



## **WHY WAS THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME FILM BIGGER THAN STAR WARS?**

### **Video transcript – Turning war into a cinematic attraction**

Hundreds of cinemas like this one were built in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The cinema was seen as a low brow art form, while the middle and upper classes preferred to go to the theatre. But some in the film industry saw the war as an opportunity to broaden their appeal of cinema.

Screening topical newsreels about the war was one way of doing this. These generally showed footage of troops in training or life on the home front. Such worthy newsreels weren't much of an attraction to audiences. But nearly half the population came to see Battle of the Somme when it was released in 1916.

The film was, at times, incredibly graphic.

The public had been following newspaper reports about the 'Big Push', but they desperately wanted to see what conditions were actually like at the front. Although the majority of people in Britain appreciated seeing a realistic account of life at the front, the graphic imagery was not popular with all.

One of England's most senior clergymen, the Dean of Durham, famously said that it "wounds the heart and violates the very sanctity of bereavement."

The way the film was edited and marketed also broadened its appeal. It was cut into a single feature film, rather than a series of short newsreels. And it had an educational quality similar to the public lectures or industrial documentaries favoured by the middle classes. The film was shown in the more expensive cinemas first and then the cheaper picture houses.

The Battle of the Somme was extensively advertised in the newspapers. Its release was a newsworthy event in itself, helped by endorsements from some of the most notable men in the country. Arthur Conan Doyle, Lloyd George and King George the Fifth all gave their public backing to the film.

All of this helped to make the Battle of the Somme one of the most successful British films of all time.