



THE DARK HEART OF FILM



## **BFI PREMIERES EARLIEST FILM OF CHRISTMAS GHOST STORY *THE MISTLETOE BOUGH* (1904)**

**- newly restored by the BFI National Archive**

**London, 12 December, 2013.** The BFI today reveals that the public's appetite for Gothic horror at Christmas time has endured over centuries. *The Mistletoe Bough* (1904), newly restored by the BFI as part of the BFI's GOTHIC blockbuster project, is a ghostly folk tale traditionally sung or recited at Christmas time, predating even Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The bride-and-see story inspired author Kate Mosse's newly published collection of short stories *The Mistletoe Bride and Other Haunting Tales* and is referenced in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*. The earliest version of this original Christmas ghost story on film has its big screen premiere at a special event **Nightmares Before Christmas** at BFI Southbank on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> Dec - and it will also be available on the BFI Player, the BFI's new VOD platform from Friday 13<sup>th</sup> December – guaranteed to spook a whole new generation over a hundred years later.

Bryony Dixon, curator, Silent Film, BFI National Archive said,  
*"The Mistletoe Bough (1904) is the earliest surviving version of this spooky Christmas ghost story, an appropriate seasonal treat for the BFI's current celebration of Gothic cinema. 109 years since it was*

*made, this charming film still has the power to inspire a chill with its rendering of the legend of the Mistletoe Bough and its tragic bride.”*

### **Synopsis**

Wearing 18th century costume, Lord Lovell and his bride celebrate their wedding. The bride suggests a game of hide-and-seek; in another room she hides in an old chest. The bridegroom, her father, and the wedding guests search for her. They find her handkerchief beside the chest, which is locked, but no other clue, and they eventually abandon the search. Thirty years later Lord Lovell, now grown old, sees the ghost of his lost bride leaving the chest. Horror-stricken, he rushes to the room, prises open the chest, and finds her skeleton.

### **NIGHTMARES BEFORE CHRISTMAS, BFI Southbank, London - Sat 14 Dec 15.30 NFT1**

This Gothic-tinged festive event delves into the long history of the Christmas ghost story, promising to take audiences back to the time of the magic lanternist and the early cinema showman for an afternoon of darkly chilling horrors. The programme includes the big screen premiere of *The Mistletoe Bough* (1904). Featuring Jeremy Brooker and his Grand Gothic Magic Lantern Show, plus a programme of rarely seen Gothic tales (with macabre humour) from the archive, presented by silent film curator Bryony Dixon, with live music accompaniment. A ghoulish treat for young and old in dark December days!

**BFI PLAYER** *The Mistletoe Bough* is available to view on the BFI Player from **Friday 13 December** with a new score by **Pete Wiggs** of St. Etienne. The original Gaumont *Christmas Special Edition Catalogue, November 1904* catalogue has the following notes on the film: ‘Brilliant quality. Finished acting. Beautiful Effects. Dramatic and Romantic.’ This rare catalogue is held as part of the holdings of the BFI National Archive’s Special Collections.

[player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

### **Restoration**

The BFI National Archive has long held an original release print from 1904. Now the film has been digitally restored: it was scanned at 2K resolution using a ‘wet gate’ process to eliminate surface scratches and the image has been stabilised, to create a new High Definition master.

### **Production**

**The Mistletoe Bough, dir. Percy Stow, 1904. 8 mins, black & white**

The film was probably shot near the Clarendon Studio, Limes Road, Croydon, and combines exterior scenes with those shot on studio sets. Although the final shot of the bride’s skeleton is missing – it was common for the endings of reels to get progressively shorter, through damage caused by repeated projection - this remains a fascinating early example of filmed Gothic.

The Clarendon Film Company was founded in 1904 by H.V. Lawley and Percy Stow (the latter had been an early partner of Cecil Hepworth) . The company was formed at Limes Road, Croydon and its distinctive logo carried the abbreviation CFC.

## Origins and legacy

The story of the bride-and-see death became world famous as a ballad, *The Mistletoe Bough*, written around 1830 by Thomas Haynes Bayly with music by Sir Henry Bishop, and was set in England. However, the story is much older. It first appeared in print in *The Monthly and Boston Review* (1809), in a short piece entitled *The Melancholy Occurrence*, with the story set in Germany. A poem by Samuel Rogers published in 1822 as *Ginevra*, probably the direct inspiration for Bayly's ballad was set in Italy. It was later adapted as a stage play bearing the name *The Mistletoe Bough* by Charles A Somerset in 1835 and has remained English ever since. Henry James used the story as the basis for his own short story *The Romance of Certain Old Clothes* (1868) and it re-appeared as *Ginevra or The Old Oak Chest: A Christmas Story* by Susan E Wallace (1887). Two further silent films were made (1923) and (1926). The story makes an appearance in Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), in which Brandon Shaw, one of the two young murderers, played by John Dall, claims *The Mistletoe Bough* is his favourite story - the fact that he is standing over a box with a body in it tells us everything we need to know about this despicable character!

The legend is still claimed by many different English stately homes in a widespread appropriation of popular folklore. The enduring power of the story is evident in that it is still in circulation today as an urban legend. Kate Mosse's most recent book of short stories is *The Mistletoe Bride and Other Haunting Tales*, with its title piece being a modern re-telling of the story.

Bayly's ballad was regularly and often sung as a parlour piece at Christmas time during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stow's film was released in November 1904 and its story and the music would have been instantly recognisable to audiences.

Bryony Dixon, curator, silent film, BFI National Archive is available for interview.

Notes to Editors:

**GOTHIC: The Dark Heart of Film** is a nationwide BFI project (**October 2013 – February 2014**) The BFI is taking Britain back to darker times and thrilling the nation by uncovering as never before the dark heart of film. With over 150 titles and around 1000 screenings GOTHIC features spectacularly terrifying special events to thrill every corner of the UK. The project also incorporates the longest BFI Southbank season in London yet (4 months), UK wide theatrical and DVD releases, an education programme and a range of exciting partnerships, special guests and commentators, including project ambassador Sir Christopher Frayling. GOTHIC explores film's most popular theme, spawning some of the medium's most iconic, powerful and terrifying scenes and characters whose lasting popularity just refuses to die. A Gothic compendium featuring essays by leading figures such as Mark Kermode, Guillermo Del Toro and Marina Warner accompanies the project. The BFI Player, newly launched VOD platform, features a dedicated Gothic channel.

[www.bfi.org.uk/gothic](http://www.bfi.org.uk/gothic)

**Press contacts:**

**Brian Robinson**, Communications Manager, BFI [brian.robinson@bfi.org.uk](mailto:brian.robinson@bfi.org.uk) / (020) 7957 8940

Caroline Jones, BFI Press Officer [caroline.jones@bfi.org.uk](mailto:caroline.jones@bfi.org.uk) / (020) 7957 8986

**Liz Parkinson**, Assistant Press Officer, BFI [liz.parkinson@bfi.org.uk](mailto:liz.parkinson@bfi.org.uk) / (020) 7957 8918

**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
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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