

BILLY LIAR ON LOCATION - LEEDS, BRADFORD

Film ID: 1120 **Year:** 1962

This filming of the production of the film *Billy Liar* was made by Leeds local cine enthusiast David Chapman. The film found its way to the YFA via Tony Earnshaw of the National Media Museum whilst he was working on a project on Bradford on Film, and which resulted in the book *Made in Yorkshire* (see References – David can be seen in the photograph on p.73 just to the left of the banner, two along from the policeman).

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They actually filmed near his old school, Green Lane School, off Tom Road, where David lived, and this can be seen in the *Billy Liar* film. Seemingly unconcerned by David roaming around the set – being careful not to get in the way – the film crew carried on as usual and David was able to capture the filming. During the week David worked in York as a graphic arts photographer in printing. David had acquired a Kodak cine camera whilst still at school in 1955, shortly after this inexpensive cine came out (although he had a different camera by 1962). At the age of 22 David wanted to be a film cameraman himself, but like many others found it difficult to find a way in without contacts and from outside London. Over the next 10 years David took a lot of film of his family, but virtually all of it is outside Yorkshire. David was not a member of the Leeds Cine Club, and eventually found using 8mm film hard work – 16 mm being a lot more expensive.

The film provides a rare glimpse behind the scenes of a major film made in Yorkshire. The film was based on the novel of the same name by Leeds writer Keith Waterhouse, written in 1957. Waterhouse claimed that the film wasn't autobiographical, even though he too had had a dead end job as a clerk at an undertaker's before escaping to Fleet Street. He went on to adapt it for the stage, and worked with Willis Hall, another Leeds man, on the screenplay for the film. Waterhouse went on to write some 20 novels and the same number of plays, as well as being an extraordinary prolific and highly regarded newspaper columnist with the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*.

The film shows a fascinating glimpse of Bradford when it was at the height of its post-war transformation. In 1962 the Swan Arcade, where JB Priestley had his first job, was being demolished at the time this film was made. It was replaced by Arndale House, built by the corrupt building developer John Poulson. This rebuilding work can possibly be seen in the background in the film, and having this in may well have been deliberate on the part of the filmmakers. Keith Waterhouse was to later write about what he saw as the wanton destruction of city centres: "I would put most of the blame on the councillors who invite and encourage the laying-waste of their own townships. The trouble is that many of them are not very bright." In 1962 John Betjeman described the growing structures of glass and concrete as 'international nothingness'. See the Context for the film *700th Anniversary Of Bradford Market Charter* (1951) for more on the re-building of Bradford.

The film is one of many made in Yorkshire (see the book *Made In Yorkshire*, which provides details and an excellent overview of these films, in References). John Schlesinger, seen directing in the film, later also made *Yanks* in nearby Keighley in 1978. Schlesinger won an Oscar for director of *Midnight Cowboy* in 1969, which also won best film. Tom Courtenay, who was born in Hull, featured in many films located in Yorkshire, including *The Dresser*, also partly filmed in Bradford at the Alhambra Theatre. This co-starred Albert Finney who had played the Tom Courtenay part, Billy Fisher, on stage, but turned down playing the part in the film. Having starred in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* the previous year, *Billy Liar* established Tom Courtenay, playing the lead character Billy Fisher, as a major actor.

The film also starred Julie Christie making her first major film role. Julie only took the role, of Liz, after the first choice, Topsy Jane, had to drop out because of illness. All the scenes she had appeared in had to be re-done. An interesting feature of this film is that it was made when they were shooting the original version: it is Topsy Jane and not Julie Christie who is with Tom Courtenay at the top of Leeds Town Hall steps – an early scene in the film. Playing entirely different kinds of characters, Tom Courtenay and Julie Christie also appeared together two years later in *Dr Zhivago*.

