

Watch this British propaganda and be beguiled

A newly digitised archive of films promoting 1940s Britain shows why it's good to romanticise ourselves a little



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Yesterday I watched how *The Times* is produced. Grave figures in sober ties and wire-rimmed glasses, light bouncing off neat balding heads, discuss the leading article: the greying Intelligence Department frowns over neat box files; and the highly polished black shoes of the evening shift clatter obediently downstairs in pleasing counterpoint to the rattling obligato of typewriters. Sub-editors work with pipes clenched firmly between their teeth, presses rattle, brave van drivers in tin helmets defy incendiary bombs to speed towards the mainline stations. Boys on bikes deliver it to chaps with spaniels, who read out important news to wives in floral housecoats.

It was, of course, 1942.

With delightful serendipity, just as the first instalment of John Peel's vinyl library got released on to the internet so that middle-aged chaps can sigh over recent musical history and enjoy assorted teenage howls for sex and dancing, the British Council offers an alternative diversion. It has put online, after careful digitisation, dozens of its ten-minute propaganda films from the Forties. They are messages from another world, which, though not wholly imaginary, was in its way as much of an artful illusion as any prog-rock dream.

I first learnt of this innovation when my husband erupted into the room, enervated by the Leveson Inquiry and the local elections, crying "I want to live in British Council Britain! Where sturdy lighthouse-keepers kiss their little golden-haired daughters

goodbye and row out bravely to the distant tower! I want the country run by men who wear proper hats!"

In vain I murmured that this was deliberate and necessary propaganda in wartime and after, and that maybe it wasn't really all that much better, in the far-off days when we were yet unborn: certainly not for women at the washtub, gays in the closet or anyone with a lungful of asbestos. But then I clicked on the website myself, and fell beneath the blissful spell.

Here is *Bobby on the Beat*, about the rigorous training of a police constable, and *City Bound*, celebrating the 1941 commuter. Here is a documentary about Kettering preparing for the 1945 election: the London Symphony Orchestra's fanfare, Westminster heraldry and an orotund pronouncing of Parliament speech segue in posh commentary to a town of "Factories, farmahs and small tradahs", where the Conservative candidate, one John Profumo, faces his Labour opponent.

Packed meetings of attentive folk listen with care, while "busy housewife Mrs Green" who couldn't get to the hustings (presumably because there was a lot of pegging-out to do),

A town of Factories, farmahs and small tradahs' elects its MP

receives election leaflets from the smartly uniformed postwoman and reads them carefully. "The British public are individuals," says the commentary. "They watch, they listen, but they decide for themselves. Every thinking person in the British Isles looks on his country's problems as his own responsibility."

Under the returning officer's stern gaze (everyone looks well over 55) the result is announced and Profumo loses his seat. Cue another fanfare as "the King opens the new Parliament, and

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An imaginary housewife in the West Riding goes happily about her day

Britain settles down to solve her current problems under a new Government chosen freely by her people".

Tears to the eyes. I had to calm myself down with *The Life of the Rabbit*, then ten minutes on a tour of the Royal Naval College Dartmouth, where 13-year-old boys with spindly legs in white shorts train for "the finest Service in the world" and a rare colour film, *The Green Girdle*, encouraging Londoners to Wimbledon Common or Box Hill to escape "the teeming jostling thoroughfares scarr'd by war, to rest jaded minds and jangled nerves in the quiet health of London's countryside".

Only then could I tackle *We of the West Riding*, in which an imaginary Yorkshire family holystone doorsteps, make fine cloth at the mill and send it out to be worn by the entire world, and go cycling 50-strong across the moors "in wind, rain or snow", singing *Ilkley Moor Baa't At*. Everyone joins in the Christmas *Messiah*, Our Edna stars in the am-dram and Uncle Something is

the scowl, and dutifulness above sprawling self-pity. That can be bracing 2012, after all, is another year of

anxiously selective national showcasing with the Diamond Jubilee and Olympics: why else is a splendidly preposterous ornate royal barge leading a flotilla up the Thames, and Danny Boyle putting NHS nurses in the Olympics opening ceremony? Can we doubt that Boyle will direct them more in the spirit of the British Council than of a gritty investigative depiction of nurses gossiping or doing paperwork while ignoring patients' pleas for bedpans or their inability to feed themselves? Of course not.

The fact is that there has always been a need for the romanticising of Us: of ordinary lives. Every nation needs a daydream about itself. Those beguiling 1940s visions had their uses, not only as cynical propaganda. As the late actress Greer Garson said, looking back in old age at a Miniveresque career of inspiring role models, "I think the mirror should be tilted slightly upward when it's reflecting life — toward the cheerful, the tender, the compassionate, the brave, the funny, the encouraging, all those things — and not tilted down to the gutter part of the time, into the troubled vistas of conflict."

Atah. Apologies to my more snarly, gritty friends and colleagues. It's just that it's a wet bank holiday, I've been watching a lot of dystopian plays lately and I thought you might like a change of scene too. Just for ten minutes at a time. Oh, go on...

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in the brass band. Because in Britain "we'd all rather stand up and do a thing ourselves than watch other people".

Which is, of course, just what I was doing: mesmerised by the sheer quality and conviction of these little gems, like Ealing films only without their moral dilemmas, tragedies or a self-aware satirical edge. Of course, they were made to showcase a sturdy, decent Britain to itself and to the outside world. The British Council, offering these downloads, breezily invites us to "play" with them, to "reinterpret and share your interpretations with the world", and no doubt there will be some very, very funny and far from innocent reinterpretations on YouTube in no time. This is a more cynical age.

Yet they were not really lies, just careful edits of reality. There were, and still are, plenty of decent, busy, brave ordinary people doing useful things for the public good. The process of romanticisation did at least celebrate certain virtues, value the smile above