



THE FILMS OF SAINT ETIENNE

What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day?

+ Q&A with Pete Wiggs and Paul Kelly

Once upon a time, most towns and cities had spots like the Lower Lea Valley. It was where the railway sidings were. Look in an old A to Z and the dense parallel stripes of Victorian terraces give way at the Lea to curled lines of terminating railways, to curious white spaces (what, nothing there?) and to blocks marked 'Works'. For this was where work was carried out, old-style. Things had been manufactured here since medieval mills dipped their waterwheels into the Lea. Astonishing work, too – like the invention of plastic, the discovery of petrol. Humdrum work, mostly, though, such as car repair or serving up bubble and squeak, and dirty work, like the recycling of cooking oil, the transportation of sewage. The Lower Lea Valley was one of those spots in cities where the dirty business that supports civilisation elsewhere was carried out, out of sight.

It still was, when Saint Etienne and filmmaker (and one-time band member) Paul Kelly turned up with their cameras in the summer of 2005, to film a place they hardly knew, but which had been dragged staggering, blinking into the limelight as the potential site for the 2012 Olympics; most thought it would stagger right back into obscurity. It's hard to remember, this side of the Mobot, but on 6 July 2005 few even expected London to win the bid, let alone dreamed that the games might be successful. Just look again at the footage of the International Olympic Committee's announcement that day in Singapore – the shocked eyes of the London team, the doleful faces of the Parisians. From the moment that envelope opened before the world's media, the life of the Lower Lea Valley transformed more radically than it had since its birth in the last ice age. Saint Etienne's film changed, too, into an elegy. As one of the locals interviewed puts it, 'once they start building, you never get it back'.

The Lower Lea Valley depicted in the film is a world apart. Geography and town planning had isolated this patch from the body of London, fended off with tendrils of river water, the concrete trenches of the A102(M), and the brick barricades of countless railway viaducts. Even Eastenders didn't know it well. Only those who worked there, who tended their cabbages at Marshgate Lane allotments, or those who lived in the Clays Lane and Carpenters estates... these people really knew this landlocked island. You can only truly understand a place by touching it, day in, day out. Outsiders were marked from the outset by their inability even to get the name right; this isn't the Lower Lea Valley, says one inhabitant, 'Round here we just call it the Wick'.

What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day? reproduces this intimacy by following, on the day after the Olympic announcement, the paper round of the fictional Mervyn Day, played by Paul Kelly's teenage nephew Noah, and named after the 1970s goalkeeper at West Ham, just up the road. Apart from a brief curse, Mervyn is silent throughout; narration comes from local interviewees and Mervyn's mum and grandad, voiced by David Essex and Linda Robson. With nods to films such as *Kes* (1969) and *Whistle Down the*

Wind (1961), the adult world is revealed through the clean, clear eyes of a child, cut across by the words of his elders, heavy with age and experience.

The Lower Lea Valley is a curious place. Its isolation has meant that the clock seems to have turned more sluggishly here than elsewhere. The entire film has a curious tone I can only describe as 1970s-ish, washed, like that entire decade, in a grimy, pre-digital brown. It looks like my childhood. In fact, few fragments of the modern world enter the film. Mervyn, with his long hair and sheepskin jacket, seems plucked from the pages of *Look-in*. The soundtrack, with its flutes and synthesizers, echoes the haunting music that accompanied so much of the kids' TV I watched, tinged, I now realise as a grown-up, by the apocalyptic angst of that decade. Were it not for the cereal packets on the newsagent's shelves in the film, and posters hailing the victorious Olympic bid, this might be the hot, yellow summer of 1976. The grass is dry and crunchy, flowers are going to seed. It is the end of summer.

This is only partly poetic license. Had you visited the Lower Lea Valley before 2005 you would have found a land that seemed little touched by the decades since the 1970s. The last time it had been 'modernised' was when Clays Lane estate was built. Since then, few people had troubled it. Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair had been mostly kept at bay by the A102(M); within, a curious ecosystem had grown, nourished by neglect, far from the eyes of politicians, until someone realised a vast patch of prime real estate existed 20 minutes by tube from Oxford Circus.

Mervyn guides us through this ecosystem. And it is an ecosystem. Deep within, says Mervyn's dad, 'you are in the country'. The trees along the Lea bulge with green. The river itself is thick and soupy, solid with plant life. Weeds, shoulder high, burst from every crack in the urban fabric. This landscape is fecund. At its heart is the secret garden within the secret garden, the allotment: 'I could lose myself there,' says Mervyn's grandad. 'I could be lord of all I surveyed'.

