



FRIDAY 9<sup>th</sup> March 2012

## MAJOR DISCOVERY - EARLIEST EVER DICKENS FILM FOUND BY BFI NATIONAL ARCHIVE



The BFI has just discovered the world's oldest surviving Dickensian film, *The Death of Poor Joe*, UK 1901, dir. G.A.Smith the day after the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dickens birth celebrated at BFI Southbank and around the world. The discovery was made by BFI silent film curator Bryony Dixon whose research reveals this to be the earliest film made featuring a Dickensian character.

Until now the earliest known Dickens film was *Scrooge or Marley's Ghost* (1901), currently on nationwide release from the BFI National Archive and it remains the earliest direct adaptation.

*The Death of Poor Joe* will screen as a special addition to a programme of **Dickens: pre-1914 Short Films 9<sup>th</sup> March & 23rd March, BFI Southbank** as part of the **Dickens on Screen** screening series which continues until 23<sup>rd</sup> March.

Bryony Dixon was actually researching early films of China when she noticed a catalogue entry referring to a film called *The Death of Poor Joe* which she instantly realised might be a reference to a character in *Bleak House*. Archivists routinely check for any surviving copies of films they have come across as a title reference with little hope that the film actually survives as the majority of films made in this period have been destroyed. On checking the database Bryony Dixon discovered that the film was listed as being in our collections under an alternative title of *Man Meets Ragged Boy*, wrongly dated c1902, and hitherto unknown.

Bryony Dixon said, “*It’s wonderful to have discovered such a rare and unique film so close to Dickens’ bicentennial. Not only does it survive but it is the world’s earliest Dickensian film! It looks beautiful and is in excellent condition. This really is the icing on the cake of our current celebration of Dickens on Screen.*”

The film has been attributed to G.A. Smith and is reckoned to have been shot in Brighton in early 1901. It came into the BFI collections in 1954 as part of a group of films from a collector in Brighton who had known G.A. Smith. It depicts the Dickens character ‘poor Jo’ the crossing sweeper from *Bleak House*, one of a number of pitiable child figures (Smike, Oliver, Little Nell or Tiny Tim) and he is arguably the most helpless and poignant of all Dickens’ child deaths. In the film poor Jo is seen at night against a churchyard wall, freezing in the winter snow with his broom. A watchman comes along swinging his lamp and catches Jo as just as he falls to the ground dying; the watchman tries to help but it is too late as he shines his lamp down into Jo’s face, Jo puts his hands together in prayer, taking the lamp for heavenly light as he dies.

The film conflates two stories: it has similarities to Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Little Matchgirl* which has a child die in the snow while fantasising about the warmth she so dearly needs; and Dickens’ story of Jo from *Bleak House* which has similar pathos (but no snow). The *Bleak House* Jo collapses at the gates of the grim Tom-all-alone’s Cemetery but is carried inside George’s Shooting Salon. It is interesting that Jo in this film (it is spelt Joe in the catalogue) is played by a woman, possibly one of the Bayley sisters (Laura Bayley was Smith’s wife), well known pantomime performers from Brighton.

The film, which is just one minute long, was issued for sale in the Biokam catalogue sometime after the launch of the equipment itself in 1901. The Biokam device was a combined camera/projector for the amateur market using 17.5mm film. The films were almost certainly made by pioneer filmmaker G.A. Smith who was working for the Warwick Trading Company who marketed the Biokam at that time. The original collector believed that this was one of G.A. Smith’s films which the filmmaker re-purposed for the Biokam.

**The film will be screened as a special late addition to the programme of Dickens: pre-1914 Short Films 9<sup>th</sup> March & 23rd March, BFI Southbank.**

**The BFI is preparing a DVD release of the films of the Brighton pioneers, G.A.Smith and F. Williamson**

Bryony Dixon is available for interview.



The Watchman cradles the dying Jo



Poor Jo at the gates of Tom-all-alone's by Phiz

### **PRESS CONTACTS**

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### **Notes to editors**

#### **About the BFI**

The BFI is the lead body for film in the UK with the ambition to create a flourishing film environment in which innovation, opportunity and creativity can thrive by:

- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world

- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

### **BFI National Archive**

The BFI National Archive was founded in 1935 and has grown to become the largest collection of film and television in the world with over 180,000 films and 750,000 television programmes. With specialist storage facilities in Warwickshire and Hertfordshire the archive also boasts significant collections of stills, posters and designs along with original scripts, press books and related ephemera. We are funded partly by OfCom as the official archive for ITV, Channel Four and Channel Five. We record a representative sample of television across Britain's terrestrial channels and are the official archive of moving image records of Parliament.

### **BFI Mediatheques**

Anyone can get access to collections of over 2200 titles from the archive for free at BFI Mediatheques around the UK, currently at BFI Southbank, BFI National Library, QUAD Derby, Central Library Cambridge, Wrexham Library, the Discovery Museum, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

### **BFI National Archive Online**

Our YouTube channel **BFIFilms** has over 350 items which can be viewed online. Over 1.2 million views have now been recorded for *Royal Wedding* (1923) released in April overtaking *Alice in Wonderland* (1903) which has had just over 1.17 million views. Academic access for higher education is through the **BFI InView** project. Schools and educational institutions have access to a wide range of material at **screenonline.org.uk**. This is in addition to paid access at the BFI for other research needs.

### **BFI Special Collections**

Part of the BFI National Archive, Special Collections looks after and makes available collections relating to individuals and organisations involved in the British film and television industries. Highlights of the collection include the papers of Sir David Lean, John Schlesinger, Derek Jarman, Joseph Losey, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Carol Reed, Gerald Thomas, Lord Puttnam, Dirk Bogarde, Muriel, Sidney and Betty Box, the Children's Film Foundation and Hammer Films.

### **BFI Viewing Copies & BFI DVD**

12,000 prints a year are loaned out by the BFI National Archive to support the programmes of 800 venues across the UK and overseas and our DVD label regularly issues selected items. These have included the hugely popular British Transport Films Collection series, the legendary documentaries of The GPO Film Unit and most recently an award-winning restoration of *The Great White Silence* (1922) the official film record of Scott's final expedition to the South Pole.

There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

\*\*\* PICTURE DESK \*\*\*

A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting the BFI Southbank screenings can be found at [www.image.net](http://www.image.net) under BFI / BFI National Archive

