

A graphical history of current UK cinema circuits

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Notes: 1. This chart does not include all UK circuits through history. In the 1930s and 1940s, there was a very great number of independent chains that were gradually subsumed into the major circuits.
2. For reasons of space, this chart does not include smaller chains existing at 2006 such as Apollo, Picturehouse (City Screen) or Screen Cinemas (Mainline).
3. This chart has been researched by David Abbott on behalf of Cinematopia / WebPlex Old Cinemas.
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4. Company logos are included where possible only to allow quick access to information on that chain. The copyright in these logos belongs to the companies in question or their successors.
5. Sources for this information are often unreliable or conflicting and this information should therefore be regarded as a guide rather than a full and accurate statement of fact. Major sources include the websites of the current chains and their former parent companies; Wikipedia; UK Screen Online history; and the reports archived at website of the Competition Commission, which reports at regular intervals on the state of cinema exhibition in the UK. I am also indebted to Philip Turner's fascinating book *Cannon Cinemas: An Outline History* and its MGM companion piece for shedding light on the turbulent histories of those organisations.

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1884 UK's most famous cinema – the Empire Leicester Square – built

1909 UK's first purpose-built cinema opens

1910 UK's oldest surviving purpose-built cinema – the Electric, Portobello Road, London – opens

1912 Gaumont, a French company, establishes a UK film studio at Shepherd's Bush

The Bernsteins had two attempts at founding a Granada cinema chain, resulting (briefly) in there being two independent and competing circuits with the same name. Granada hit snarling problems in the cinema exhibition arena. The vast majority of their cinemas were shut down or converted to a much more successful chain of bingo halls. The five remaining Granada cinemas were sold to Cannon in 1988 (which, by then, also owned the two Granadas from the "other" chain through its acquisition of ABC) and the bingo halls were sold to Bass Leisure in 1991.

Contrary to popular belief, Odeon is not an acronym for Oscar Deutsch Entertains Our Nation. Not only had the Odeon name been used for cinemas elsewhere in Europe by this time, but it was itself derived from the name of ancient Spartan theatres.



1922 Gaumont's British operations acquired by Ostrer Bros.

1926 Gaumont registered by amalgamation of Bromhead Bros. Gaumont Co., Ostrer Bros., C M Woolf

1927 Gaumont British merges with Gainsborough Pictures; Gaumont British Picture Corporation incorporated 24th March 1927

1927 British International Pictures founded by John Maxwell through purchase of British National Studios, Elstree

1928 BIP merges existing circuits to form Associated British Cinemas



1931 Warner Bros Theatres Ltd. opens Warner Theatre, Leicester Square



1930 Odeon founded by Oscar Deutsch

1931 Gaumont subsumes Provincial Cinematograph Theatres (PCT)

1930 Granada founded by Sidney and Cecil Bernstein

1930 Capital & Provincial Theatres founded

1930 Essoldo founded by Sol Shekman as SS Blyth Kinemas, Newcastle

1933 ABC acquires the two "original" Granada Cinemas



1937 ABC acquires Union Cinemas, one of the first "luxury" town-centre circuits



1937 Rank Organisation started by J Arthur Rank

1937 Odeon Leicester Square opens

1938 Odeon acquired by Rank

1938 Rank Screen Advertising founded



1941 Some Gaumont properties acquired by Rank; circuits kept separate at this stage

1949 Gaumont and Odeon join forces to form Circuits Management Association



1953 Pearl & Dean founded by Ernie and Charles "Dickie" Dean, having jumped ship from Rank Screen Advertising

1955 Essoldo acquires Southan Morris Cinemas

1955 ABC's parent, Associated British Picture Corporation, wins contract for Midlands, Northwest and Yorkshire ITV regions

When Independent Television launched in the UK, the major cinema chains were encouraged to bid for the regional franchises. For the regulators, this introduced a welcome element of competition. For the cinema circuits, it represented a way of protecting their business against the encroachment of television. The most successful entry into ITV was by Granada which today forms an integral part of the ITV corporation.

MGM would go on to have a turbulent history. From being the most well-known of the old Hollywood studios, its demise coincided with the end of the studio system. In the 1970s, MGM increasingly became interested in other leisure activities, including an expanding chain of hotels. In 1981, it bought United Artists, which was itself struggling to stay afloat. In 1985, the MGM film catalogue was transferred to Ted Turner's Turner Network Television. By the time Cannon/Pathé bought MGM in 1990, there was little left but its name.

1939 Paramount sells chain to Rank

Six opulent provincial picture houses were built in the UK by Paramount in Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Liverpool, Glasgow and Leeds. Four of these still operate as Odeons. The Newcastle Odeon was originally a listed building but ahead of closure in 2002, Odeon successfully applied to have it delisted in order to maximise the value of the site.

1954 MGM divests Loews, its distribution arm

Today, the Plaza is owned by Apollo, a small but successful geographically-diverse chain operating eleven cinemas across the UK



1961 Gaumont British Picture Corporation taken over entirely by Rank

1962 Golan-Globus Productions formed

1961 The Classic Cinemas Ltd founded by Eric Rhodes – takes over Capital & Provincial

1967 ABC loses Midlands and Yorkshire regional ITV but, in partnership with Rediffusion, gains London in the form of Thames Television

Early cinemas had been modified music halls; particularly before the invention of the talkies, live music and other entertainment was very much part of the programme. This gradually evolved from Vaudeville to serious music concerts. In the 1960s, with the big cinema chains owned by large corporations with interest in television and music, larger town cinemas were frequently used for live music concerts. The Beatles' first UK tour in 1963/4 took place largely in provincial cinemas belonging to large chains. This multi-use of cinemas led to experimentation with other forms of entertainment, such as bingo, the profitability of which ultimately explains why so many full-time bingo halls today are former cinemas.

