BFI presents a history of ‘Disabled Britain on Film’ from 1911 to the present day

A free BFI Player collection of over 170 films from across the UK charting disabled people’s everyday lives onscreen over the last century

Showcasing the UK’s flourishing contemporary D/deaf and disability-led filmmakers

Featuring key figures in the history of disabled people including Ian Dury, Alf Morris MP, Paul Hunt,

**NEWLY AVAILABLE FOR FREE THROUGH BFI PLAYER**

https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/disabled-britain-on-film

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For Immediate release: 18 January 2019, London, 10:00am

The BFI today launches ‘Disabled Britain on Film’, a rich and varied free online collection of over 170 films, plus 20 specially curated features available to rent on BFI Player. Dating from the earliest film East End Cripples Enjoy a Happy Days Outing in Epping Forest (1911) to the most recent title, The Mask (2017), this valuable resource explores the representation of disabled people on film over the last century from across the UK.

Giving a unique insight into the lives and everyday experiences of people often hidden from screen history, the collection of fiction and non-fiction films reveals the often shocking treatment of disabled people, whilst charting changing attitudes and improved legislation around access and inclusion.

The collection also provides vital context to the issue of ‘cripping up’, currently at the top of the news agenda and creating much debate with recent high profile and controversial casting decisions such as Bryan Cranston’s current portrayal of a wheelchair-user in his new film The Upside and non-disabled actor Charlie Heaton’s lead role in the BBC’s remake of The Elephant Man. Disabled Britain on Film launches in parallel to a renewed call for the film and television industries to be more inclusive on and off screen, creating more opportunities for disabled actors to be considered for a broader range of roles and in turn embracing more meaningful and authentic casting across the board. This is as BFI Diversity Standards, which provides filmmakers with a framework to improve representation in front and behind the camera, are gradually being adopted by the wider industry.

Drawn from films held by the BFI National Archive in association with Regional and National Archive partners from across the UK, the Disabled Britain on Film collection also includes titles from leading UK charities such as Scope, Leonard Cheshire and Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB).
Spanning documentaries, news reports, charity appeals, home movies and works of fiction, the collection features appearances by leading figures in the history of disabled Britain from all walks of life including pioneering rights campaigner Paul Hunt, Minister for the Disabled Alf Morris MP, Blockheads lead singer Ian Dury, actor/writer Mat Fraser and artist/activist Liz Crow, as well as films by leading filmmakers David Lean, Anthony Asquith, Jack Cardiff and support from a host of famous faces including, Sean Connery, Charles Laughton, Sylvia Syms, Flora Robson, John Mills and Frank Sidebottom.

There are some genuinely surprising and rare films, including the late John Hurt playing a disabled teenager being welcomed into a youth club in The Contact (1963). Produced in connection with The Spastic Society, now Scope, and made two decades before he played John Merrick in David Lynch’s Oscar-nominated The Elephant Man (1980), The Contact is a remarkably forward-looking attempt to show the need for inclusion of disabled young people in mainstream society.

Many of the films in the collection are anchored through a well-meaning and sometimes patrician narrator, but some of the most compelling moments are when disabled people speak for themselves. Young Kevin Donnellan discusses his aspirations in A Day in the Life of Kevin Donnellan (1972). Viewers warm to Joyce Carpenter’s infectious positivity in The Smallest Woman in the World (1972). Blind Farmer (1978) features Staffordshire farmer Blake Brown and his story of hard work and determination to continue doing the job he loves.

The empowering story of Martin Sharp, Britain’s First Disabled Racing Driver (1980) makes an interesting parallel with the experience of teen racing driver Billy Monger, recently honoured at BBC Sports Personality of the Year, who has returned to F3 racing less than a year after the accident which left him a double leg amputee.

The history of disabled people in Britain has been one of social exclusion and segregation regularly being patronised, pitied and overlooked, or people speaking on your behalf. In the early 20th Century, many were consigned to an institutional life of incarceration, becoming what one disabled academic dubbed ‘the socially dead’.

A post-war charitable response to disability and the development of state-led care in the community in the 1980s eventually gave rise to the struggle for civil rights. Led by disabled activists and the famous rallying cry “nothing about us, without us”, this new collection provides positive stories where disabled people themselves are involved in the struggle for choice and control to live independent lives as well as a forward-thinking approach to what representation might look like in the future.

