

Remembering 'The Virgin and the Gypsy' 50 years on

By Helen Knight (née Bacon)

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*Some time ago I was asked by Phil Smith if I would write something to commemorate the 50th anniversary, this June, of the screening of the film *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. Phil has contributed his photos which he took at the time of filming, and a special thanks to him for the reminder of this special anniversary for the village.*

Youlgrave was very fortunate to have been chosen by director Christopher Miles as the location for this film, and he has kindly written a piece for us, reproduced at the end of this article, and supplied photos. As Christopher points out, it was a special film for him, as it helped his career take off at that time, and broke box office records and received very good reviews here and in the USA.

The film was adapted from a novella by DH Lawrence, of the same name, telling the story of two girls Yvette (Joanna Shimkus) and her sister Lucille (Harriet Harper) returning from a French finishing school to the family vicarage (Raper Lodge). The cast included Fay Compton, Honor Blackman, Mark Burns, Norman Bird, Maurice Dunham and, of course, Franco Nero as the handsome and enigmatic gypsy, with whom Yvette falls in love. Events unfold leading to a dramatic conclusion. The film was nominated for awards on both sides of the Atlantic, including a Golden Globe, and in 1969 voted the best film by the British Critics' Circle and the New York Press. It was released in June 1970 and ran for 18 months in the West End in London, while many in Youlgrave remember the coach trip to the Gaumont cinema in Sheffield.



The filming that took place in the summer of 1969 has special memories for people in Youlgrave, who were either 'starring' as extras or just enjoying the spectacle of the filming and mixing with the crew and the actors. At the time of filming I was 14 and appeared with my mother, Mildred Bacon, in the Church congregation singing in the opening scene. For myself and others we were always so proud to have been involved and to see our beautiful

village and local scenery on the big screen, and it has always made a good tale to tell friends over the years. It was a fun time that is still remembered with very nostalgic fondness.

I have dipped into the collective memories of various people living in the village or still connected with it, and am immensely grateful for their help and amazing recall (which is far better than mine!).

Here are some of these recollections, starting with some very interesting reflections by Harriet Harper, who played Lucille, and who contacted me via the DH Lawrence Society.

Harriet Harper remembers

As a cast member, Harriet recalls how the cast and crew all made friends and shared a happy time during the filming. At that time, Joanna Shimkus had fallen in love with Sydney Poitier and would retire early after filming, to talk to him on the phone in her room, while the others would meet up for dinner or visit local pubs. (Joanna Shimkus later went on to marry Sydney Poitier.) Harriet remembers that the producers and director wanted a nudity element, and it fell to Harriet to do the flimsy garment, semi-strip scene, probably very innocent by today's standards. She remembers attending the shoot where the Severn Bore was used to enhance the final flood scene, but apparently it only managed a small wave that year, and so just small bits could be used for the final edit. Harriet also remembers the village and surrounding area with great fondness and how she would enjoy sunbathing and eating lunch lying on the slope below Raper Lodge (no nudity though!). She has kindly sent some photos, too.



Leading actors: Franco Nero and Joanna Shimkus

Marion Frost remembers

Marion totally enjoyed being the nominated person for village liaison, finding herself as

