



MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

Went the Day Well?

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Directed by: [Alberto] Cavalcanti

Presented by: Ealing Studios

Distributed by: Associated British Film Distributors

Produced by: Michael Balcon

Associate Producer: S.C. Balcon

Production Manager: Hal Mason

Production Supervisor: John Croydon

Story and Screen Play: John Dighton,
Diana Morgan, Angus MacPhail

From a story by: Graham Greene

Cameraman: Wilkie Cooper

Reporter Cameraman: D. [Douglas] Slocombe

Camera Operator: G. [Gerald] Gibbs

Special Effects: Roy Kellino

Editor: Sidney Cole

Art Director: Tom Morahan

Music: William Walton

Musical Director: Ernest Irving

Sound Supervisor: Eric Williams

Sound Recordist: L. Page

Sound System: RCA

Thanked in credits: The War Office

Made and Recorded at: Ealing Studios

uncredited

Location Manager: Ronald Brantford

Assistant Directors: Billy Russell, Muriel Cole,
Norman Priggen, Cyril Pope

Continuity: Daphne Heathcote

Assistant Camera: Hal Britten, J. Dean,
Desmond Crowley

Stills: Wilfrid Newton, Eddie Orton

Assistant Art Director: Michael Relp

Sound Camera: Peter T. Davies

Boom Operator: Bert Minnell

Cast:

Leslie Banks (*Oliver Wilsford*)

Elizabeth Allan (*Peggy Fry*)

Frank Lawton (*Tom Sturry*)

Basil Sydney (*Major Ortlor*)

Valerie Taylor (*Nora Ashton*)

Mervyn Johns (*Charlie Sims*)

Edward Rigby (*Bill Purvis, the poacher*)

Marie Lohr (*Mrs Fraser*)

C.V. France (*Vicar Ashton*)

David Farrar (*Lt Jung*)

Muriel George (*Mrs Collins, the postmistress*)

Thora Hird (*Ivy, land girl*)

Norman Pierce (*Jim Sturry*)

men of the Gloucestershire Regiment (*soldiers*)

Harry Fowler (*young George Truscott*)

Patricia Hayes (*Daisy*)

Hilda Bayley (*cousin Maud Chapman*)

Johnny Schofield (*Joe Garbett*)

Ellis Irving (*Harry Drew*)

Philippa Hiatt (*Mrs Bates*)

Grace Arnold (*Mrs Owen*)

John Slater (*German sergeant*)

Eric Micklewood (*soldier Klotz*)

uncredited

Josephine Middleton (*Mrs Carter*)

James Donald (*German corporal*)

Gerard Heinz (*Schmidt*)

Gerald Moore (*Johnnie Wade*)

Robert MacDermot (*BBC announcer*)

Charles Paton (*Harry Brown*)

Arthur Ridley (*Father Owen*)

Anthony Pilbeam (*Ted Garbett*)

Lilian Ellias (*Bridget, the Frasers' maid*)

Kathleen Boutall (*Mrs Sturry*)

Mavis Villiers (*Violet*)

Josie Welford (*June*)

+ intro by James Bell, Senior Curator, BFI National Archive

'The critics, led by Miss Lejeune, literally pulled us to pieces,' Cavalcanti wrote in his note for the Irish Film Society screening. In fact, the reviews were by no means all bad, and *Went the Day Well?* had a respectable run at the London Pavilion. But filmmakers will always remember the reviews that hurt most, and Caroline Lejeune savaged the film as though she had simply lost her temper with it. She found the action risible, and in her synopsis easily enough managed to make it sound so. 'Any display of hate, except in the hands of an expert director and artist, is to be avoided,' she wrote, 'since high passions without high performance are less likely to lead to conviction than laughter. The nearer a plot sticks to life at this tense moment of our fortunes, the nearer it gets to drama.' And the boot went in decisively with her final sentence: 'The most patriotic film can lose nothing by the exercise of a little talent and taste.'

Of the two 'Sunday ladies', C.A. Lejeune in *The Observer* would then have carried heavier guns than the relative novice Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*. Where *The Observer* spat, *The Sunday Times* quietly praised: 'For once the English people are shown as capable of individual and concerted resourcefulness in a fight and not merely steady in disaster. The essential virtue of the film is its expression of an English tradition: the tradition of the rural community, self-contained, still drawing strength from the past, still adding its own experience to the common store of village history. At last, it seems, we are learning to make films with our own native material.'

