

The Black Legend Lives on

Illustrious film career began at the Gibbet

JOHN Schlesinger, who went on to become an Oscar-winning director, was to say in later life that it was his silent black-and-white film *Black Legend*, made while he was still at university, that confirmed his passion for making films and which he regarded as his first success

A HORNETS' nest, poisoned ham, chains in a pond – all have featured in legends surrounding Combe Gibbet – and the stark silhouette of the 'hanging tree' on Inkpen Beacon is a familiar sight for those living in the surrounding counties.

It was in the Easter of 1948 that John Schlesinger, whose family lived at the Inkpen house then named Mount Pleasant, took a stroll up to the gibbet with friends down from Oxford and made a decision that was to have a dramatic impact.

Schlesinger and Alan Cooke, who was also to become well-known in the entertainment industry, were trying to think up a film project for that summer. They rejected various legends turning instead to the real case which led to the erection of the gibbet (the first of four) in 1676.

George Broomham and Dorothy Newman, his mistress, convicted at Winchester Assizes of the murder "with a staff" of Broomham's wife and son, were sentenced to be hanged near the site of the crime.

With few details to go on, Schlesinger and Cooke decided to write their own version, based on the Broomham case, using amateur actors and, having managed to "beg, borrow or steal" £200, the project became viable.

Schlesinger found local people enthusiastic and the cast included villagers from the surrounding area, members of the WI drama group, a large group of schoolchildren (which included Robin Tubb, now Hungerford's town crier), and the local thatcher, milkman and schoolteacher, Schlesinger's family plus friends from the OUDS (Oxford University Dramatic Society) including a young Robert Hardy playing the village idiot Mad Thomas, who wore a long blonde wig, no shoes, "was mad and bad, and ran a lot".

The grisly role of hangman was assigned to pig farmer Percy Billington. The late Jean Tubb was given the part of one of three gossips with

Kate Lovelock and Ethel Druce. Her costume included a mobcap which she is recorded as saying, "did nothing to enhance my peculiar style of beauty".

A programme note refers to the patience of the actors who, dressed in XVIIth-century costume were "stamped and shouted at" and compelled to desert their families to spend whole days in windy fields. The pressure was on, for more than 400 separate shots had to be taken in a fortnight and the weather was unkind. At the same time, the harvest had to be brought in and children would cadge lifts on the carts as workers picked up the sheaves.

For ease of filming, a fake gibbet was erected on a brow nearer Inkpen, though many scenes, including the final hanging, were shot on the Beacon itself.

Watching the villagers silhouetted against the sky, trudging up the hill as they followed Roger Schlesinger as Sheriff of Newbury for the execution of the condemned pair on the lonely gibbet still sends a shiver down the spine and underlines the praise Schlesinger was later to receive for his ability to create dramatic effects.

He recalled getting rather too ambitious when it came to shooting the actual hanging.

"I decided to put the camera on a rope and drop it... giving the impression of plunging to one's doom. What it did was to shake the camera up so seriously that it ruined the motor and shooting was held up!"

As a silent film, *Black Legend* was accompanied by music when first shown, presumably on records, and a commentary by Alan Cooke. The fragile film was shown from time to time, but the original commentary disappeared along with details of the music played. One of only two copies is held by Inkpen's parochial church council on behalf of the village.

In 2000, Robert Hardy was delighted to be asked to record a new commentary based on one put together earlier by Geoff Luton, Gerald Atkinson, part of a small committee working on the film, developed music from various sources. Now, the film has been transposed on to a DVD and Hardy's commentary and the music will be added. I can say that it is an extraordinarily atmospheric film, even bearing in mind the limitations of the time when it was created.

Money made from showing the film has always been given back to the village and this will continue to be so whenever it is shown again, hopefully if his trustees agree, with the addition of an introduction about John Schlesinger.

That summer when film-making came to Inkpen has resulted in a film of which the village is extremely proud. The programme note ends with the words: '*Black Legend* is dedicated to the villages of Inkpen and Combe, and to all those for miles around whose unbounded goodwill was sufficient to bring the story of the gibbet to the screen'.

CAROLINE FRANKLIN



Actor Hardy at Watermill screening

JOHN Schlesinger's film *Black Legend* will be shown at The Watermill on Sunday, March 6, (7pm) when Robert Hardy will be in conversation with Jon Snow.

In 1948, as a student at Oxford University, Hardy acted in the short film noir movie directed by fellow student Schlesinger.

The film tells a tale of forbidden love, exposed passion and a multiple murder, inspired by the story behind Combe Gibbet in Inkpen.

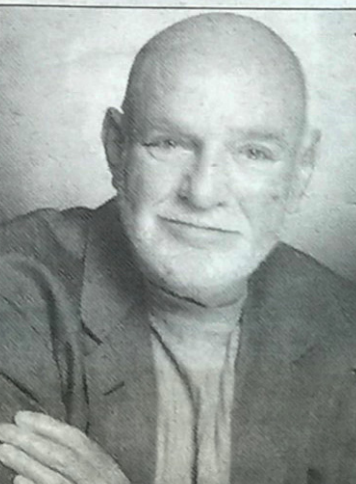
Hardy is one of Britain's leading actors, with a career that has spanned everything from the classics with Laurence Olivier and the Royal Shakespeare Company, to his hugely popular television roles in *The Troubleshooters* and *All Creatures Great and Small*.

