

= A Ghost Story for Christmas =

A Ghost Story for Christmas is a strand of annual British short television films originally broadcast on BBC One between 1971 and 1978 , and revived in 2005 on BBC Four . With one exception , the original instalments were directed by Lawrence Gordon Clark and the films were all shot on 16 mm colour film . The remit behind the series was to provide a television adaptation of a classic ghost story , in line with the oral tradition of telling supernatural tales at Christmas .

Each instalment is a separate adaptation of a short story , ranges between 30 and 50 minutes in duration , and features well @-@ known British actors such as Clive Swift , Robert Hardy , Peter Vaughan , Edward Petherbridge and Denholm Elliott . The first five are adaptations of ghost stories by M. R. James , the sixth is based on a short story by Charles Dickens , and the two final instalments are original screenplays by Clive Exton and John Bowen respectively . The stories were titled A Ghost Story for Christmas in listings such as the Radio Times , although this never appeared on screen , where they were regarded as individual films .

An earlier black @-@ and @-@ white adaptation of M. R. James 's Whistle and I 'll Come to You , directed by Jonathan Miller and shown as part of the series Omnibus in 1968 , is often cited as an influence upon the production of the films , and is sometimes included as part of the series . The series was revived by the BBC in 2005 with a new set of adaptations that were produced intermittently over the next few years .

= = Production = =

= = = Background = = =

The first five films are adaptations of stories from the four books by M. R. James published between 1904 and 1925 . The ghost stories of James , an English mediaeval scholar and Provost of Eton College and King 's College , Cambridge , were originally narrated as Christmas entertainments to friends and selected students .

The sixth film , The Signalman , is an adaptation of a story by Charles Dickens published in his magazine All the Year Round in 1866 . In its original context it was one of eight stories set around the fictional Mugby Junction and its branch lines . It was inspired by the Staplehurst rail crash of June 1865 , which Dickens himself survived , having attended to dying fellow passengers . He subsequently suffered panic disorders and flashbacks as a result .

The final two stories were based on original screenplays , one by Clive Exton , who was an experienced television screenwriter , and the other by John Bowen , who was primarily known as a novelist and playwright .

= = = Adaptation = = =

In an interview in 1995 Lawrence Gordon Clark stated that the stories " focus on suggestion . The aim , they say , is to chill rather than shock . Partly because television is not best suited to carrying off big @-@ screen pyrotechnics , but mainly because they want to keep faith with the notion of a ghost story in its literary rather than cinematic tradition . " Helen Wheatley notes that the best adaptations maintain the stories ' " sense of decorum and restraint , ... withholding the full revelation of the supernatural until the very last moment , and centring on the suggestion of a ghostly presence rather than the horror of visceral excess and abjection . "

After the first two adaptations , both done by Clark , the tales were adapted by a number of playwrights and screenwriters . In most instances the adaptations alter the original source material . For example , A Warning to the Curious frequently deviates from its literary source . The screenplay avoids the convoluted plot structure of M. R. James 's original , opting for a more linear construction and reducing the number of narrators . In addition the central character , Paxton , is changed from a young fair @-@ haired innocent who stumbles across the treasure to a middle @-@ aged character

driven by poverty to seek the treasure and acting in full awareness of what he is doing .

To take another example , in his screenplay for *The Signalman* Andrew Davies adds scenes of the traveller 's nightmare @-@ plagued nights at an inn , and reinforces the ambiguity of the traveller @-@ narrator by restructuring the ending and matching his facial features with those of the spectre . The film also makes use of visual and aural devices . For example , the appearance of the spectre is stressed by the vibrations of a bell in the signalbox and a recurring red motif connects the signalman 's memories of a train crash with the danger light attended by a ghostly figure .