Connecting the past to the present and possibilities for the future, Disabled Britain on Film also showcases the latest chapter in the story of D/deaf and disability-led filmmaking, with a flourishing of new screen work produced by an exciting array of filmmakers, visual artists, choreographers, dancers and theatre practitioners who are insisting that their own images and voices be seen and heard. Challenging and upending established frameworks of representation and storytelling, these contemporary films include works by artist-activist Liz Crow, (Resistance (2008), Nectar (2005) 21 Things to Remember (2003)) and filmmakers Ted Evans, (Retreat (2013), The End (2011)) and Charlie Swinbourne, (The Kiss (2014), Hands Solo (2009)).

On the significance of the BFI’s new collection, David Proud, actor, writer, producer and author of The Art of Disability said, “From the fictional non-disabled depictions to archive footage, all have a place in the wonderful tapestry of disability history. We cannot truly understand where we are heading without being able to look at where we came from. Disability does not discriminate it can affect anyone anytime, it is so broad it is really hard to nail down what Disability Culture is. By curating these films together under this banner we can begin to explore what we mean by the term "disabled".”

It is also important to understand that the tone and use of language in many of the archive titles reflect less enlightened times, and the historic context of when they were made which is now understood by modern audiences to be outdated. This context is reflected on BFI Player and these titles are included for their historical significance, and as part of an ongoing discourse about what we can learn from the past to inform the future. A complementary BFI Mediatheque film and television collection is available to view in venue at BFI Southbank.
DISABLED BRITAIN ON FILM HIGHLIGHTS:

CARE OR CURE

For centuries, both disabled people and becoming disabled were viewed as a fearful burden, both to the family and to society at large. This selection show how this world view of disability, in essence, care or cure, permeated our society, including how disabled people viewed themselves. But it's not all black and white. As these films show, there is evidence of some emerging fresh ideas around the rights to independence of disabled people

Cry of the Crippled Children (1921)

Set in 1920s London this silent docudrama about curing disabled children gives an insight into a pre-NHS health system, where hospital charity appeals were vital to develop services.

Heredity in Man (1937)

During the 1930s and early 40s, the rise of the global eugenics movement led to the mass murder of thousands of disabled people in Nazi Germany and compulsory sterilisation in several European nations. Biologist Julian Huxley, brother of Brave New World author Aldous, gives a chilling insight into the discredited science of coercive eugenics.

(For a contemporary response see Resistance (2008), Liz Crow’s haunting wartime drama, revisiting and reframing the horror as faced by disabled people under the Nazi regime.)

Education of the Deaf (1946)

This film focuses on the use of hearing aids, teaching people to lip-read, and lessons in communicating verbally. In the 1940's sign language was passed on unofficially within the deaf community. It wasn't until the 1970's that schools started to recognise British Sign Language (BSL) and it wasn't formally recognised as a language in its own right by the UK government until 2003.

Rehabilitation at Roffey Park (1946)

Gloriously shot in Technicolor by legendary cinematographer Jack Cardiff, this valuable film, intended at the time for specialist viewing looks at the forward-thinking treatment of World War II Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Learning in Slow Motion (1961)

Patients at Epsom’s Manor Hospital learn new skills in this documentary, which reflects, and supports changes in professional thinking about learning disability developed by pioneering psychologists Alan and Anne Clarke towards encouraging vocational training.

BODY POLITIC

It’s only relatively recently that disabled people began to be seen as a part of, not apart from, the communities where they live and work. It wasn’t until the 1980s and the development of care in the community that the areas of civic life that most Britons usually take for granted; housing, employment, leisure, travel, became a battleground for the independent living movement, with assertive and articulate disabled activists in the vanguard.

Chairbound (1964)

Are wheelchairs symbols of liberation or do they constrain disabled people’s lives? This introduction to the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville, which helps newly-disabled people to recover from spinal trauma and live independently, includes scenes from the International Stoke Mandeville Games, which eventually became the Paralympics.

Theatre of the Deaf (1972)
This optimistic, upbeat film shows the performers at the newly-formed and innovative British Theatre of the Deaf being put through their paces. Pat Keysell, co-presenter for the BBC’s pioneering children’s TV programme Vision On, was the driving force behind this unique theatre group which helped establish deaf theatre as a distinctive art form.

**Probe: Alf Morris announces the recalling of the Invacar** (1976) from UEA’s East Anglia Film Archive

For a number of years, the Ministry of Health had been put under pressure from disability campaigners who felt that the Invalid Carriage, the Invacar was not fit for the road. In 1976, the government announced that all Invacars loaned and leased to disabled drivers would be recalled. However, some drivers were not at all happy. One of a number of films in the collection about the Invacar recall, Alf Morris, Minister for the Disabled, explains why the car is to be phased out.