1967 Empire Leicester Square split into multiple screens, the larger holding 1,490. Odeon Leicester Square becomes UK's largest cinema auditorium as a result

1967 Plaza Lower Regent Street split into multiple screens – the Paramount and the Plaza

1964 Odeon Nottingham is first to be subdivided and "blanded" for commercial reasons

1968 Classic acquires 47 cinemas from Rank

1969 ABC taken over by EMI

1967 Cannon Films incorporated

1970 Classic taken over by Tigon Group

1972 Classic acquires Essoldo's 56 sites for £4.3M. Barry Jenkins becomes MD

In a reversal of the route taken by ABC and Granada, Associated Communications Corporation moved into cinemas from its existing interest in television. In fact, when Associated Television (ATV) launched, it had deliberately branded itself as ABC, only for regulators to rule that the name was too confusing.

At the time when Cannon took over ABC, no new cinemas had been built by the chain in 40 years. Along with the acquisition of the down-market Classic chain, and in the light of Cannon Films' prolific but low-budget production output, Cannon quickly acquired a reputation for owning rather run-down cinemas, despite their best attempts at renovation and rebranding.

1979 Cineplex opens the first Canadian multiplexes

AMC (American Multi Cinemas) grew out of a business founded in 1920 as the Durwood Theatre, Kansas City. It was the first chain in the world to introduce the concept of the "mall multiplex" in 1963 and the first megaplex in 1995. It opened the UK's first multiplex at Milton Keynes in 1985. In 2001 AMC re-entered the UK market with megaplexes at Birmingham and Manchester. In 2006, AMC merged with Loews Cineplex.

1973 Cinema International Corporation, a distribution agreement between Paramount and MCA's Universal, begins operating in the UK



1979 Golan & Globus acquire Cannon Group Inc. for \$500k

1982 Now the UK's No. 3 circuit with 67 cinemas (130 screens), Classic acquired by Cannon for £7M to become Cannon-Classic

1985 Thorn EMI Screen Entertainment sold to Bond Corporation for £125M. Sold on one week later

1984 Cineplex buys Canadian Odeon Cinemas from Rank to form Cineplex Odeon. Opens cinemas in UK as Gallery Cinemas chain

1981 Along with MGM, CIC operates as United International Pictures. The CIC brand continues in the home entertainment area

1980

2000

By selling Odeon in 2000, Rank, a name synonymous with film in Britain since the 1930s, finally ended all connections with the industry. In that time, it had been producer, distributor, exhibitor, advertiser, studio owner and even manufacturer of projection hardware.

1993 Troubled Pearl & Dean sold to French consortium for 10 Francs

1987 Due to mounting financial problems, Cannon taken over by Giancarlo Parretti under new parent Pathé Communications Corporation

1986 TESI (including Elstree and 287 ABC cinemas) sold to Cannon for £175M, giving Cannon a 40% market share

1989 CIC acquires AMC UK's ten cinemas to form United Cinemas International. UCI takes over operations of Empire Leicester Square



1987 Warner Bros Theatres (UK) Ltd founded

1989 First Warner multiplex opens in Bury

1991 Warner flagship in Leicester Square begins two year multi-screen conversion

1996 Rank Screen Advertising sold to Carlton

1998 Odeon undertakes major rebranding of chain and revamp of flagship Leicester Square cinema

1999 Pearl & Dean sold to SMG for £22M

1995 Former Cannon chief Barry Jenkins buys former ABC cinemas totalling 234 screens from Virgin, reinstating the ABC brand. New multiplexes are planned

1996 ABC acquired by Cinven for £83M



1997 Virgin sells remaining multiplexes to French exhibitor Union Générale Cinématographique (UGC)

1996 Cineworld founded by the Blackstone Group

1996 Warner begins partnership with Australian Village Roadshow, forming Warner Village Cinemas



2000 Granada re-enters cinema industry by buying Carlton including Carlton Screen Advertising

2000 Cinven buys Odeon circuit from Rank for £280M

2003 Odeon sold to investment consortium of WestLB AG & Entertainment Group for £430.6M

2000 ABC begins rebranding to Odeon

2004 Odeon and UCI both acquired by Terra Firma to form the largest cinema chain in Europe and the largest in the world outside of North America. Parent company now United Cinemas International (but remains branded Odeon in the UK)

2005 As a result of both the Cineworld-UGC and Odeon-UCI merges, the Office of Fair Trading orders some assets of each to be disposed of, forming a new chain – Empire Cinemas, owned by Ireland's biggest cinema operator Ward Anderson – with the Empire Leicester Square as its flagship



2005 UGC sells UK operations to Cineworld to become UK's second largest chain



The perceived relative strength of brands plays a big part in the chains we see today. As will be seen from this chart, the current Odeon might equally have been called UCI, or it could have kept one of its earlier incarnations: Gaumont or Rank or any number of smaller chains subsumed by the company over the years. Potentially it could have been called Cannon or Classic or Essoldo. It could even have ended up as ABC, which, given that Odeon and ABC were bitter rivals for most of their histories, would have been ironic. ABC itself disappeared under the Cannon name, and Cannon became the internationally-famous MGM, presumably because of the negative connotations of Cannon. It is testament to the power of the Odeon brand that all these other names have disappeared while Oscar Deutsch's original name lives on.