= = = Filming = = =

Lawrence Gordon Clark had made his name as a BBC documentary director during the 1960s . *The Stalls of Barchester* was the first dramatic production he directed . Clark recalled in an interview for the BFI 's DVD release in 2012 that " the BBC at that time gave you the space to fail , and generously so too . They backed you up with marvellous technicians , art departments , film departments and so forth . "

Unusually for a BBC television drama of the 1970s , each instalment was filmed entirely on location using 16 mm film . As a result , the cameraman John McGlashan , who filmed all of the original adaptations , was able to make use of night shoots and dark , shadowy interiors , which would not have been possible with the then @-@ standard video @-@ based studio interiors . Of *The Stalls of Barchester* Clark recalls that " Paul Fox (Controller of BBC One) gave us a tiny budget ... and we set out to do a full @-@ blooded drama on location . Budgets were really tiny , and we shot for ten days and brought the film in for about 8 @,@ 000 pounds . "

The filming of the adaptations took place at a variety of locations , although East Anglia , where M. R. James set many of his stories , was the location for early instalments . *The Stalls of Barchester* was filmed at Norwich Cathedral and in the surrounding close . *A Warning to the Curious* was filmed on the coast of North Norfolk , at Waxham , Happisburgh and Wells @-@ next @-@ the @-@ Sea , although the original story was set in " Seaburgh " (a disguised version of Aldeburgh , Suffolk) . Later locations include the Severn Valley Railway for *The Signalman* and Wells Cathedral for *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* .

= = Episode list = =

With the exception of the final film , the tales were directed by Lawrence Gordon Clark and produced by Rosemary Hill . The final episode was directed by Derek Lister .

= = Revivals = =

BBC Four revisited the series at Christmas 2004 , and in 2005 began to produce new adaptations of stories by M. R. James , broadcast along with repeats of episodes from the original series .

BBC Two premiered a new adaptation by Neil Cross of M. R. James 's *Oh , Whistle and I 'll come to You , My Lad* on Christmas Eve 2010 .

Mark Gatiss 's adaptation of *The Tractate Middoth* , yet another story by M. R. James , was broadcast on BBC Two on Christmas Day 2013 . This was followed by a documentary , *M. R. James : Ghost Writer* .

= = Critical reception = =

The critical reception of the films has been varied , but several are regarded as classic television ghost stories . Sarah Dempster , writing in *The Guardian* in 2005 , noted that " Perhaps the most surprising aspect ... is how little its adaptations ... have dated . They may boast the odd signifier of cheap 1970s telly ? outlandish regional vowels , inappropriate eyeliner , a surfeit of depressed oboes ? but lurking within their hushed cloisters and glum expanses of deserted coastline is a timelessness at odds with virtually everything written , or broadcast , before or since . "

The production values have received particular praise . Helen Wheatley writes that " the series was shot on film on location , with much attention paid to the minutiae of period detail ; ... it might be seen to visually prefigure the filmic stylishness and traditions of later literary adaptations such as *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown* . " However , she notes that , unlike those adaptations , the sinister tone of the period pieces could lend itself the label of a " feel bad " heritage television drama .

The *Signalman* is perhaps the most critically acclaimed . Simon Farquhar suggests that the film is the first evidence of Andrew Davies 's gift as an adaptor of literary fiction : " despite an extremely arduous shoot , Davies and Clarke 's fog @-@ wreathed , flame @-@ crackling masterpiece manages something the production team could never have imagined : it 's better than the book . " Dave Rolinson notes that , while " the adaptation inevitably misses Dickens 's nuanced and often unsettling prose , ... it achieves comparably skilful effects through visual language and sound , heightening theme and supernatural mood The production heightens the story 's crucial features of repetition and foreshadowing . "

Sergio Angelini writes about *A Warning to the Curious* : " Of Clark 's many adaptations of James 's stories , this is perhaps the most varied in its use of landscape and the most visually arresting in its attempt to create an otherworldly atmosphere Using long lenses to flatten the scenery and make the ghost indistinct in the background , John McGlashan 's fine cinematography brilliantly conveys the ageless , ritualistic determinism of Ager 's pursuit and signposts the inevitability of Paxton 's demise . " Angelini is less appreciative of *The Ash Tree* , noting that the literal adaptation of the story 's ending loses the atmosphere of earlier instalments : " While the creatures are certainly grotesque and threatening , compared with some of the other adaptations of the series , *The Ash Tree* does lose some power through this lack of ambiguity . The result overall remains satisfyingly unsettling , however , thanks also to Petherbridge 's restrained , psychologically acute performance . "

