



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

# The Phantom Light

## The Phantom Light

**Director:** Michael Powell  
**Production Company:** Gainsborough Pictures  
**Producer:** Michael Balcon \*  
**Associate Producer:** Jerome Jackson  
**Scenario:** Ralph Smart  
**Dialogue:** J. Jefferson Farjeon, Austin Melford  
**Based on the play** *The Haunted Light* by:  
Evadne Price, Joan Roy Byford  
**Photography:** Roy Kellino  
**Editor:** D.N. Twist  
**Art Director:** Alex Vetchinsky  
**Music Director:** Louis Levy \*  
**Sound:** A. Birch  
**Studio:** Gainsborough Studios  
**Cast:**  
Binnie Hale (*Alice Bright*)  
Gordon Harker (*Sam Higgins*)  
Donald Calthrop (*David Owen*)  
Milton Rosmer (*Dr Carey*)  
Ian Hunter (*Jim Pierce*)  
Herbert Lomas (*Claff Owen*)  
Reginald Tate (*Tom Evans*)  
Barry O'Neill (*Captain Pearce*)  
Mickey Brantford (*Bob Peters*)  
Alice O'Day (*Mrs Owen*)  
Fewlass Llewellyn (*Griffith Owen*)  
Edgar K. Bruce (*Sergeant Owen*)  
Louie Emery (*station mistress*)  
UK 1935  
76 mins  
Digital 4K

Remastering has been supported by Matt Spick and the Charles Skey Charitable Trust.

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**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Michael Powell bid for box-office success with this tale of a gang of ship-wreckers who spread the legend of a 'phantom lighthouse' to distract attention from their activities – but they didn't reckon on Gordon Harker's newly-installed lighthouse keeper Sam Higgins. Edited by Powell's soon-to-be regular collaborator Derek Twist, and making evocative use of its coastal locations, it's all carried off with real atmosphere.

James Bell, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

Michael Powell's last film in his contract for Gaumont-British/Gainsborough was a fascinating taste of things to come from the young director.

*The Phantom Light* (1935) was a comic thriller adapted from the stage play *The Haunted Light* by Evadne Price and Joan Roy Byford.

It seemed the perfect project to Powell, who later admitted, 'I am a sucker for lighthouses. The lonelier and inaccessible, the better. And I love comedy-thrillers. I said "yes" to this one right away, and never regretted it. I enjoyed every minute. The less said about the plot the better.'

It's true that the film was interesting less for its slim plot – which, though entertaining enough, could almost pass for an episode of *Scooby Doo* – than for its effective use of location and atmosphere. Particularly impressive are the night sequences of the lighthouse and bay, and an evocative opening sequence which suggested that Powell had been paying attention to the Universal horror films of the period (e.g. *Dracula*, 1931; *Frankenstein*, 1933). The effective editing – notably in the sequence in which a ship narrowly escapes disaster on the rocks – also hints at greatness to come, but the film is far from a masterpiece.

Gordon Harker, a favourite of British audiences in the '20s and '30s thanks to his versatile comic skills, is good value as the no-nonsense lighthouse keeper, and Ian Hunter is suitably heroic, if a bit stiff, as a naval officer (a role that Powell had hoped to offer to the inexperienced Roger Livesey, but was overruled by studio head Michael Balcon), while there is a likeable performance from Donald Calthrop as a dour coastguard official. All three actors had been Hitchcock regulars.

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)

## A contemporary review

A lighthouse off the coast of Wales has been the scene of strange events and disappearances, while a phantom light appears on the rocky coast.

Gordon Harker as Sam Higgins, the new Cockney chief lighthouse-keeper is excellently cast. His matter-of-fact tone when confronted by the local tales of the haunted lighthouse told in sing-song, Welsh-accented English, is finely done, as also his amazement when he finds that half the village are related

## CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

### **The Love Test + Something Always Happens**

Tue 19 Dec 20:20

### **Projecting the Archive: The End of the River +**

intro by film scholar Dr Kulraj Phullar

Tue 5 Dec 18:20

### **The Phantom Light**

Wed 6 Dec 20:30; Sun 17 Dec 12:30

### **Peeping Tom**

Thu 7 Dec 20:45 (+ intro by Kiri Bloom Walden, author of *Peeping Tom Devil's Advocates*); Sat 9 Dec 15:00 (+ Doesn't Exist magazine launch and panel discussion hosted by Victor Fraga); Fri 15 Dec 20:50; Mon 18 Dec 20:45; Thu 21 Dec 18:00; Sat 23 Dec 18:00; Fri 29 Dec 18:15

