

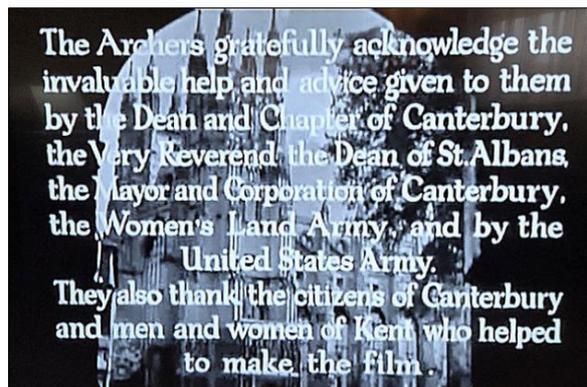


Your Canterbury Tales ...

We welcome your comments or queries on any aspects of 'A Canterbury Tale';
memories; testimonials; film reviews,
and reports and photographs of your visits to locations.
Email your contributions to paul.tritton@btinternet.com



*Powell and Pressburger devotees on Chilmans Downs during
a walk to 'A Canterbury Tale' locations in and around Chilham*



Some questions and comments from Peter of Ruislip

(Chapter and page numbers refer to entries in Paul Tritton's book A Canterbury Tale: Memories of a Classic Wartime Movie).

Q *Where was the location for the soccer match played behind some of the closing credits (*Page 130)*

A In what is now the car park opposite the George & Dragon in Fordwich, and was previously the village football pitch. The idea of including this sequence may have occurred to Powell while lodging at the inn for most of the time he was in and around Canterbury directing 'A Canterbury Tale'.

Looking out from his bedroom window, maybe he saw boys playing football there, and also while waiting for Bert Woodcock, his chauffeur, to collect him (see pages 68 and 70). PT

Why no credit where due?

Q *Can you explain glaring omissions in the credits. "Invaluable help" was also given by other organisations, notably the East Kent Road Car Company, Canterbury City Police and The Buffs Regiment. They must have been very disappointed at not being mentioned.*



Onlookers at the Beany Institute (pages 71, 73, 74) await the arrival of the military parade. Above: The parade at the corner of Mercery Lane, where a battery fault caused the camera to run too slowly, necessitating a retake (page 127).

A The 'East Kent' provided a bus, conductress's uniform and ticket machine for the scene in Chilham Square where Alison meets Polly Finn. The company also co-operated by diverting or suspending services to and from its bus station in St Peter's Place, near the Westgate, while the main street was closed for The Buffs Regiment's parade from the Westgate to Mercery Lane (Chapter 18).

The City Police Station was the location for the scene where Peter Gibbs is given directions to the Cathedral (page 109), and its officers were responsible for keeping St Peter's Street and the High Street closed for the military parade (Chapter 18), and also for crowd control.

The parade was staged from 2pm on Thursday, 14 October 1943 (see announcement in window on page 103), convenient for shopkeepers and their customers, as this was early closing day. Without The Buffs the finale would have entirely lacked drama; the regiment's forbearance was especially essential when a camera fault required a retake (page 127).

Q *Did any other Canterbury dignitaries play themselves in the film as well as Police Superintendent George Hall and Alderman Charles Lefevre?*

A Although not mentioned in the contemporary reports of the filming quoted in Chapter 18, the bewigged official on Lefevre's left (centre picture, page 137) is likely the Town Clerk, John Boyle, whose predecessor Tom Marks was killed in an air raid during the 1942 Canterbury blitz.

Boyle, who was to serve as Canterbury's chief executive for 30 years and after the war became a Freeman of the City, was rather self-important and unlikely to have missed the opportunity to visit Denham Studios, nor would he have been willing to allow an 'extra' to portray him.

Boyle died aged 86 on 16 October 1986, too soon to have enjoyed the revival of 'A Canterbury Tale' His legacy to the city he served for so long is his book 'Portrait of Canterbury.'



Alderman Charles Lefevre, Mayor of Canterbury from 1940 until 1944, was a Churchillian personality in both appearance and manner, who led the city through some of its most difficult times in WW2 - including the evacuation of its schoolchildren; the 1942 Blitz and subsequent air raids; and the temporary restoration of the devastated shopping centre to enable trading to resume within weeks of being severely damaged.

Lefevre's father, William, established Canterbury's first department store in 1875, the eponymous 'Lefevres', which eventually occupied almost an entire block of the city centre. Charles ran the business after

William died in 1911; in 1927 it became part of the Debenhams group but retained its original name for many years, as seen in the photo (*above*) when the military parade proceeds along Mercery Lane towards Christ Church Gate.