Alf Morris MP was a crucial political ally for disabled people in the 80s and 90s. It could be argued that the creation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was in good measure down to his doggedness to change the agenda from welfare to disability rights.

**On the Level** (1985)

This government-sponsored film aimed to raise awareness about the importance of inclusive design to give disabled people independence, 10 years before the first UK disability discrimination legislation came into force. Many of the disabled campaigners taking part in this film were pioneers who fought long and hard for an accessible environment.

**Three for Society** (1969)

Compelling viewing, three disabled people with cerebral palsy talk frankly and with feistiness about the barriers they experience in the 1960s, and their aspirations for the future. Unlike many other films about disability during this period, the participants are allowed to speak for themselves with little commentary.

**FUNDRAISING AND CHARITY**

Beginning with caring for the returning wounded from the First World War and ending at a special school for disabled children in the early 1990s, these films exemplify how the charitable response to disability was the predominant one for many disabled people.

The great and the good, notably Royals and film stars, are marshalled to capture the audience’s attention and solicit donations to help good causes. Two things are less prominent, though, the voices of those disabled people and the idea that disabled people can live an independent and useful life as citizens outside of institutions.

**Zero Hour** (1928)

Ten years after the end of WWI, this charity appeal film shows how a veteran blinded by poison gas sets up his own egg-selling business after being trained at St Dunstan’s Home for the Blind. St Dunstan’s, now Vision UK, was an unusual charity for its time, choosing to trained veterans to run independent small businesses, what the blind founder Arthur Pearson called their "second sight". An early attempt at the integration and inclusion of disabled people. See also **Work at St. Dunstan’s** (1916) and **Victory over Darkness** (1942).

**Lest We Forget** (1937)

Charles Laughton and Flora Robson star in this appeal film for Enham Village Centre where WWI servicemen with disabilities are cared for. Directed by Anthony Asquith, sadly the dialogue and Laughton’s direct charity appeal have been lost with time, but we can see how injured and war-disabled soldiers were being rehabilitated.

**Another World by Sean Connery** (1962)

In the same year as James Bond made him famous, Sean Connery made this charity appeal to help blind people live an independent life with the right workplace support made for RNIB.

**Lady Allen** (1971)
Lady Allen of Hurtwood was a passionate campaigner for every child’s right to play, to experience the physical freedom play brings. This lively 1970s TV profile matches her enthusiasm with the palpable joy and excitement of the children as they explore an adventure playground with minimal adult supervision.

**Chance Encounter (1978)**

Campaigning film by director David Lean, who directs and appears in this film alongside campaigner Leonard Cheshire, in which he tells how he became interested in the work of Cheshire to support disabled people in India.

**Frank Visits a School for Disabled Children (1990) from North West Film Archive at Manchester Metropolitan University**

In this quirky short film, Frank Sidebottom, surreal comic character, performer, and Timperley's most famous resident, takes his sidekick Little Frank to a school for children with disabilities in Cheadle.

**UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL**

Covering three decades, this collection of personal journeys gives an insight into how disabled people were often viewed through two powerful lenses of personal tragedy or triumph over adversity. But disabled people usually don’t conform to these stereotypes and their voices are heard loud and clear when given the opportunity to speak for themselves.

**Y Gwr O Gwr Aran (1978)**

A fascinating Welsh language portrait of a disabled husband, father, and teacher living in Wales. Frank Letch lives a remarkably independent life with his acquired disability. He is shown riding a modified bike, driving an automatic car, and sailing, all with apparent ease.

**A Day in the Life of Kevin Donnellon (1972)**

An episode of World in Action documenting the life of the remarkable 11 year old Kevin and how he and his family live with the effects of the drug Thalidomide, the challenges his disability can present in everyday life and his aspirations for the future. Kevin now works as a freelance lecturer and disability consultant. He was involved in the making of the BBC programme Thalidomide: The Fifty Year Fight (2004).

**Ian Dury (1983)**

Ian Dury, lead singer of the Blockheads, talks about how becoming disabled has affected his life and music. This documentary, featuring a mix of performances, interviews and fly-on-the-wall footage, explores the strong links between his life and song writing with Dury’s notorious wit, grit and gusto.

