

The 13th
**British
Silent Film
Festival**

PHOENIX SQUARE
FILM & DIGITAL MEDIA

Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks

Sunday 18 April, 6 pm

With live accompaniment by **Stephen Horne**

With a special presentation on the challenges of scoring for this important First World War film by Toby Haggith (Imperial War Museum). +

Composer Laura Rossi talks about her original score for the film and Stephen Horne will perform live excerpts using recently discovered original cue sheets for the film.



UK 1917
Director: J.B.McDowell
Producer: William F Jury
73mins

The Battle of the Ancre (January 1917) was the third film in a successful trilogy of official First World War films that started with The Battle of the Somme (August 1916) and The King Visits His Armies in the Great Advance (October 1916). The Battle of the Ancre gave audiences their first sight of the tank, Britain's new 'implement of war', and despite the fact that footage of the tanks amounted to only 9 minutes, the film earned more in its first three months at the box office than its predecessor, The Battle of the Somme.

'While the film reworked much familiar ground, it also included a number of sequences that achieved a visual quality quite unprecedented in the earlier official films. In one sequence, for example, the camera observed a film of horsemen making their way through a barren, war-devastated landscape populated only by tree stumps, mud and standing water. The shot opens with the horsemen in the foreground, and the camera then pans slowly to the left to follow as they turn right and then left again to cross the screen along a small ridge above water-filled craters. The strength of the composition and the slow, steady pace of the camera serve precisely to convey the realities of this very particular environment, forcing the audience to confront the harsh battle-scarred landscape, while emphasizing

at the same time, the quiet dignity of the men who must go about their appointed tasks in this God-forsaken land. Indeed, it is this sense of ordinary men retaining their dignity and humanity in these most dreadful and extraordinary of circumstances that represents perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of both *The Battle of the Somme* and *The Battle of Ancre* – small wonder, then, that these films evoked such a powerful response in the domestic audience’.

Nicholas Reeves from ‘Official British Film Propaganda’ in ‘The First World War and Popular Cinema’ USA 2000.

In terms of the music, the following statement from musician and composer, Stephen Horne, talking about his earlier project in reproducing the original score for *The Battle of the Somme* gives an insight into the issues that the modern composer faces when attempting to reconstruct musical scores using contemporary cue sheets for these films.

‘It is almost impossible for a modern accompanist, when improvising for *Battle of the Somme*, not to play in a way that reflects our shared historical hindsight. The original Hutcheson cue sheet presents a challenge to this impulse, which can make the musician feel in equal parts validated and humbled. From our perspective, his musical choices vary from the genuinely moving to the wildly inappropriate, an example of the former would be his suggestions for the scenes of battlefield dead, which seem fully attuned to the pity of war. An example of the latter might be the recommendation to play Suppé’s *Light Cavalry Overture*, as soldiers go over the top for the first time. One temptation for the musician is to undercut any offence to the modern sensibility by playing these troublesome passages ironically. I try to avoid this, and after several performances I now find poignancy in the contrast between the music’s strident optimism and images that have acquired such terrible meaning. Nevertheless, I think that it is still reasonable to make judgements about the medley on its own terms. And there are certain places where Hutcheson’s ingenuity seems to desert him. For example, at the beginning of Part 5 he suggests that the overture to the opera *Das Nachtlager in Granada* [by Konradin Kreutzer, 1834] be played straight through. Some passages bear scant relation to the scenes that they accompany, so here I think a little judicious editing is legitimate. After all, it is hardly a modern phenomenon for musicians to pass judgment on each others’ work, and one can certainly imagine a rebellious cinema band in 1916

playing fast and loose with this cue sheet...’
Stephen Horne.

Contemporary reviews

The following reviews from 1916 trade magazines reveal how critics responded to the first screening of *The Battle of Ancre* and the *Advance of the Tanks* at the time of its release. The reviews write about the realism of “seeing the boys go over the top”, making us almost “part and parcel” of the action. They also extol the virtues and the “wonders” of the tanks, seen in action for the first time, describing them as “ponderous” and “monster” like, as they advance over enemy territory.

The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly 28 Dec 1916

Actuality of War- New Official Film which shows *Fighting Under Shell-fire* and the *Tanks in Action* THE SOMME FILM created a deep impression upon the mind of the Great British public, chiefly, perhaps, because it was the first of the Official War Pictures which really showed us the war as it is. It was, in a word, a realistic record of things as they are, and as they happen at the Front. The new film, “*The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks*,” takes us much further, and the large gatherings of representatives of the trade who saw the picture at the Scala Theatre on Friday afternoon was unanimous in its opinion that it is far and away the best and most actual war film yet seen in this country.

Marvellous Pictorial Realism.