More recently he appeared as the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, in the *Harry Potter* films. He also has the distinction of having played both Churchill and Roosevelt.

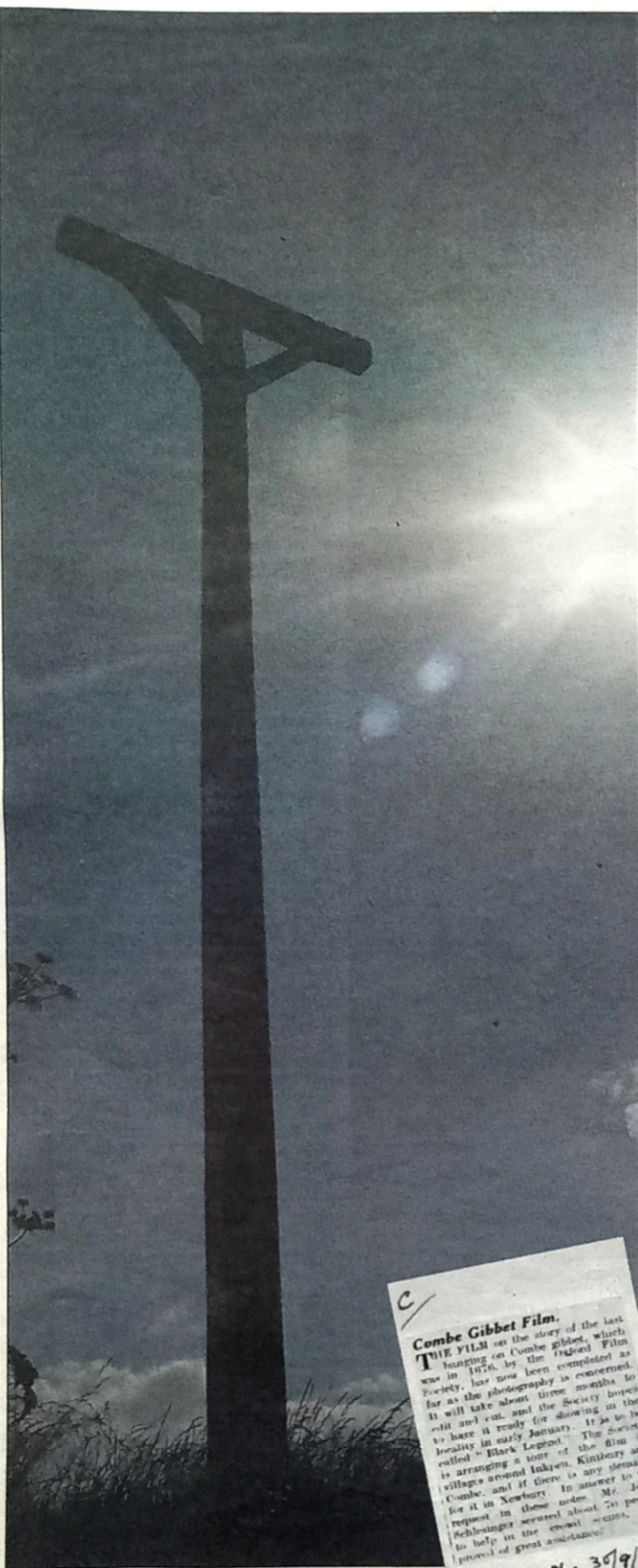
This is a rare opportunity to listen to Hardy and see the early work of the Hollywood legend Schlesinger who went on to direct such classic films as *Billy Liar*, *Darling*, *Far From The Madding Crowd*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Marathon Man*.

Jon Snow is an experienced journalist and presenter and currently presents the award-winning, flagship news programme, *Channel 4 News*. Return tickets only (£20 and £17.50).

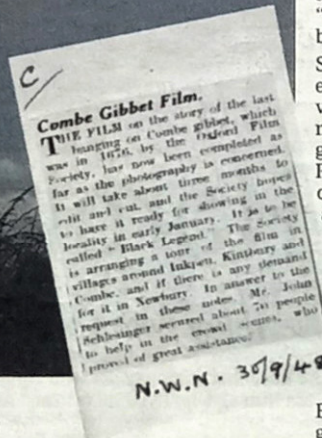
For more information, telephone the Corn Exchange box office on (01635) 46044.



John Schlesinger



The atmospheric gibbet at Combe (above) and a contemporary report in the *Newbury Weekly News*



The three gossips from the film *Black Legend* filmed in Inkpen September 1948 – Jean Tubb as Elizabeth Waite, Kate Lovelock and Ethel Druce