Along the way, director Paul Kelly builds a level of detail you can only acquire with sharp eyes and time to look; little details, in extreme close up, that make a place lived, such as the landscape of smudges, graffiti tags and old sticker glue on a street sign, or the wood of a waste bin, grey, rounded and gnarled by the elements, or an abandoned barometer stuck, appropriately, on 'Change'. Kelly and Stanley unearth histories buried in the undergrowth, beneath piles of flotsam. They find myths and legends – did Dick Turpin prowl the marshes? They hear tales that only locals would know and understand – did sheep graze on the riverbanks in the 1930s? And they hear stories of Lea Valley glory lost from the history books, such as the birth, in the late 19th century, of the Labour movement at the Bryant & May match factory strike and the invention of petrol and plastic. In the Lea Valley, the future was invented. And now the future was catching up again.

It may have looked in stasis, but the Lower Lea Valley was changing, albeit slowly. The rest of the world was seeping through its barricades. Order books for its factories got thinner. Its neglect, once benign, began to fester as dereliction. Its isolation, once attractive to dirty industry and kingfishers alike, became pathological. It remained beautiful for some, however. Modern-day flâneurs and psychogeographers rhapsodised about the landscape's peculiar beauty, without worrying much about the unemployment rates accompanying it. Decay easily becomes picturesque for the overly romantic who do not live amid the ruins.

The inevitable urge, with obituaries, is to romanticise. Faults are forgotten. There is a romance to this film, a wistfulness. It is a contemporary version of Norman Cohen’s 1967 film, *The London Nobody Knows*, in which James Mason trawls London’s flophouses and music halls disappearing under developers’ office blocks. But there is a hard realism in *What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day?* too. Both Mervyn and the Lower Lea Valley cannot escape their future. News comes in on the radio of the 7 July bombings. Interviewees tell us about local gang culture. As Mervyn’s dad says, ‘something’s gotta change round here’. But it is the nature of that change that is under question. We can’t escape the future, but we should be able to direct it. Yet locals are powerless to alter in any way the course of the Olympic juggernaut heading straight for them.

The French political philosopher Henri Lefebvre once wrote that the landscapes we live in are actively constructed, like any other product of culture, their shape the result of complex changes happening every minute of every day, by every person who comes into contact with them, from the allotment holder planting his cabbages to the Olympic strategist poring over masterplans in their office. We all have a relationship with a landscape. But none, said Lefebvre, is more prized or powerful than the relationship between a landscape and the people who live within it every day. Lefebvre called this ‘lived space’. *What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day?* is a celebration of lived space. The inhabitants of the Lea’s secret garden may not be the most powerful or rich, but they have one great advantage: they know every inch of a place, in their heart. Recording this ordinary, everyday detail is a powerful act. It does not immortalise, I know that – but it does eke out life just a bit longer. It means we remember. It means that stories and histories, easily forgotten, can be told.

Tom Dyckhoff, ‘Catching up with the Future: *What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day?*’, from *A London Trilogy: The Films of Saint Etienne 2003-2007* DVD booklet (BFI, 2013)

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TODAY MERVYN DAY?
Filmed and Directed by: Paul Kelly
Production Company: CC-Lab
Commissioned by: The Barbican
Presented by: Saint Etienne
Produced by: Andrew Hinton
Runner: Jacob Brown
Audio Research and Interviews: Johnny Burke
Script by: Kevin Pearce
Additional Photography: David Raedeker
Edited by: Mikey Tomkins
Titles: Rob Jones
Colourist (at Exposure): Paul Jones
All Music Written and Performed by: Saint Etienne, Ian Catt
Keyboards: Bob Stanley, Pete Wiggs
Vocals: Sarah Cracknell, Debsey Wykes
Bass: Ian Catt
Drums: Simon Lea
Guitar: James Walbourne, Noah Kelly
Flute: Jo Fraser
Saint Etienne are: Sarah Cracknell, Bob Stanley, Pete Wiggs
Musical Direction by: Ian Catt
All Music Recorded at: Catt Music
Sound Recordist: Paul Sheekey
Sound Mixer: Herb

Cast
David Essex (*voice of Mervyn’s grandfather*)
Linda Robson (*voice of Mervyn’s mother*)
Noah Kelly (*Mervyn Day*)
James Cocker (*racing cyclist*)
Manny (*newsagent*)
Sadie Kelly (*girl in newsagent*)
Sheena Naylor (*caff lady one*)
Deborah Gathercole (*caff lady two*)
Billy Gathercole (*caff punter one*)
Pete Wiggs (*caff punter two*)
Martin Green (*tile factory foreman*)
Keith Quinlan (*tile factory worker*)
Andy Hackett (*longboatman*)
Nick Parrish (*motorcyclist*)
Bob Stanley (*diner worker*)
Pat Gilbert (*diner customer*)

UK 2005
48 mins

A London Trilogy: The Films of Saint Etienne 2003-2007
is available to buy in the BFI Shop:
<https://shop.bfi.org.uk/a-london-trilogy-the-films-of-saint-etienne.html>