



*Solar Eclipse (1900) credit: Royal Astronomical Society*

## **BFI National Archive and Royal Astronomical Society re-animate first film to capture a solar eclipse as part of Victorian Film bi-centenary project**

- *First ever solar eclipse to be captured on film from 1900*
- *Only known surviving film by Nevil Maskelyne, British film pioneer, magician and fellow of The Royal Astronomical Society*
- *Digitally restored in 4K*

**\*\* Now available to view for free in the UK on BFI Player as part of the Victorian Film collection \*\***

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-solar-eclipse-1900-online>  
<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/victorian-film>

And for global access via <https://youtu.be/q4jfPfMKBqU>

**For Immediate Release: 30 May 2019, London**

The **BFI** and **The Royal Astronomical Society** have announced the rediscovery of the earliest moving picture of a total solar eclipse from 1900. The original film fragment held in The Royal Astronomical Society's archive has been painstakingly scanned and restored in 4K by conservation experts at the **BFI National Archive**, who have reassembled and retimed the film frame by frame. Available now to watch online for free, ***Solar Eclipse (1900)*** is part of **BFI Player's** recently released Victorian Film collection, viewers are now able to experience this first film of a solar eclipse since the event was originally captured over a century ago.

The film was taken by British magician turned pioneering filmmaker **Nevil Maskelyne** on an expedition by The British Astronomical Association to North Carolina on 28 May, 1900. This was Maskelyne's second attempt to capture a solar eclipse. In 1898 he travelled to India to photograph an eclipse where he succeeded but the film can was stolen on his return journey home. It was not an easy feat to film. Maskelyne had to make a special telescopic adapter for his camera to capture the event. This is the only film by Maskelyne that we know to have survived.

Advancement in technology and magic intermingled seamlessly in the Victorian world, where a passion for science with innovations including Marconi's wireless telegraphy co-existed alongside a deeply held belief in

the paranormal and the spiritual photography of the Society for Psychical Research. It was no coincidence that many early filmmakers and showmen including GA Smith and Walter Booth worked in magic theatres or were performing illusionists before they turned their hand to film. **Nevil Maskelyne** and **David Devant** who ran the famous **Egyptian Hall**, the oldest magic theatre in London's Piccadilly, were early adopters of the new medium, introducing 'trick' films into the overall magic show.

On the news of this recent rediscovery **Bryony Dixon, BFI silent film curator** says: *"Film, like magic combines both art and science. This is a story about magic; magic and art and science and film and the blurred lines between them. Early film historians have been looking for this film for many years. Like one of his elaborate illusions, it's exciting to think that this only known surviving film by Maskelyne, has reappeared now. Harnessing 21<sup>st</sup> century technical magic, this 19<sup>th</sup> century attraction has been reanimated. Maskelyne wanted a novelty to show at his magic theatre, what better than the most impressive natural phenomenon of them all"*

**Professor Mike Cruise, President of the Royal Astronomical Society** said: *"It's wonderful to see events from our scientific past brought back to life. Astronomers are always keen to embrace new technology, and our forerunners a century ago were no exception. These scenes of a total solar eclipse - one of the most spectacular sights in astronomy - are a captivating glimpse of Victorian science in action."*

An enthusiast for film, Nevil Maskelyne styled himself as a scientific investigator of illusions, spiritualism and various phenomena, he was fascinated by astronomy and became a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. He wanted to show that the developing cinematograph could be used for the advancement of science. The film forms part of the astrophotography collection of the Royal Astronomical Society, which recognised the increasing importance of astrophotography, appointing a permanent photographic committee in 1887 and acting as a centre for receiving and distributing astronomical photographs for research and teaching from the 1880s to the 1970s.

**Dr Joshua Nall, Chair, RAS Astronomical Heritage Committee** adds: *"This is a wonderful archival discovery: perhaps the oldest surviving astronomical film, it is a really striking record of both early cinema and late Victorian eclipse observing. The BFI are ideal partners, they've done a fantastic job digitally restoring the film and it's great that it will be available for anyone to view free of charge as part of their trove of Victorian cinema."*

Maskelyne's film returns to his spiritual home in Piccadilly where it will screen at the Royal Astronomical Society's HQ on 31 May as part of an event celebrating the centenary of the 1919 eclipse as well as being available to view for free on BFI Player.

**Celebrating 200 years since the birth of Queen Victoria (born 24 May 1819) the BFI has digitised over 500 Victorian Films, available now to explore for free on BFI Player:**

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/victorian-film>

**Tickets and info on the Royal Astronomical Society Centenary of the 1919 Solar Eclipse event are available here:** <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/centenary-of-the-1919-solar-eclipse-tickets-60573842995?aff=eac2>

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**ABOUT THE BFI**

The BFI is the UK's lead organisation for film, television and the moving image. It is a cultural charity that:

- Curates and presents the greatest international public programme of World Cinema for audiences; in cinemas, at festivals and online

- Cares for the BFI National Archive – the most significant film and television archive in the world
- Actively seeks out and supports the next generation of filmmakers
- Works with Government and industry to make the UK the most creatively exciting and prosperous place to make film internationally

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 the 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 THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY**

The Royal Astronomical Society (RAS, [www.ras.ac.uk](http://www.ras.ac.uk)), founded in 1820, encourages and promotes the study of astronomy, solar-system science, geophysics and closely related branches of science. The RAS organises scientific meetings, publishes international research and review journals, recognises outstanding achievements by the award of medals and prizes, maintains an extensive library, supports education through grants and outreach activities and represents UK astronomy nationally and internationally. Its more than 4,000 members (Fellows), a third based overseas, include scientific researchers in universities, observatories and laboratories as well as historians of astronomy and others.

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YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/RoyalAstroSoc/feed>"

#### **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 Victorian Film collection is accessible through the BFI Player.