Q *How much did 'A Canterbury Tale' cost to make?*

A In his *A Canterbury Tale Journal*, John Sweet wrote, 'Cash outlay, approx. \$650,000' (page 139). In 2000 he gave me a figure of £100,000 but whether this was the film's budget or final cost is not clear. According to the Bank of England Inflation Calculator, £100,000 in today's money would be £3,976,751.46.

According to John the wages costs were \$10 a minute (page 20) and Edward Rigby (who played Jim Horton), George Merritt (Ned Horton) and 15 or 20 other actors were paid \$80 - \$100 a day (page 50).

Throughout most of WW2 the exchange rate was £1 = \$4.04, \$1 = £0.2478.

John was paid \$2,000 (£495, or £19,700 in today's money) for appearing in *A Canterbury Tale*. Sheila Sim likely received the same remuneration as John, Eric Portman many times that amount. John's Army pay was \$600 a year, so his few weeks before the cameras on location and at Denham Studios were well rewarded.

He donated the entire \$2,000 to the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#), a worthy cause but one that was not a generally popular cause in the USA;

Unless The Archers's accounts have survived (but where?), or those of Powell & Pressburger's backers, J Arthur Rank, and can be accessed, the cost cannot be confirmed.

The film's overheads were enormous. Film stock was scarce and expensive, with priority given for military uses (especially RAF reconnaissance flights over Occupied Europe), yet countless reels were expended on successive takes, especially on location.

Petrol was expensive and available only for essential business and military purposes, yet The Archers obtained all it needed to transport its hundreds of personnel to locations for weeks at a time.

So in some respects, apparently, money was no object.

Operation Fortitude

Allan from Adelaide comments: 'David Todd recalled (page 155) going to Denham Studios and on the way seeing in the fields what he thought were toy Army lorries and later wondered if they were real or cardboard ones.'



'They were in fact dummies, deployed during Operation Fortitude South, a massive deception campaign devised in 1943 to fool the German High Command into believing that the main landings during the expected Allied invasion of occupied Europe would be launched in the Pas-de-Calais, across the Strait of Dover, and not along the Normandy coast.'

'Bogus lorries, tanks, aircraft and landing craft were created by scenery and set designers and craftsmen from Denham and other film studios around London, using

plywood, canvas and other materials like those with which the interior of Canterbury Cathedral was replicated (Chapter 18). Realistic lorries and tanks (*pictured above*) were fabricated from inflatable rubber.

'A phantom army was invented for the ploy, commanded by General George Patton. To add realism to the ruse, radio stations across the county constantly exchanged messages about the forthcoming 'attack' on Calais and neighbouring ports'.

'Putting you through'

Bob Johnson's struggle to operate a push-button public telephone (page 95) reminded **Joan of Worthing** how she and her brother made free calls and obtained loose change from the ones on her way to school.

'By very quickly tapping the cradle on which the handset rested you could get through to a local number. Our home number was 2747, so we tapped twice for '2,' paused, then seven times for '7,' and so on. Not that we knew many people who were on the phone, so most of our calls were pranks!

'We never passed a phone box without nipping in and pressing Button B in case previous users had forgotten to retrieve their change. If unlucky we would stuff a hankie up the coin chute, to block it, and on the way home pull the hankie out in the hope of releasing a jackpot'.



Life down the line

Wendy from Heme Bay wrote: 'My gran' was a signalwoman, like Gwladys Swinton (page 86). She had been a shop assistant until she found she could earn a few more shillings a week on the railway.

'She was trained at Canterbury West and cycled to whichever box she had to operate that day, as most of them were alongside level crossings serving country roads. Occasionally she was given a lift on the footplate of a steam locomotive¹.



'The hours were unsocial. Gran was struggling to bring up two young children and objected to being much paid much less than the signalman she replaced. So she went hop-picking (page 61) for more money and earned enough to buy winter outfits for the family

'After that she worked as a cleaner and waitress; at Bligh Bros' war factory in North Lane, and finally in the haberdashery department at Debenham's in Canterbury.

[!For example, Harbledown Junction, above and on page 89. Note the walkway from the track to the steps; also the barrage balloon hovering above the embankment. These had been deployed since the 1 June 1942 blitz and are glimpsed in several scenes].

The Road of Steel and subsequent scenes enacted at Harbledown Junction (page 86), Selling Station (Chapter 15, page 105) and Canterbury West Station (page 106) evoked a miscellany of steam railway memories for **Graham of Toronto**.

'I was a schoolboy in Chartham about ten years after the film was released and my friends and I spent a lot of time trainspotting at Chartham Station, which had a signalbox and a level crossing.

'One of the signalmen would sometimes let us pull his levers and ring his bell. We also helped him open and close the crossing gates - they were enormously heavy. None of this would be allowed today!