### **The Red Shoes**

From Fri 8 Dec

### **The Red Shoes in the Spotlight**

Fri 8 Dec 18:00

### **Bluebeard's Castle (Herzog Blaubarts Burg)**

Fri 8 Dec 20:40; Fri 15 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by writer Lillian Crawford); Sat 23 Dec 13:30

### **Crown v. Stevens + Behind the Mask (aka The Man Behind the Mask)**

Sat 9 Dec 12:40; Sat 23 Dec 15:00

### **The Tales of Hoffmann**

Sat 9 Dec 17:30; Tue 12 Dec 20:20 (+ intro by Andrew Moor, Manchester Metropolitan University); Sat 16 Dec 14:45; Sat 30 Dec 17:30

### **Honeymoon (Luna de miel)**

Sun 10 Dec 13:25; Thu 28 Dec 20:40

### **The Small Back Room**

Sun 10 Dec 18:30; Sat 16 Dec 20:45; Fri 22 Dec 18:20; Wed 27 Dec 20:30; Sat 30 Dec 15:00

### **Queering Powell + Pressburger**

Tue 12 Dec 18:00

### **Experimenta: Michelle Williams Gamaker and**

**Powell + Pressburger** + Michelle Williams

Gamaker in conversation with Dr Kulraj Phullar

Wed 13 Dec 18:05

### **Oh... Rosalinda!**

Wed 13 Dec 20:45

### **They're a Weird Mob**

Sat 16 Dec 17:45; Fri 29 Dec 20:40

### **Espionage: Never Turn Your Back on a Friend /**

**A Free Agent + intro**

Sun 17 Dec 15:15

### **Library Talk: The Glass Pearls**

Tue 19 Dec 19:30 BFI Reuben Library

### **Lazybones + Her Last Affaire**

Wed 20 Dec 17:50

### **Age of Consent**

Fri 22 Dec 20:45; Wed 27 Dec 18:15

### **A Matter of Life and Death**

Sat 23 Dec 15:00 BFI IMAX

### **Black Narcissus**

Sat 30 Dec 14:30 BFI IMAX

With thanks to



Owens. Helped by a naval lieutenant and a lady detective, he solves the mystery.

The atmosphere is well built up and sustained, and the tension is balanced by the comic relief. The photography is very good, giving some fine views of Welsh landscape and of the village where the drama takes place. The shots of the ship Mary Fern in the fog are well done and add their full quota to creating tense expectation. The sound effects are enhanced by the booming of the sea and the screaming of the seagulls which are used to add to the eeriness of the scene.

Binnie Hale as the lady detective acts well, especially in her fight with the wreckers at the top of the lighthouse-she makes it real. Her efforts to be taken to the lighthouse, involving overtures first to Sam Higgins and then to the naval lieutenant, are amusing, and her success at last is welcome. Gordon Harker and Binnie Hale are well supported by the rest of the cast, especially by Herbert Lomas as the melancholy Welsh assistant keeper.

There are a number of violent scenes which make the film unsuitable for young people or impressionable adolescents.

*Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1935

## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### **The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)**

Fri 1 Dec 14:40; Wed 13 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 17 Dec 18:45; Wed 20 Dec 20:55

### **The Passenger**

Sat 2 Dec 20:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sun 10 Dec 15:45; Wed 27 Dec 17:50

### **After Life (Wandafuru Ralfu)**

Sun 3 Dec 12:45; Tue 12 Dec 17:15; Wed 27 Dec 14:40; Sat 30 Dec 20:20

### **My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)**

Mon 4 Dec 18:15; Thu 14 Dec 20:50; Thu 28 Dec 18:15

### **Five Easy Pieces**

Tue 5 Dec 14:30; Sat 9 Dec 20:55; Tue 19 Dec 18:15; Fri 29 Dec 18:20

### **White Material**

Wed 6 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by film curator Abiba Coulibaly); Fri 29 Dec 20:45

### **Boyz n the Hood**

Thu 7 Dec 20:35; Sat 16 Dec 18:15; Sat 23 Dec 20:40

### **Meet Me in St Louis**

Fri 8 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by writer Richard Dyer); Wed 20 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 18:10; Sat 23 Dec 11:50

### **It's a Wonderful Life**

Wed 13 Dec 18:10; Sat 16 Dec 20:25; Mon 18 Dec 20:25; Wed 20 Dec 18:10; Fri 22 Dec 14:30, 20:25; Sat 23 Dec 18:10

### **The Shop around the Corner**

Fri 15 Dec 18:20; Mon 18 Dec 14:30; Thu 21 Dec 20:45; Sat 30 Dec 12:20

### **Remember the Night**

Sun 17 Dec 12:15; Tue 19 Dec 20:40

### **Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)**

Sat 23 Dec 14:20; Fri 29 Dec 13:30; Sat 30 Dec 13:00

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