**The Smallest Woman in the World (1972) from the Media Archive for Central England at the University of Lincoln**

Joyce Carpenter from Bromsgrove was thought to be the smallest woman in the world when she appeared in this news report for ATV Today. At twenty-nine inches tall she is, in her own words, "making the best of it", in an environment which presents her with a series of daily challenges from posting a letter to learning to drive and even cleaning her home. Through it all what comes across is Joyce Carpenter’s infectious positivity.

**One Per Cent of Us (1966-1986) From the South West Film and Television Archive/The Box, Plymouth**

Filmed over twenty years three documentaries examine the lives of children born with disabilities. **So Many Children (1966)** looks at the parents and teachers of disabled children. **Children No More (1976)** follows the same children into adolescence highlighting changed perceptions around them. **One in a Hundred (1986)** catches up with the same children in adulthood and explores dependency. Set in the context of changes in governmental policy and the evolving attitudes of society these films represent a commentary for the way disabled people in Britain have been treated.

**NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US**

The most recent chapter in D/deaf and disabled-led filmmaking is rich and varied. Increasing ease of access to digital technology, structured funding initiatives, online distribution platforms and dedicated film festivals
have all enabled a production boom across art forms that places representational power back in the hands of the disabled community. This film selection upends expectations, offering up timely correctives to historical narratives, new perspectives on our present and potential imaginings of the future.

**Resistance (2008)**

Aktion-T4 was the Nazi regime’s first official programme of mass murder. Targeting disabled people it became the blueprint for the Final Solution. Liz Crow reimagines that horror faced by disabled people in Germany. The film was created as part of a broader art project culminating in Crow taking to Trafalgar Square’s fourth plinth in her wheelchair, dressed as Nazi, 70 years since the Aktion-T4 programme was instituted.

**The End (2011)**

Ted Evans fiercely intelligent and utterly moving film asks us to imagine what the erosion and disappearance of Deaf culture might mean for society. His highly creative drama applies documentary aesthetics to chart the imagined decline of a culture over four decades.

**Hands Solo (2009)**

A Deaf man becomes a world-famous porn star thanks to some advanced skill with his hands. Turning conventional depictions of disability on its head William Mager’s award-winning mockumentary written by Charlie Swinbourne features a breakout performance from Deaf actor Matt Kirby.

**Nonsense (2014)**

Set in a post-sensory world, Max Clendaniel’s mad-cap sci-fi fantasy, featuring winning performances from Deaf actors Alex Nowak and Stephen Collins, involves experimental kit that allows people to experience sight, sound, smell, touch and taste, however the further they go, the greedier people become.

**Trapped Rhythms (2016)**

Access All Area’s Theatre company draws on archive material and hijacks the swaggery conventions of the music video form to protest against the historic treatment (and representation) of people with learning disabilities and autism. Tearing down institutional walls with humour and urgency we are reminded that everyone has their own rhythm.

**The Mask (2017)**

Sharif Persaud takes us on a journey through a personal exploration of identity and autism, with a splash of Al Murray.

**DISABILITY ON FILM**

From a rare portrait of the first spokesperson of the UK disability rights movement, a cinematic reimagining of a stroke and the long road to recovery, as well as a history of the British Deaf community’s fight for civil rights, this rental selection of mainly fictional films covers a range of representations of being disabled.

**Disabled (1967)**

A young Paul Hunt, the godfather of the UK disability movement, then living in a care home, clearly outlines his embryonic vision for an inclusive society where disabled people have independence, choice and control.

**The Possibilities Are Endless (2014)**

A moving and haunting account of singer Edwyn Collins’s long and difficult recovery from a stroke. With its use of abstract images and cut-up flashbacks, directors Edward Lovelace and James Hall convey Collins' predicament in innovative style.

**Power in Our Hands (2015)**

Ground-breaking documentary that uses archive film to tell the story of the British Deaf community’s fight for civil rights, and the right to be heard. This largely unseen cache of archive films from the British Deaf Association highlights the unique role played by the medium of film in recording the use and development of British Sign Language, as well as the British Deaf Community’s history and heritage.
ABOUT BRITAIN ON FILM AND UNLOCKING FILM HERITAGE

Britain on Film is one of the largest and most complex archival projects ever undertaken and is part of the BFI’s Unlocking Film Heritage programme (2013-18) and one of the most successful. Unlocking film heritage for everyone in the UK was a key strategic priority for the BFI. Bringing together a partnership with Regional and National Film Archives and rights holder collections across the UK, this work has included a sophisticated programme of data capture, cataloguing, copying to archival standards, meticulous preservation of original materials, thorough searching of archives across the country, new state-of-the-art equipment and digital storage facilities and the transfer of films to the BFI’s online video platform, BFI Player.