'We also wasted some of our pocket money by placing pennies or halfpennies on the rails at the crossing, so that they would be flattened by the next train. A complete waste of money. A penny was half the price of a bus ticket to Canterbury and no conductor or shopkeeper would accept damaged coins, so we soon gave up that silly game.

'Sometimes we bought a platform ticket for one penny and caught a train to the next station along the line, somehow evading the guard on the train and the ticket collector when we go off, and walking home'.

Pictured above: Chartham Signal Box and, right, an array of levers in a typical 1950s signal box (©Steve Banks)

What's in a name?



'Chillingbourne' Stationmaster Thomas Duckett. Above: bus conductress Polly Finn adjusts her destination blind at Chilham.

Terry of Southampton was fascinated to learn that the railway station in his home village of Selling masqueraded as Chillingbourne (Chapter 15) and commented that in real life, station nameplates, seen on location on the platform as the 8.57 train to Canterbury departs, and through the carriage window in the subsequent studio shots, were removed in 1940 and in Selling's case not reinstated until after the war.

Terry wrote: 'This was because an enemy invasion of southern England any time from June 1940 was expected to be preceded by an advance force of paratroops landing inland. Place names at stations and on road signs would have immediately revealed to the invaders where they were, so the idea was to leave them disoriented!'

'Which sequences of the Selling station episode were filmed on location?'

PT comments: Regarding place names, bus destination blinds were another tell-tale sign that could have aided the enemy and were replaced with ones displaying the names of local landmarks, such as pubs or churches and other local landmarks, instead of village names. In reality the bus seen at Chilham would have displayed 'The Square'.

At Selling station, Michael Powell evidently for the sake of verisimilitude ignored the directive about station names still being kept anonymous in 1943, little realising that more than 80 years later someone would notice!

The episode in question (page 105) combines location and studio scenes. Although we don't actually see Alison, Bob and Peter board the Canterbury train, we presume they did because they pop their heads out of a carriage window that would hardly have been worth replicating at Denham Studios for less than a minute on screen. Furthermore, Thomas Colpeper is seen hurrying over the station bridge in the real world (page 108). It is unlikely that Powell would have sent a camera crew to Selling just for that one brief sequence.

But for how long did the train driver delay his departure to give the cameramen time to do all this? If Sheila Sim, John Sweet and Dennis Price had to stay on the train they would have had to alight six minutes later at its next stop, Faversham.

By the time there was no longer a threat of an invasion the original bus destination blinds were reinstated, so maybe the one on the single-decker depicted on the foot of page 88, partially displaying 'Ramsgate' and '25' breaks no rules, although East Kent bus No 25 was a double decker that ran through Canterbury city centre, between London Road and Spring Lane estates.

'Any more fares, please?'

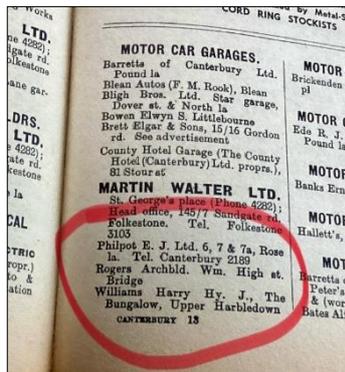
Bus memorabilia collector and 'East Kent' bus company historian **Peter of Worthing** was fascinated to see conductress Polly Finn's Setright ticket machine (pages 86 and 88) and glimpses of EK buses in St Dunstan's Street (Chapter 15), Chilham Square (see above and page 88) and St Peter's Street (page 132).



'I have several Setrights. Their blank tickets were held in a mousetrap-like contraption and inserted into the machine, or dispensed from a paper reel which had EAST KENT ROAD CAR COMPANY printed along its edges. At the end of the bus routes we schoolboys always watched the conductor or conductress change the reel and ask if we could have the partly used one.

'These machines were commonly used right up to the time when buses operated by one-man (or should I say 'one person') buses were introduced, with new ways of issuing tickets.

'I lived in Wingham in the 1950s and travelled to Canterbury by bus to attend Simon Langton Grammar School. When I first saw "A Canterbury Tale" about 20 years ago it left me totally baffled but it grows on you! I was delighted to see our local pub, the Red Lion, acting as the Hand of Glory (Chapter 5).



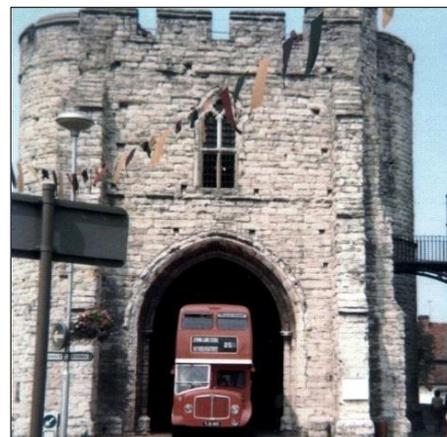
'The final scenes in the film are especially poignant personally as they remind me of my daily walk to school some 70 years ago from the bus station in St Peter's Place. My route was almost the same as the one Alison followed from the Westgate to Philpot's Garage in Rose Lane (Chapter 17), opposite the rear entrance to the Simon Langton. The bomb sites seen in the film were still there while I was at school'.

