

## BOMBS AT TEATIME PROGRAMME NOTES

### CHRISTMAS UNDER FIRE

Despite the Blitz, it's 'business as usual' as England prepares for Christmas in this propaganda film intended for US audiences. It's a Christmas of holly and barbed wire, guns and tinsel, yet the British, we are told, are determined to make it as cheerful as possible.

"England is fighting for her life", asserts the American narrator, but it is admiration rather than pity that the film seeks to evoke. The filmmakers achieve this with emotions bigger than most 10-minute films could contain, as we watch plucky Londoners creating a subterranean Christmas on Underground platforms and the choristers of King's College sing their hearts out. While no doubt intended to encourage US support in the War, *Christmas Under Fire* ultimately offers a portrait of a nation "unbeaten, unconquered and unafraid". - **Poppy Simpson**

### THE COUNTRYWOMEN

Proving that they're far more than jam, Jerusalem and Tony Blair-baiting, this is a record of the remarkable - and often unknown - contribution that the Women's Institute made to the War effort.

Despite the slightly feeble narrative framework - Mrs Urban and her son (Master Urban, presumably) are evacuated to the countryside and taken in by Mrs Rural, who explains the many-splendoured thing that is the WI - *The Countrywomen* perfectly captures the wartime spirit of unity and working together. Worth the price of admission just for a glimpse of the all-woman, village hall production of *A Christmas Carol* and a reminder that, in an age of rationing, women wore overcoats and hats at absolutely all times. - **Robin Baker**

### FIVE INCH BATHER

A portly (and naked) Richard Massingham instructs wartime Britain in the importance of water economy. From the maker/star of *Handkerchief Drill* (1949) – recently seen across the UK accompanying the release of *The History Boys*.

Massingham was a self-taught filmmaker, but rapidly became one of the most distinctive voices of WWII. Looking like a bedraggled Peter Ustinov, he clearly relishes his shallow dip. He certainly makes the prospect of cleaning yourself in a few scummy inches appear to be rather more fun than it probably was. – **Robin Baker**

## THE GOOD HOUSEWIFE 'IN HER KITCHEN'

This short class-conscious film advises housewives on the most effective way of storing food and basic food hygiene. It opens with a terribly well dressed middle class woman giving advice in her best BBC English accent in her modern inter-war kitchen complete with a 'refrigerator'.

Her presentation is interrupted by a 'Dick van Dyke' character from the crew who proceeds to rebuild the set to point out that not every housewife is so fortunate to have such luxurious labour saving devices and offers more down-to-earth practical tips such as keeping milk cool in a cupboard under an upturned flower pot. Ingenious.

A Ministry of Information film produced for the Ministry of Food. – **Sharon Messenger**

## ISLAND PEOPLE

Britain from two perspectives: a bird's-eye view of its landscape and industries, and a ground-level introduction to its people, their work, their leisure and their family lives.

Expertly squeezed into ten minutes, *Island People* is a surprisingly well-rounded portrait of Britain as a society, in which shared values transcend contrasts of geography and (understated, but obvious) divisions of class. Released during the early stages of World War Two, to which it makes no reference, the film's message of unity was shared by wartime propaganda.

As to what's changed since 1940... The international economy is no longer so heavily centred on London. British heavy industry has almost disappeared. 'High tea' isn't often taken these days. But pubs, football and gardening are still firm fixtures of national life. - **Patrick Russell**

## SPRINGTIME IN AN ENGLISH VILLAGE

Unseen for years due to the fragility of the materials, *Springtime in an English Village* offers an extraordinary and unexpected snapshot of rural life in the 1940s. After a fairly predictable opening - farmers ploughing fields, cute baby animals gambolling - it finally gets down to business. The film is about that most ancient of English traditions: the selection and crowning of the Queen of the May. But what is so surprising is that 60 years ago this village chose to honour a young black girl.

It's hard to know quite how literally to take the proceedings. The film was made by the Colonial Film Unit for the purpose of screening throughout Britain's African and Caribbean colonies - to demonstrate 'typical' life in the UK - at a time when the government was on the look out for cheap labour. – **Robin Baker**

*If you can identify the village in which the film was shot or know anything about the young star, please contact us at [mediatheque@bfi.org.uk](mailto:mediatheque@bfi.org.uk)*



## TEA MAKING TIPS

Welcome to the world of a national obsession and a place where people say “orf” instead of “off”.

Tea connoisseurs will benefit from “the six golden tips” for making the perfect cuppa as well as countless other handy hints (never store your tea next to cheese, for example). There’s an assessment of the pros and cons of various teapots and words of wisdom about the tea bush itself.

Slightly grotesque methods for producing tea en masse are demonstrated – it was wartime, after all, and tea had to be produced by the oceanful. As such, there are some top tips for cleaning that hard-to-reach tap in your tea urn. Remember: “a dirty tap means dirty tea”. - **Robin Baker**

## TWO COOKS AND A CABBAGE

This intriguing title is essential viewing for cooks everywhere, especially in times of austerity. The two cooks, Sally and Jane, are called upon to assist their forthright, no-nonsense, northern Grandmother (Mrs Ingleton) in cooking dinner. The girls are sent to find a large cabbage from the wartime garden and cut it in half: a whole cabbage would be frivolous; there is a war on!

Sally and Jane choose different cooking techniques but the message is simple: ‘never boil green vegetables in vast quantities of water’. I wish my mother had seen this film. – **Sharon Messenger**

## UNWANTED GUESTS

As if times weren't hard enough during the Second World War, the last thing people needed to worry about was an invasion of head lice. From evacuees to land girls, lice were rife: one land girl reported that at an inspection 22 out of 30 of her colleagues were infested.

As well as terrifying people with scalp-itching close-ups, the film also offers invaluable advice to the anxious and the infested on how to avoid and destroy the little blighters. - **Robin Baker**