Unlocking Film Heritage and Britain on Film have been made possible thanks to £15 million funding from the National Lottery and the additional support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

BRITAIN ON FILM ONLINE ELSEWHERE

- Selections from Britain On Film are hosted on the BFI’s YouTube channel, Facebook and Twitter, so audiences can find and experience it in the easiest way possible
- BFI and regional and national film archive curators have written features highlighting important films and themes on the BFI website. Their expertise adds context and provide new ways in for the British public to find films that illuminate the places they know and love
- Join the conversation at #BritainOnFilm

Britain on Film is a project from the BFI National Archive and the UK’s Regional and National Film Archives

ABOUT THE REGIONAL AND NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVES

The English Regional Film Archives and other National Film Archives (listed below) hold significant collections of film and video material specifically relevant to their regions or hold dedicated collections such as Imperial War Museums, preserved in specialised storage facilities and made widely available for education, research, communities and the wider public.

UEA’s East Anglian Film Archive
Imperial War Museums
London’s Screen Archives
Media Archive for Central England at the University of Lincoln
North East Film Archive
North West Film Archive at Manchester Metropolitan University
Northern Ireland Screen Digital Film Archive
National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive
Screen Archive South East
South West Film & Television Archive at The Box, Plymouth
National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales
Wessex Film and Sound Archive
Yorkshire Film Archive

ABOUT THE BFI

The BFI is the lead body for film in the UK with the ambition to create a flourishing film environment in which innovation, opportunity and creativity can thrive by:

- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK - investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

The BFI is a Government arm’s-length body and distributor of Lottery funds for film. The BFI serves a public role which covers the cultural, creative and economic aspects of film in the UK. It delivers this role:

- As the UK-wide organisation for film, a charity core funded by Government
- By providing Lottery and Government funds for film across the UK
- By working with partners to advance the position of film in the UK.
Founded in 1933, the BFI is a registered charity governed by Royal Charter.

The BFI Board of Governors is chaired by Josh Berger CBE.

ABOUT THE BFI NATIONAL ARCHIVE

The BFI National Archive was founded in 1935 and has grown to become one of the largest and most important collections of film and television in the world with over 180,000 films and 750,000 television programmes. For over 80 years the BFI has been an international leader in film preservation and guardian of Britain’s unparalleled film and TV heritage. The BFI is an innovator in presenting films to audiences in new and dynamic ways, from cinemas to film festivals, outdoor events to online video-on-demand. At the heart of all its activities is the BFI’s central aim to ensure that everyone in the UK has access to the widest possible range of film and their own film heritage.

That heritage includes all time great British directors Alfred Hitchcock, David Lean and Powell and Pressburger; and the rich vein of documentary filmmaking, in which Britain led the world, including the lyrical work of Humphrey Jennings. The archive also boasts a significant collection of filmmakers’ papers as well as extensive stills, posters and production and costume designs along with original scripts, press books and related ephemera.

Expert teams undertake the time-consuming and complex task of restoring films at the BFI John Paul Getty Jr Conservation Centre in Hertfordshire. The BFI’s most precious film materials are kept in optimum conditions in the world-leading Master Film Store in Warwickshire.

ABOUT BFI PLAYER

BFI Player is a ground-breaking video on demand service which offers a uniquely diverse range of films, from the latest releases to the rarest silent cinema classics, giving UK audiences a rich and rewarding digital film experience. The Britain on Film collections are accessible through the BFI Player. [http://player.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film](http://player.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film)

ABOUT THE BFI DIVERSITY STANDARDS

The BFI seeks to reflect the public – in the films we fund, the programmes we support, the audiences who watch them, and the filmmakers, actors and crews who make them.

The BFI Diversity Standards, guide both our own activities and the projects that we fund. The Standards focus on disability, gender, race, age and sexual orientation (as they pertain to the Equality Act 2010) and also seek to ensure that people from lower socio-economic groups are better represented.

The Standards are also a resource for the industry and we encourage them to be adopted widely. They have already been embraced by BAFTA, Film4 and BBC Films. [www.bfi.org.uk/diversity-standards](http://www.bfi.org.uk/diversity-standards)