Above left: Kathleen Lucas of the Women's Voluntary Service directs Alison to Rose Lane. Above right: Thomas Colpeper arrives unexpectedly at Philpot's Garage as Alison prepares to inspect her caravan.

Bob of Oldham, another bus aficionado,, spotted an anomaly: '25s ran through Canterbury city centre, between London Road and Spring Lane estates.

'They were Guy Utility double-deckers with uncomfortable slatted seats, four in a row on the top deck, very awkward to reach from its side aisle. Smokers had to sit upstairs, creating a suffocating fug. There were signs reading SPITTING PROHIBITED and PLEASE TENDER EXACT FARE AND STATE DESTINATION.

'Eastbound buses entered the city through the Westgate (right). It was a tight fit for their drivers who frequently lost their wing mirrors. It was also awkward for the ranks of troops in the military parade scene.



John of Chelmsford writes: 'My acting debut took place way back in 2007, on one of Paul and Steve Crook's location walks which was filmed by the BBC, outside Christ Church Gate. Believe it or not, a few seconds of my performance did get broadcast but it was only on BBC South East so nobody saw it. I hear that Martin Scorsese wrote to offer me a part in his next movie, but it got lost in the post.

'My memory is a little foggy after all this time and I can't remember which part I played, but I had to do an American accent, so it may have been none other than Sgt Bob Johnson (aka John Sweet) himself.

'I and several others of the party played quite a few parts throughout the walk, where we stopped at places used as locations in the film. It was an honour to meet people who had actually appeared in the film as children.

'It was a fun day out with great camaraderie amongst the group. In fact we liked it so much that many of us became regulars but only this one was filmed.

'Sadly, neither Paul nor Steve is able to continue the walks these days and several of the participants have passed on.'



[The annual walks are now led by Laura Wirtz. The next one, on August Bank Holiday Sunday



2026, will be the 28th in the series .Keep in touch with acanterburytale.org for details]

Above: John (right) on camera as Sgt Bob Johnson in one of the playlets that are a feature of the 'A Canterbury Tale' location walks. Above right, 64 years earlier: Sgt Roczinsky (right): 'What are you doing in Can'erbury?' Sgt Bob Johnson: 'Learning, sergeant, learning'.

From John's 'A Canterbury Tale' photo gallery:



Devotees at Wickhambreaux and (above) a playlet on Julliberrie's Grave at Chilham: 'Bob: 'Is there some place round here we can have a pow'wow?' (Chapter 11)

Chloe from Chepstow asks: How were you able to contact John Sweet, more than 60 years after he returned to the USA and left the US Army?

'After making his film debut in *A Canterbury Tale*, John decided not to pursue an acting career but to resume his pre-war vocation as a schoolteacher in Columbus, Ohio. I wrote to the US Army records department at the Pentagon for his current address, but they would not divulge this, and to Columbus's newspapers, asking if any readers knew of his whereabouts. The only reply I received was from someone who told John about my quest, having kept in touch with him after he had moved to Fearington, North Carolina, 500 miles from Columbus, many years previously.

'A few months later I received a letter from John and began a lengthy correspondence with him which culminated when he agreed to send me his collection of stills from the film; publicity photographs; a copy of his *A Canterbury Tale Journal*¹, and his 1980 memories of making the film (see ARTICLES pages).



'Thus began the series of events leading to the memorable days in October 2000 (page 165) when John visited Canterbury to be reunited with Sheila Sim (Lady Attenborough) and juvenile leads David Todd and Len Smith; attend a charity screening of the film; have tea with the Lord Mayor of Canterbury, Councillor Jennifer Samper; visit the film's locations² and be interviewed by Nick Burton, head of Canterbury Christ Church University's media department, for a documentary *A Pilgrim's Return*, included in the [Criterion Collection](#)'s DVD of the film

'Sadly, I eventually lost touch with John.

'Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 8 February 1916, John died at his home in Fearington on 5 July 2011. At that time he was married to Wendy, who accompanied him on his trip to Canterbury in 2000. His offspring from previous marriages included a daughter who was murdered in Washington DC. PT

¹ See page 22 of *A Canterbury Tale: Memories of a Classic Wartime Movie*. John subsequently donated his collection to the media department of Canterbury Christ Church University.

².See page 165 et seq.

Screen captures in this feature courtesy reelstreets.com