

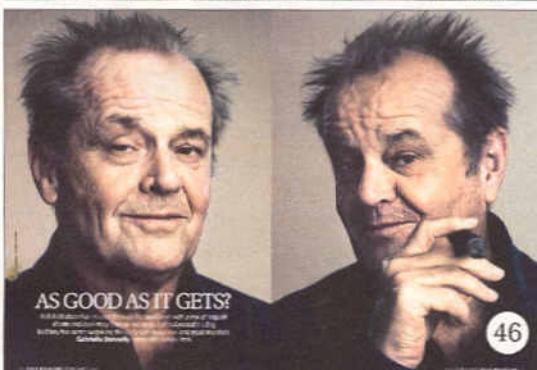
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# The long intermission

Unseen for over 50 years, a collection of classic films has turned up in a suburban garage in north London. **David Allsop** tells the story behind the discovery

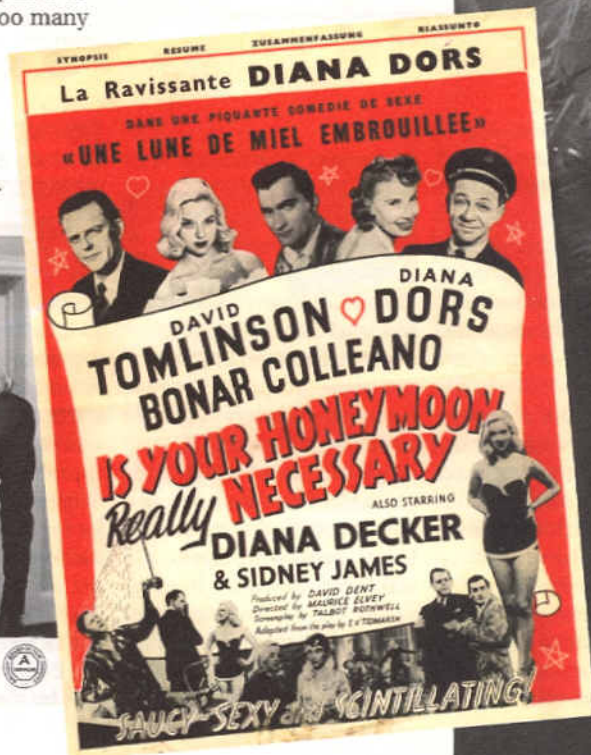
IF PERHAPS NOT QUITE ON A PAR WITH THE DISCOVERY of a £53 million Qianlong dynasty Chinese vase in the attic of a house in Pinner, the archive of 40 "lost" British full-length feature films found by retired NHS manager Kate Lees a few years ago must rate as one of the more fascinating cultural treasure troves of recent years. Even if it were possible to place a monetary value on an artistic property of this sort (imagine the millions required to make just one movie today), there wouldn't be too many film buffs with the money to buy it. The stark reality of this occurred to Kate soon after she realised what she had stumbled on, and so she did the next best thing. She decided to devote herself to bringing the films to as wide an audience as possible, and entrusted the entire ▶

Diana Dors on the arm of Adelphi studio boss Arthur Dent and, below left, with Sid James in *Is Your Honeymoon Really Necessary*; publicity material, partly in French, for the film's European release



DAVID TOMLINSON • DIANA DORS • BONAR COLLEANO  
**IS YOUR HONEYMOON REALLY NECESSARY**

DIANA DORS • SIDNEY JAMES









◀ collection to the British Film Institute (BFI) for safekeeping and restoration. "Apart from any other considerations the films were in a pretty bad condition and I needed expert help," she says. "Although my original thought was to sell them off individually, my clear view now is that the collection should never be split up. The films and the entire document archive that goes with them should stay together."

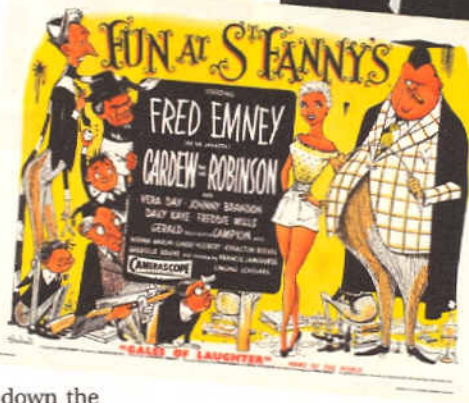
The films, mostly in black and white and dating mainly from the early Fifties, represent a golden era of British film-making when the industry ranked second only to Hollywood in terms of its output and abundance of creative talent. A remarkable number of home-bred stars of the period feature in the casts of the rediscovered films – including Diana Dors, James Mason, Dennis Price, John Gregson, Stanley Baker and Hermione Baddeley. In others the list of performers reads like a *Who's Who* of established British comedy talent: names such as Sid James, Joan Sims, Max Bygraves, David Tomlinson, Thora Hird, Brian Rix, Ted Ray and Dora Bryan stand out. Lower down the pecking order were little-known performers such as Prunella Scales, Dandy Nicholls, Rolf Harris, Ronnie Corbett – and a trio of virtually unheard of comic actors in their mid 20s called Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe. Very few of the films, which range from noir-ish crime thrillers to screwball comedies, and which glory in such titles as *Fun at St Fanny's* and *Is Your Honeymoon Really Necessary?* have been seen since their original release over half a century ago.

