



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Akenfield

Akenfield

Directed by: Peter Hall

©: National Film Trustee Company Ltd.

Made by: Angle Films Ltd.

Produced by: Peter Hall, Rex Pyke

Production Manager: Richard Dobson

Accountant: Ernie Shepherd

Made by: People of Suffolk

Written by: Ronald Blythe

Based on: Ronald Blythe's book

Cameraman: Ivan Strasburg

Assistant Cameramen: John Metcalfe, Peter Ormrod

Edited by: Rex Pyke

Assistant Editor: Bob Gavin

Art Directors: Ian Whittaker, Roger Christian

Costumes: Sally Bacon

Make-up and Hairdressing: Penny Bell

Hymns Arranged by: Ian Kellam

Hymns Sung by: Wandsworth School Choir

Under the Direction of: Russell Burgess

Folk Music Arranged by: Dave Arthur, Toni Arthur

Radio Music by: Philip Goodhand-Tait

Sound Recorded by: Bob Allen, Peter Handford, Richard Laughton

Cast:

Peter Tuddenham (*voice of old Tom*)

Garrow Shand (*Tom Rouse*)

Peggy Cole (*Dulcie Rouse*)

Barbara Tilney (*Jean Quantrill*)

Lyn Brooks (*Charlotte Rouse*)

Ida Page (*Aunt Ida*)

Ted Dedman (*Ted*)

Mollie Dedman (*Mollie*)

Charlie Cornish (*Charlie*)

Charlie Whiting (*Charlie*)

Robin Buckingham (*Robin*)

Mary Hammond (*young Dulcie Rouse*)

Ronald Blythe (*vicar*)

F.O. Staddon (*minister*)

Bob Wilson (*farmer*)

Ethel Branton (*Mrs Quantrill*)

Stanley Baxter (*blacksmith*)

Reg Hall (*policeman*)

Clifford Arbon

Ernie Cole

Ray Cornish

Victoria Peacock

Barry Martin

Neil Scopes

John Simpson

Ron Wood

Sidney Bedwell

Andy Chenery

Allan Cole

David Cole

John Meek

Walter Whatling

Roger Clark

Sean Wood

Wilfred Frost

Roger Burroughes

Jonathon Fox

Monty Hale

Phyllis Grant

Mark Thorpe

Fred Collins

Lucy Dedman

David Dedman

Helen Tydeman

Arthur Smith

Margaret Allen

Erica Zant-Boer

The screenplay, written by Ronald Blythe, derives from his book *Akenfield*, a documentary microcosm of rural life in this country which uses as its framework a series of taped interviews with the inhabitants of a single Suffolk village; in the film, the people of East Suffolk are being asked to play themselves. 'A feature made like a documentary,' is how Peter Hall, now directing, described it in 1970 when it was still an unfinanced project. Though *Akenfield* is a 35mm widescreen feature with a cast of 150 and period settings from the 1890s onwards, it is being made with a strictly functional economy of means and manpower, and a maximum of individual involvement. The pervasive, almost pioneering spirit of cooperation on the film is undoubtedly stimulated by the knowledge that here for once a worthwhile project is actually off the ground, that it is not costing a penny more than its basic budget requirements, and that (like almost all the dozen or so films of lasting value completed in this country in the past decade) it is being made despite rather than because of the existing film establishment.

The crew is a young one, and most people are doing their jobs for the first time on a feature production. The cameraman, Ivan Strasburg, was focus puller on *Family Life*; the wardrobe and make-up team have come in from television; and the art direction has been taken over by two props supervisors who have got hold of almost everything necessary for the film by begging, borrowing and hiring cheaply in the Suffolk locality. Research into locations and casting was taken on by Ronald Blythe himself.

Peter Hall directs his cast without the use of scripted dialogue: 'controlled improvisation' is the name he gives it. He much admires Bresson, but there is no similarity of approach here beyond the use of non-actors. During the shooting of a scene he keeps the camera running, playing through, then repeating and re-repeating the action and the verbal sense of the scene in an uninterrupted series of permutations. The actors, selected by improvisation tests, have been briefed in what they say but not in how they should say it. By calling them in when they least expect it, unemphatically and without exhortation, he creates – after the initial tensions – a relaxed flow of interchanges in which time and again moments of genuine spontaneity occur. These moments, one suspects, are when the Suffolk people will seem closest to their ancestors. Judging by his previous work, Hall is not a born filmmaker; but in relying upon his unquestioned ability with actors, and in taking this undogmatic, rabbit-from-hat approach, he is getting extempore effects which are vitally close to the individuals' own reactions.

The production had come up with an expected handful of 'naturals', the most notable being a pig-farmer. During his first take in the dance-hall scene, set during the Second World War, I was in a room adjoining the hall. Three old dears in print dresses and immaculate 1940s hairstyles filled the doorway, peering out nervously towards the shooting area. The dancers were motionless for the take, in which the farmer discussed with a young man at the bar wartime problems for agriculture. His rolling dialect droned on for a good five minutes, and the old ladies got into difficulty, their eyes watering, bursting to laugh. During that time there was not a pause or repetition. When the camera stopped turning the hundred and fifty onlookers, somewhat awed, gave him a round of applause.

Violet Smith
Ena Bower
Claire Bateson
Kenneth Runnacles
Sarah Noakes
Romy Jacob
Cecil Barrell
Eunice Carpenter
Gladys de Brisay
Wendy Keable
Joan Piper
pupils of Charsfield School
pupils of Framlingham Secondary Modern School
UK 1974
98 mins

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In a satisfying kind of symmetry, and with typical economy, the casting of the film echoes its theme. *Akenfield* presents a view of the underlying continuity of rural life, and the same set of actors have been cast as, in effect, themselves, their fathers and their fathers' fathers. Ronald Blythe is emphatic in describing himself as a poet; but, he adds, the sociology of *Akenfield* is none the less accurate. The very Elizabethan achievement of his book, which may account for its combined popular and academic success, is to have fused poetry and sociology without compromising either. In adapting material from the book to the screen, he has put stronger emphasis on the 'poetic' concept of the essential continuity beneath all the changes in country living standards and styles over the past 80 years. Shooting is taking place throughout the seasons – at weekends, because of the money. The same locations are visited in each but at different periods; birth and death, spring and winter, are presented in an archetypal balance. It will come as no surprise to find that the finished film has a definite structure. Hall, a Suffolk man himself, commented that a first reading of the script evoked memories of his own grandfather, and that what most drew him to the project was its powerful suggestion of the passage of time and the interrelation of the generations.

The film is being shot using a camera technique developed by Hamburg cameraman Wolfgang Trau; no lights are being used, even on interior shooting. 'What stock, gauzes, filters and lighting set-ups did you use to get these beautiful monochrome effects?' the labs are asking. The film is being shot on the Techniscope system, whereby the final widescreen image is produced with a camera taking standard (non-anamorphic) objective lenses, and in which the pull-down and aperture plate have been modified to produce a frame image two perforations high, i.e. widescreen-shaped. All 'squeezing' is done at the labs and the cost of negative stock and processing is half that of a regular widescreen system such as CinemaScope.

To all intents and purposes *Akenfield* is an independent film; none of its money comes from orthodox sources, and it is self-produced, using non-actors, cheap local resources and a crew of newcomers. Yet despite the qualms of Establishment onlookers, it is as much a product of the contemporary British film industry – creating as large a turnover in labour terms – as *Father, Dear Father* or *Bequest to the Nation*. The crux, of course, is how good it is. But even at the shooting stage, in its calculated astringency of means and collective commitment, *Akenfield* is an object-lesson for serious feature production in this country.

Gareth Jones, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1973