Both the novel and the film emerged out of post war 1950s Britain when a new generation of talented artists appeared. There was a movement in literature, the theatre and cinema towards examining working class life, and locating this more in the provinces – some came to be known as part of the 'Movement' with a capital 'M'. Pioneering in this were Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson who, through a programme of screenings at the National Film Theatre between 1956 – 59, formed the Free Cinema movement, and along with John Schlesinger and Jack Clayton, the 'British New Wave'. Although this was not entirely new – see Philip Gillett's book (References) – it was distinctive in having a more youthful edge and in taking a less passive perspective. In *Billy Liar* this is represented by the character of Liz, who in the film escapes from Billy Fisher's dead end world for London.

In the same year as *Billy Liar* came out, Colin Macinnes' *City of Spades* and *Room at the Top* by John Braine were published, this last also featuring a working class character living in Yorkshire (Worley, modelled on Bradford). Two years later came David Storey's *This Sporting Life* about a working class boy who becomes a professional rugby league footballer. Both of these were also turned into films and filmed in West

Yorkshire – in 1958 and 1962 respectively. Later still came *Kes*, also filmed in the Bradford area in 1968 (see also the Context for *Kindergarten*). Two other films made in West Yorkshire and worth a mention in this context are *Brassed Off* (1995), and *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!*, filmed on the Buttershaw Estate in Bradford in 1986 – described by Tony Earnshaw and Jim Moran in their book as, ‘Thatcher’s Britain with her knickers down’.

Of course, each of this new generation had their own take on working class life at that time, but the four directors involved in these films – John Schlesinger, Lindsay Anderson and Ken Loach, and Jack Clayton (although Clayton is more eclectic) – were all prepared to push the boundaries of what could be shown in mainstream films. Many of the novels and films reflected a post war period when there were more educational opportunities for working class children, and this, together with new trends in youth culture, created a distance from the generation of their parents – *Billy Liar* has a comic scene that may well have inspired the ‘Four Yorkshiremen’ sketch from *At Last the 1948 Show*, and later Monty Python.

This was seen especially so in theatre with new playwrights, some tagged as ‘angry young men’ (a journalistic term taken from Leslie Allen Paul’s autobiography of 1951). These included John Osborne with his pathbreaking *Look Back in Anger* – in that breakthrough year of 1956 – and Arnold Wesker with his classic *Roots Trilogy*. Here working class young men rebel against rigid authority and stifling outlooks. Even the character of Billy Fisher in *Billy Liar* rebels in his own fashion – as does another character played by Tom Courtenay, Colin Smith, in Alan Sillitoe’s *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, made into a film by Tony Richardson just before *Billy Liar* in 1962.

Billy Liar has been classed among a series of films made in the late 1950s and early 1960s as ‘kitchen sink dramas’: dramas that are viewed as being socially or morally realistic. These usually have a domestic setting – although the film *The Kitchen* (1961), directed by Yorkshireman James Hill of an Arnold Wesker play, is set in a hotel kitchen. It is interesting to set *Billy Liar* against another film made the year before, *A Taste of Honey*, adapted for film in 1961 by Tony Richardson from the play by Shelagh Delaney. This is perhaps the most challenging of the ‘kitchen sink dramas’. Like other films made by ‘New Wave’ directors, *Billy Liar*, with its stereotyped female characters, can be accused of a certain misogyny – although the male characters are equally stereotyped and Liz represents someone new and different. But *A Taste of Honey* goes beyond the issue of class to openly explore race, gender and sexual orientation at a time when few others were doing so. It went on to win four BAFTA film awards, best actor (Murray Melvin) and best actress (Rita Tushingham) at Cannes (1962), and Tony Richardson and Shelagh Delaney between them won the Writer’s Guild Award (1963).

Although the character of Billy Fisher yearns to escape what he feels to be the drabness of his home town, the film itself leaves open the suggestion that maybe life here isn’t so bad, and is ultimately more rewarding than living a virtual one in one’s head (or in the newer method of the internet). Perhaps what the film teaches is that it is relating to other people that really counts – which Billy never really manages to do.

References

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