Found in the garage of her parents' London home, the forgotten cache once belonged to Kate's grandfather, Arthur Dent, a British studio boss who founded his own film production and distribution company called Adelphi Films in 1939. "He was the driving force behind the business and led a very glamorous and exciting life," recalls Kate, 61. "I was always aware, for example, that he had 'discovered' Diana Dors – who was a huge name in those days. Films were part of my childhood, and my sister and I used to dress up in clothes he brought back with him from the sets."

Her grandfather's death in 1956 coincided with a downturn in the British film industry, due to a combination of difficult trading conditions and the increasing domination of the big cinema chains such as Rank and Odeon – which favoured lavishly budgeted American productions. Many independent British film companies such as Adelphi suffered as a result; the smaller distributors were squeezed out, and Kate's father and uncle who had inherited the business turned their attention to other interests in property and publishing. Kate and her sister Jean Bloom went on to pursue careers in the public sector. Meanwhile 40 original prints of the



Relative newcomer Ronnie Corbett (above right) is instantly recognisable in the classic schoolboy comedy revelling in the name *Fun at St Fanny's*. Stanley Unwin, Gerald Campion and Cardew Robinson also star, among others



Adelphi film catalogue gathered dust in cans in the garage. "I'm sure Dad knew they were there, but it was just part of the stuff you have lying around the house," says Kate. "He and my uncle were getting older – they're now 93 and 88 – and my uncle happened to mention a list of 20 or 30 of the 'forgotten' films for the first time to me and my sister. When I uncovered what was in the garage, I couldn't believe what I was looking at. The Goons, Sid James and all the Carry On stars, Diana Dors, some of the biggest names in British film history... I was totally knocked out by the whole thing. This was material that hadn't been seen for over 50 years – not even by the actors who took part. It took me some time to take it all in."

When she finally did, she realised that her chalice of cinematic gold was contaminated by the ravages of time. "At first I thought I might be sitting on a fortune, but what I didn't know then was that film quality degrades. And a lot of the master material has degraded badly.

"Looking at the costs of just stabilising them, not to mention the very considerable cost of re-mastering, I realised that I had to start looking for funding. I tried a lot of different avenues but soon realised that all roads led back to the BFI, which has since done wonderful work ▶

**Their list of performers reads like a comedy Who's Who: Joan Sims, Sid James and Brian Rix to little-known Rolf Harris and Prunella Scales**



**Part of the archive includes such gems as a letter from Spike Milligan – in red type – reading ‘thanks for the lolly’**

◀ in restoring and re-mastering the original material. But even they admitted that there wasn't enough money to do all that was needed."

The breakthrough came when the BFI screened one of the better preserved films, *Penny Points to Paradise*, a 1951 comedy starring 26-year-old Peter Sellers, about a man who wins the football pools. In the audience was Laura Camuti, an American philanthropist and die-hard fan of Sellers. "She's a wonderful woman, and offered to fund the costs of restoring some of the films," says Kate. "That opened a lot of doors, and we were on our way."

But restoration takes time as well as money, and only two films a year are currently being transferred to DVD. The first two, released 18 months ago were Sellers' rarely seen early films including *Penny Points* and a half-hour comedy called *Let's Go Crazy*, co-written by him and Spike Milligan. Part of Kate's discovery included an extensive archive of original posters and documents, including Sellers' first contract (£125 per day for three weeks' work) and a letter to her father Stanley from Spike Milligan in red type reading in part: "Thanks for the 'Lolly' from *Penny Points*. It was a pleasant surprise [sic], as I never expected any at all (knowing the film profession to be what it is)."

What makes Adelphi unique is that, unlike other British independents, the company was never swallowed up by a larger producer. Neither did it go bust and, although dormant for more than 50 years, the company continued to own the rights to all the films it had made. Kate has now taken over the ownership and has agreed a 30 year contract with the BFI to distribute the films on DVD. A brace of Diana Dors films followed the Sellers' films last summer, and the next to be released is *The Crowded Day*, an extraordinary mixture of light comedy and film noir in a 1954 drama about a day in the life of a London department store, with John Gregson, Dora Bryan, Thora Hird, Sid James, Dandy Nichols, Prunella Scales and Joan Rice among others, and directed by John Guillermin (who later went on to direct *The Towering Inferno* and *Death on the Nile*). "It's a fabulous film with moments of comedy, romance, and real suspense," says Kate. "What I like about it is what it says about women in the 1950s. It wasn't afraid, for



PETER SELLERS "LET'S GO CRAZY" FRANK WELFORD AND GARRICK MENZIES & AGENTS • SPIKE MILLIGAN  
JOAN LYNDON • WELLS & GIBSON



"THE CROWDED DAY"



Top: Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers in *Let's Go Crazy*. Patricia Plunkett and Joan Rice (above) in *The Crowded Day* – its then-daring storyline was deemed unsuitable for children

example, to deal with the trauma of unwanted pregnancy. It was very cutting edge for the time." The film will form part of a double bill with *Song of Paris*, a 1952 romantic comedy starring Dennis Price and Ann Vernon.

There's an interesting footnote to Kate's discovery. "We know there are as many as eight Adelphi films still missing. The full catalogue was stored in specialist labs until 1973, until it proved too expensive to continue, and we reckon that some got pinched by the lab staff before they came 'home' to the garage. It was a common practice and that's why lost films occasionally get rediscovered. If anyone has one of the missing films I'd love to get it back to complete the collection. No questions asked!"

The *Crowded Day* and *Song of Paris* from *The Adelphi Collection* are released on BFI DVD on February 14; [filmstore.bfi.org.uk](http://filmstore.bfi.org.uk) or tel: 020 7815 1350. Kate Lees can be contacted via [adelphifilms.com](http://adelphifilms.com)

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