deputy for Dr Hadfield who was on holiday at that time and who had been asked to perform that role originally. She would liaise with Nick from the film crew, who oversaw the extras in the film. She remembers the recruitment day at the New Bath Hotel in Matlock, where the extras were chosen and then suitably attired, and dogs tied up outside for the filming at the gypsy encampment. On Beeley Moor, the location of that encampment, Marion remembers taking Jonathan Hall, who played the part of the gypsy baby, and holding him during a whole day's filming. She also remembers sitting near Franco Nero in the caravan, with his "piercing blue eyes", so that must have helped the time pass! He was also interested in talking about Marion's farm and milk business. She remembers seeing the bird in its cage at the site, and learnt that it was hired daily for an astronomical sum at that time. Marion's son, Simon, was a boy shopping in the Co-op (now the Youth Hostel) scene, with Louie Hadfield, and he was plied with toffee apples to keep him occupied – a sticky business. Marion also saw the costumes being pressed and ironed in the kitchens at the George Hotel, as well as the catering vans parked at the back where free food was given to pub regulars at the end of a filming day. The piece of beef carved at the table by the vicar at the Rectory was also cooked at the George, by Sylvia. Marion was also asked to arrange some altar flowers for the Church, in an old fashioned style, chrysanthemums she believes. Many of us would gather to watch filming in the village and one scene that made us all smile was the filming of Yvette cycling down Holywell Lane. Marion remembers her whizzing down on an old bike without brakes, where two chaps from the crew were ready to catch her. The final flood scene is also a memory for many people, and Marion says the old mac worn by the housekeeper in that scene was borrowed from Syd Birds' sister, Grace, who lived near the top of Raper Lane at that time. Marion also has some lovely photos and artefacts in her possession, that were given to her at that time, and would be happy to display these at some time in the future (post COVID)

Marjorie Shimwell remembers

Marjorie and her father were extras, Marjorie herself a villager who stood at the Fountain to catch a bus, and her father a parishioner who came out of the Church, shook the Vicar's hand and was asked how his daughter was. Marjorie remembers wearing a green coat, the bus being very old, and only travelling for a short distance. She also remembers the catering van parked outside their field on Conksbury Lane, and Franco Nero sitting on the wall and eating his meal. He had "very blue eyes"; a common memory emerging here! Marjorie also remembers Yvette on her bike and the white lines on the main road being concealed in dirt; and the final flood scene, as well as the Co-op scene and the baby being filmed on Beeley Moor.





Top left: Group shot with Maurice Denham as the rector. Top right: Syd Birds and Mildred Bacon. Above: Mildred and daughter Helen.

Susan Holland remembers, along with her mother Margaret

Susan has vivid memories of many small details, especially around costumes and sandwiches! Considering that she was only six years old at the time, these have stayed with her and made a lasting impression. She remembers the ham sandwiches that were eaten at the New Bath Hotel while we were being chosen as extras (lots of us from Youlgrave had arrived that Saturday morning together); and then the costume designer Deirdre Clancy (later to receive a BAFTA for Mrs Brown) picking out our clothes for us. Susan remembers her dropped waist silk outfit, a beaded handbag, a cloche hat and then her own black patent shoes and white socks. Her sister Katie (Katharine Holland) wore a linen sailor costume and a sheer sun hat, while her mum had a brown coat with a large fur collar. Thank you to Sue and her mum for the photo of us all in our outfits. Susan also remembers the straw and manure laid on the white road markings during filming, and the removal of all modern signage. She remembers filming in the Church on 8th August, with many takes of the singing of Lead Kindly Light; in fact, we had to return and record the sound again on a different day. In the door of the Vestry, Susan remembers Joanna Shimkus sitting on the step, and later Maurice Denham chatting with people, and bacon sandwiches in the catering van outside the Church. Susan's family bought their first dog, a pedigree cocker spaniel, soon after the filming, and named it Gypsy, and she believed at the time that all their film earnings went into the purchase (and probably a lot more besides!). Well done to Susan for her marvellous memory recall and to her mum Margaret for keeping her cinema ticket all these years, when a lot of us headed to Sheffield Gaumont to watch our endeavours, and see the film in its' finished form.



Wendy Green and her friend Jackie Elliot from Alport remember

Wendy recalls that her neighbours, Edith Rowland and Mrs Purseglove, were in the choir as extras, and Jackie remembers the filming of the scene where Yvette is riding her bicycle past Alport Mill, looking through the window, where a love scene was unfolding.

Annette Oldfield remembers

Annette remembers that her daughter, Amanda, at eight years old, was an extra as a passenger alighting from a train at Cromford Station, along with Frank Barton, and a scene at Beeley Moor where her daughter was a child extra, and Marion had charge of her during the day's filming.

