

Goodbye: The Iconic Charge

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The fourth season of *Blackadder*—titled *Blackadder Goes Forth*—was ending and the final episode was scripted to conclude in the traditional *Blackadder* fashion, with everyone dying horrifically. The first two seasons had done this, with the second even killing off Queen Elizabeth I before her time, in favour of Hugh Laurie in a convincing disguise. But those were comedies set in the distant past. Who cares if a bunch of medieval fops get offed?

Blackadder Goes Forth wasn't quite as distant. It was set in World War I and aired in 1989, when soldiers who survived the war were still alive. So you might expect that they didn't shoot a mawkish, gruesome scene of all the main cast members being gunned down in a trench.

And you'd be wrong.

In fact, Richard Curtis and Ben Elton thought they could only do a World War I series if they killed off the characters—after all, that was the reality of the war—so they did shoot such an ending for the final episode, “Goodbye,” and it looked terrible. The footage still exists and can be seen on the extras of the DVD box set. The lighting is bad, the shots are sub-par and the faces the actors make while dying are ridiculous (and not in a good way).

But Chris Wadsworth, the editor, had to work with what he had—so he slowed down the footage. The assistant editor thought to slow down the audio too, giving the gunshots a hollow, haunting quality. And finally, a PA had the idea to add a field of poppies. And so, in the final version of the episode, the characters charge into battle, but we don't see their deaths. It's just a fade out over a slow piano version of the *Blackadder* theme, and then poppies and birdsong. It's surprisingly moving for a *Blackadder* episode—and it was an accident!

The scene is continually ranked among the top moments in British television history and is a major cultural touchstone—even being referenced and parodied in the end of the sketch show *That Mitchell and Webb Look*'s own final season, twenty-one years later!

Richard Curtis—the co-writer of every episode of *Blackadder*—went on to blend comedy with more poignant moments in many of his future projects as well. His hit romantic comedy *Love Actually* and his lesser-known but still delightful time-travel romance *About Time* both balance humour with real emotion. Even his single episode of *Doctor Who* (“Vincent and the Doctor”) is perhaps the most moving episode of the entire series, dealing with the sensitive topics of mental illness and suicide within a family show.

With today's television landscape full of dark comedies, dramedies and other genre-defying work, it's important to remember that one moment in 1989 when *Blackadder Goes Forth* redefined the balance between comedy and harsh reality. All because one editing team had a cunning plan...