Although atmosphere was by no means lacking in the *Somme* picture- indeed, up to that time it was the best film of the war produced – there is something in the new subject which seems to make us almost part and parcel of it. We are to all intents and purposes spectators of the vast struggle now proceeding on the fields of France; mind and body seem transported to the mud-strewn trenches in which our gallant boys await the signal “to go over the top.” We see the preparations for the advance; indeed, we almost seem to hear the word that sends them clambering over the muddy parapet. Thenceforward the film becomes one of the most marvelous pieces of pictorial realism we are ever likely to see upon the screen. Our men, thousands upon thousands of them, advance across “No Man’s Land” under the most withering shell fire. On they go in face of this tornado of hell, the eye of the camera following them all the time.

The Tanks.

And we must not forget to mention one other feature of the film that will be awaited by the general public with consuming eagerness: the first appearance of the Tanks in action. Time and again we see these huge metal monsters, these Wellsian wonders of the battlefield in France, as they amble ponderously across the muddy plains, spitting fire from their armoured sides on the advancing enemy. The actions of the "Hush! Hush!" compel laughter and admiration in equal measure, and these pictures of the most wonderful destructive weapon of the war should by themselves ensure the success of the new film.

The Man Behind the Camera.

In brief, "The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks" must be shown at every picture house in the country. We owe it to our boys that this should be so; it is the least we can do to repay the debt we owe them to blazon abroad from every screen in the land this magnificent record of their heroism and bravery. And in saying this, we must not omit to award credit where credit is due, and to Mr. G. H. Malins, one of the Official War Kinematographers, who, we believe, was responsible for the greater part of the picture, we offer a sincere tribute of admiration. His work is so actual, so realistic, that he all but enables us to stand beside the camera whilst he is "taking" the scenes presented on the screen. His composition, too, is at times irreproachable, and always so contrived that the picture is a picture indeed. Of his bravery and intrepidity we need not speak: his resultant work suffices to establish his reputation in this regard.

Stirring Message from Lord Derby.

It only remains to add that the booking director of the film is Mr. Will Jury, and that those who desire to secure the picture on release (January 15th) should communicate with that gentleman without a moment's delay, for he is certain to be snowed under with bookings during the next few days.

At the close of the screening, a message to the trade from Lord Derby was read from the stage, and it goes without saying that its stirring and encouraging words created a deep impression upon those present. The full text of it will be found set out on the second page of "Stroller's Notes."

The Bioscope 28 Dec 1916

LIEUT. MALINS' TRIUMPH.

"THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE AND ADVANCE OF THE 'TANKS' "

OFFICIAL PICTURES OF THE ARMY IN FRANCE.

The enormous interest shown in the fine series of pictures taken during the Battle of the Somme seems only to have served to whet the public appetite for still more authentic representations of the conditions under which our magnificent Army is waging its desperate struggle in France, and the audience which assembled at Mr. W. F. Jury's invitation at the Scala Theatre on Friday afternoon last was not only thoroughly representative of the Cinematography Trade, but was well attended by many of Parliamentary and Social importance. This was by no means surprising in view of the world-wide success of the earlier series of pictures, and the interest was no doubt greatly increased by the knowledge that the public was to be privileged for the first time with a sight of the famous "Tanks" in action. It is perfectly true, as stated in the pamphlet of the War Office Committee, that no description can give any adequate idea of these wonderful machines which our friend the enemy claims to have invented years ago and to have discarded on the grounds of humanity! Even the Canadian photographs which were published in the daily papers some weeks ago are incomplete by their lack of action, and it is only the moving picture that can forcibly convey the impression of their formidable strength, relentlessness of purpose and the curious touch of comedy which is suggested by their slow and ponderous movements.

The Humour of the "Tanks."

For it is certain that one but a German could fail to see the comic side of these unwieldy monsters. Even the futuristic style of decoration which they adopt as a measure of disguise gives them a curious likeness to some antediluvian reptile, which is accentuated by their shape and gait. The sight of a "Tank" which has returned from a little stroll, during which time it has passed through barbed wire entanglements as a bumble bee might break through a cobweb, lumbering down what was once a village street, followed by the troops of laughing, cheering Tommies, is a sight to raise laughter amongst any against whom its unwelcome attentions are not directed.

Big Guns in Action.

There are many fine pictures of the big guns in action, and the batteries of 8-in. howitzers veiled in their canopies of twigs and foliage make a terrific and most imposing show.

The greatest credit is due to Lieutenant Malins who has secured pictures not only of vital interest but in many cases of extreme beauty, and always of fine technical quality, taken at very considerable

personal risk, as the explosion of a shell some 30ft. from the camera gives ocular proof.

The concluding scenes, where transport and troops move up to the line silhouetted against the setting sun, is an exquisite example of artistic photography, every man and horse standing out from the brilliant background as if cut from black paper.

The editing, arrangement, titling is exceedingly well done, and Mr. Jury may be congratulated on a work which will arouse fresh enthusiasm and patriotic endeavor wherever it is shown.