Margaret Grant remembers

Margaret recalls how busy it was on Conksbury Lane during the filming, and although she and her family were not involved as extras, they were fascinated by the filming from their front row seats! They saw makeup adjustments being made by the telegraph pole on Conksbury Avenue; the horse and carriage travelling along the Lane and then disappearing down Raper Lane, driven by Laurie Dale;(Laurie, from the Red House Riding Stables at Darley Dale featured as the carriage driver Thomas, and even had a mention in the credits); teenagers hanging around in the hope of seeing Franco Nero, or his identical stand-in double.



Top: Raper Lodge spruced up for the film set, then after the flood (below).

I hope these lovely, vivid recollections have unlocked some happy memories for those of us who are still here to remember that summer, and to cast a little sunny moment in our current locked-down world. For those of you too young to remember, or new to the village, I hope you have enjoyed this nostalgic look back at that summer of '69 and the story which was released as a film 50 years ago this June.

Many thanks to all who took the time to contribute their thoughts, memories and photos, and to Christopher Miles for his interesting additional article and photos.

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Christopher Miles (Director): “Why I chose Youlgrave”

When the producer Kenneth Harper and myself, as director, drove up to Derbyshire in 1969 to find the locations for the film of DH Lawrence’s *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, we headed for the Matlock area, as we knew that Lawrence had mentioned Bonsall Head in the novel. We were looking for a Victorian style rectory on the banks of a river, which had to be near to a village, and look as if it could be flooded for the film’s finale. However we soon discovered that no rectories, or even large old houses, are ever built on river banks, for obvious reasons of danger.



On the second day in the area, I spotted on the map a rather Lawrencian sounding name of Raper Lodge on the banks of the river Lathkill, and wondered if it was worth having a look, not that our gypsy could be accused of anything so base! Driving down a wooded lane we came across a charming and secluded Victorian house, which was indeed on the banks of a river, with a small stone bridge in front of it. When we got out of the car it seemed in many ways to be perfect, but a little small for a rectory. So perhaps we could add a false front which we could then partly destroy in the flood scene? We both agreed that might work, but what about Lawrence's Papplewick village and church?

The nearest village was Youlgrave, which we later called Colgrave on the station sign in the film, and while visiting its quiet stone built street houses, with its splendid All Saints Church and Pre Raphaelite east window, I felt we had found our location. It even had an empty shop near the church which could possibly be adapted for the 1920s. We also spotted a perfect Village Hall which could be used for the Rector's daughter Yvette's concert; but we needed to get permissions. Raper Lodge, we soon discovered, was owned by the Duke of Rutland's Estate, and was lived in by the water bailiff Mr Burton, whom I photographed at the time with his wife. Throughout the filming they remained very stoical and tolerant, because the front extension we added had kept their main room and one upper floor bedroom in pitch-darkness during the six weeks of filming in Derbyshire! At the time the actual rector of Youlgrave, Dr Hadfield, was most helpful as we used his excellent church choir for the opening hymn credit sequence, with Maurice Denham and Norman Bird playing Yvette's rector-father and organ playing uncle. The congregation who were made up of very enthusiastic villagers, all looked perfect in their 1920s costumes, organised by Deirdre Clancy, our costume designer. I was pleased to see that every lady was wearing a hat, de rigueur in those days. One villager, on leaving the church while we were filming, managed to congratulate Maurice Denham on his sermon, which foresighted presence of mind was caught on camera and remains in the film.



Director Christopher Miles (centre, foreground) on the set.

The other small speaking roles were played by Laurie Dale from the nearby Dale Riding School, who met the girls at Colgrave station and drove the horse and trap. Also Mr and Mrs Hall kindly lent us their new born baby boy, Jonathan, who was taken to the gypsy encampment nearby to be suckled by Imogen Hassall, playing the gypsy's wife. So looking back over the 50 years since I put my camera and crew down in streets of Youlgrave, which with it's helpful and charming villagers, had I realised, contributed so much to my first important feature film, which broke the cinema's box-office record when it opened in 1970.