Perhaps the most perceptively sympathetic review came from a critic often underrated, now perhaps largely forgotten: William Whitebait (George Stonier) in the *New Statesman*. He got the mood exactly right: 'a mixture of friendly human nature and waking nightmare'. 'It is the sort of film that, after three years of war, with little show and no great expenditure of money, we can make better than anyone. It understates its message, it is beautifully but not too beautifully done, it bridges the gap between actors and human beings.' But Whitebait also noted that the film had missed its moment, that 'the temperature is high for invading but low for being invaded', that audiences were in a mood to take calmly events which a year or so earlier they might have found desperately tense. 'Cavalcanti has opened our eyes to reality, even if we may feel that this particular reality is past.'

In the end, *Went the Day Well?* remains what it probably always was, the wild card, the joker in the British wartime cinema pack. Increasingly, as the war progressed, films were to become a celebration of duty, and of the comradeship and discipline needed to carry it out. Their heroes were the crews of the San Demetrio and the Torrin (*In Which We Serve*), the army unit of *The Way Ahead*, the fighter squadrons and the bomber crews. In *Went the Day Well?* it could be said that recognised duty dies with the vicar, and his doomed efforts to carry out his responsibility to God, by defending his church against the barbarians, and to country, by ringing the warning bell. (Ironically, one of the Home Guard does actually hear the bell, but they disregard it, on this sleepy Sunday morning, because it would signify the real thing and they know that theirs is only a training exercise.)

After that, it is every man for himself; and just as much, and most unusually for an Ealing war film, every woman for herself. There are no rules, no clearly defined duties and no reassuring orders to be followed, as frightened old

Norman Shelley (*Bob Owen*)
Irene Arnold (*Mrs Drew*)
Leslie Gorman, Robert Bradford, Dean Braine,
Wyndham Milligan, H. Victor Weske
(*German soldiers*)
UK 1942
95 mins
35mm Nitrate

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women and flighty young ones spur themselves to improvised action – desperate, hopeful, even absurd. The villagers have no choice but to discover a brutality in themselves, which some do more readily than others. Team action begins to develop, though slowly, as they confront the question of what to do after they have overpowered the guards at the church. The women want to rush to their children, the men immediately to alert the Home Guard. Democratically, they agree to do both.

The contrast between the setting – gentle, peaceful and on the whole virtuous – and the brutish action is ever present, though left unemphasised. (Major Ortler leaning against the 1914-18 War Memorial while planning his village campaign is the sort of discreet gesture the film allows itself.) But the movie itself is not kindly, gentle or particularly squeamish. It finds its own sustaining virtue in a kind of tough good humour. And, as with so many of the Ealing pictures, it has a sturdy particularity: we are not being invited to look for allegories, to regard Bramley End as a microcosm of England under attack. The village is sufficient to itself: complacent, locked into centuries of peace, quite ready to return to its slumbers as soon as the nightmare is over.

The main criticism at the time was that the film was full of implausible behaviour, mainly by the Germans. By which was meant, I suspect, that the switch between the notion of Germans playing at being British soldiers and unmistakably British actors playing at being German soldiers was not the easiest to carry off persuasively. This, rather than such evident improbabilities as that an officer setting out in command of a secret mission would be allowed to take his sweet ration with him. If Cavalcanti had wanted to achieve effects of realism and authenticity at all levels of the film, then he should probably have taken an altogether stricter line with the script, pruning it back towards documentary roots, shading it more darkly.

Perhaps the surrealist side of Cavalcanti was easily able to enjoy such contrasts, to argue that life – or at least life in wartime – may well be like that, even if most sensible movies know better. Or perhaps, as on the whole I think more probable, he simply went ahead and made the film, with all its evident inconsistencies. And, paradoxically, it is just these incongruities and inconsistencies which seem, in the long run, to work to the film's advantage.

Went the Day Well? is not the grim, strenuously 'realistic' study of a village under occupation which might have won more immediate approval from the critics. It is something altogether odder and more untidy: cheerfulness keeps breaking in. The story deals in betrayal, disillusionment, desperate extremes, but the resilience of tone makes it appear that such things are no more than aberrations, disagreeable but not permanently damaging. If Britain had in fact been close to invasion in 1942, *Went the Day Well?* might have looked like a warning against the sort of mentality that would hear the church bell but decide it could safely be ignored. But already by spring 1942, whatever policy the Ministry of Information was still arguing about for its leaflets, the film was dealing with history which hadn't happened and was not going to happen. The realities of war had moved on, and Ealing went on to produce *Nine Men* and *San Demetrio, London*. Unlike these and many of the other war films, with their firmer basis in fact, *Went the Day Well?* had a kind of freedom to make itself up as it went along, rather as Bramley End has to take its fate into its own hands. Even the film's structure sets it out for what it is: imagined history posing as real history, but also aware that the pretence takes in no one.

Penelope Houston, *Went the Day Well?* (BFI Publishing, 1992)