood, soon formed the British National Films Company and within short order, produced their first commercial film, Turn of the Tide.



Though only modestly successful, their first production did at least provide the novice filmmakers with an introduction to some of the challenges of working in the movie business. Far from discouraging Rank, the experience provided new motivation and launched the young company on a campaign of partnerships and acquisitions which would eventually create a worldwide conglomerate.

Rank and his partners made their next move in 1935, becoming owner-operators of Pinewood Film Studios, which had only recently been created as a potential rival to the Hollywood studios. Then in 1936, Rank made a bold move to improve his distribution, by removing the middlemen who controlled 80% of the British film industry, and clogged the theatrical pipeline with American movies. He began by forming a partnership with filmmaker C.M. Woolf, for the purpose of creating the General Cinema Finance Corporation (GCFC). They then used that company to buy out General Film Distributors, the UK distributors for Universal Pictures. Distribution problems solved.

By 1937, Rank's movie assets were still accumulating, and besides Pinewood, now included Denham Film Studios, as well as several other interests, and it was at this time he consolidated these holdings in a new company called the Rank Organisation. In 1938, the Rank Organisation bought the Odeon cinema chain. In 1938, it also bought Amalgamated Studios in Elstree, and in 1941, it absorbed the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation, which owned 251 cinemas, and the Lime Grove Studios, (which Rank later sold to BBC Television.) It also acquired the Paramount cinema chain, so that by 1942, the Rank Organisation owned a total of 619 cinemas. By the late 1940s, Rank owned a total of five studios adding Ealing Studios and Islington Studios to those not already named above. The conglomerate also included Rank Screen Advertising and Deluxe Laboratories.



During the 1940s and 1950s, The Rank Organisation employed some of England's greatest directors, who produced some of the finest films ever made in Great Britain, including: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (*Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes*, *I Know Where I'm Going*), David Lean (*Brief Encounter*, *Great Expectations*) and Laurence Olivier (*Henry V* and *Hamlet*).

The Rank Organisation acting school, often referred to as "The Charm School", was founded in 1945. This prep school to the stars launched several careers including those of Donald Sinden, Dirk Bogarde, Diana Dors and Christopher Lee. Although she was not a member of the school, Petula Clark was under contract to Rank for a period of time and starred in a number of films released by the studio, including *London Town* (1946), one of the costliest flops in British film history. Also under contract to Rank was the Canadian actor Philip Gilbert.

Beginning in the 1950s the studio began cranking out more commercial productions, aimed squarely at the family market, including the popular Norman Wisdom comedies, the various 'Doctor...' films and, later on, the 'Carry On' films. Still some films of major note were produced during this era including: *Carve Her Name with Pride*, *Sapphire* and *Victim*, as

well as covering many prestige topics including the coronation of Elizabeth II and filmed performances by The Royal Ballet.

On top of their steady stream of feature length movies the company made over 500 weekly short cinema films from 1959 to 1969 in a series entitled *Look at Life*, with each film depicting an area of British life.

Besides becoming one of the world's biggest film companies, Rank began to diversify into other interests early on. In 1949 the company bought the Bush Radio manufacturing plant and later on took over Murphy Radio to become the Rank Bush Murphy Group. In 1956 Rank began a partnership with the Haloid Corporation to form Rank Xerox. Rank was also a significant partner in the consortium which became Southern Television, the first ITV television contract holder for the south of England.



In the late 1950s, Rank set up Rank Records Ltd. (the record label was named Top Rank) and Jaro Records (a jazz subsidiary). In 1961, Top Rank was taken over by EMI, and in 1962 they replaced it with Stateside Records. Rank Audio Visual was created in 1960, bringing together Rank's acquisitions in multimedia, including Bell and Howell (acquired with Gaumont British in 1941), Andrew Smith Harkness Ltd (1952) and Wharfedale Ltd (1958). Subsequent acquisitions included Strand Electric Holdings (1968) and H.J. Leak & Co. (1969).

In the mid and late 1970s Rank Audio Visual, made a 3 in 1 stereo music centre, as well as TV sets in conjunction with NEC of Japan. The production of the "classic" Rank TV ran

in the mid to late 70s, some interim models appeared and the "modern" Rank TV appeared in the early 80s.



J. Arthur Rank finally stepped down as Managing Director of the Rank Organisation in 1952, but remained as Chairman until 1962. Much of the diversification came under the management of Sir John Davis, who led the company up to 1995. In 1996 the venerable company was absorbed by The Rank Group Plc. Now completely out of the motion picture business, The Rank Group continues today as a leading European gaming business.

Source: <https://vciclassicfilms.wordpress.com/rank/>