The adaptations have had an influence on the work of the writer Mark Gatiss . Interviewed in 2008 , Gatiss said that *Lost Hearts* is his favourite adaptation because it is the one that frightened him as a child and that " I absolutely love *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* . The moment when Michael Bryant has found the treasure and ... is obviously losing his wits . He just says , rationally , ' It is a thing of slime , I think . Darkness and slime ... ' There 's also the fantastic scene where he thinks he 's got away with it by putting the treasure back . The doctor is heading up the drive and he can 't quite see him in the sunlight . Then it pauses to that amazing crane shot Very spooky .

The reception of the two later instalments , *Stigma* and *The Ice House* , was decidedly critical . Most reviewers concluded that switching to original stories instead of adaptations was " misjudged " . David Kerekes writes that *The Ice House* is almost " totally forgotten " . Wheatley has commented that they heralded a divergence from the stage @-@ inspired horror of the 1940s and 1950s to a more modern Gothic horror based in the present day , losing in the process the " aesthetic of restraint " evident in the original adaptations .

The BBC Four revival beginning in 2005 with *A View from a Hill* was greeted warmly by Sarah Dempster , who stated that the programme was , " in every respect , a vintage Ghost Story for Christmas production . There are the powdery academics hamstrung by extreme social awkwardness . There is the bumbling protagonist bemused by a particular aspect of modern life . There are stunning , panoramic shots of a specific area of the British landscape (here , a heavily autumnal Suffolk) . There is the determined lack of celebrity pizzazz . There is tweed . And there is , crucially , a single moment of heart @-@ stopping , corner @-@ of @-@ the @-@ eye horror that suggests life , for one powdery academic at least , will never be the same again . "

= = Related works = =

Before Clark 's films came under the remit of the BBC Drama Department it commissioned a Christmas play from Nigel Kneale , an original ghost story called *The Stone Tape* , broadcast on Christmas Day 1972 . With its modern setting , this is not generally included under the heading of *A Ghost Story for Christmas* and was originally intended as an episode of the anthology *Dead of Night*

Clark directed another story by M. R. James , Casting The Runes for the series Playhouse , produced by Yorkshire Television and first broadcast on ITV on 24 April 1979 . Adapted by Clive Exton , it reimagined the events of James 's story taking place in a contemporary television studio .

For Christmas 1979 the BBC produced a 70 @-@ minute @-@ long adaptation of Sheridan Le Fanu 's gothic tale Schalcken the Painter , directed and adapted by Leslie Megahey . Like the earlier Whistle and I 'll Come to You , the production was listed as part of the long @-@ running BBC arts series Omnibus .

Repeats of the original series on BBC Four at Christmas 2007 included The Haunted Airman , a new adaptation of Dennis Wheatley 's novel The Haunting of Toby Jugg by Chris Durlacher , although this film was originally screened on 31 October 2006 .

For Christmas 2008 an original three @-@ part ghost story by Mark Gatiss , Crooked House , was produced instead , though Gatiss has cited the original adaptations as a key influence .

The Turn of the Screw (1898) , a novella by Henry James (no relation to M. R. James) , was adapted as a feature @-@ length drama by Sandy Welch and broadcast on BBC One on 30 December 2009 .

= = Release = =

The BFI released the complete set of Ghost Story for Christmas films plus related works such as both versions of Whistle and I 'll Come to You on Region 2 DVD in 2012 , in five volumes as well as a box set , in celebration of the 150th anniversary of M. R. James 's birth . The following year , an expanded boxset featuring Robert Powell and Michael Bryant narrating M. R. James in the series Classic Ghost Stories (1986) and Spine Chillers (1980) respectively .

A Warning to the Curious , The Signalman and Miller 's Whistle and I 'll Come to You were released as individual VHS cassettes and Region 2 DVDs by the British Film Institute in 2002 and 2003 . A number of the adaptations were made available in Region 4 format in Australia in 2011 and The Signalman is included as an extra on the Region 1 American DVD release of the 1995 BBC production of Hard Times . For Christmas 2011 , the BFI featured the complete 1970s films in their Mediatheque centres .