

# CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

Visit our website at:  
[www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk](http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk)

Follow us on:  
[twitter.com/ChelmsfordFilmC](https://twitter.com/ChelmsfordFilmC)  
[www.facebook.com/ChelmsfordFilmC](https://www.facebook.com/ChelmsfordFilmC)



## The Spirit of '45

**Director: Ken Loach**

**UK, 2012, running time: 98 mins**

Ken Loach's film is a celebration and a lament. Using interviews, archive footage and excerpts from the rich documentary heritage of the period, it celebrates the moment of idealism when demobbed troops "came back imbued with that spirit of anything is possible".

Much of this radical spirit, we're reminded, stemmed from educational initiatives within the conscript forces, with troops encouraged to attend discussions on politics and current affairs. We see impassioned (if obviously staged) debates on how things might change after the war. And in a richly comic episode a fruity-voiced Tory MP, Maurice Petherick, reads out a letter from a constituent deploring such potentially disruptive practices: "I maintain most strongly that any of these subjects which turn towards politics are wrong. For the love of Mike do something about it unless you want to have the creatures coming back all pansy-pink."

What's most striking about the testimonies, direct or reported, from the witnesses Loach has assembled is the sense of total identification, the deeply personal pride that people took in the developments of the post-war world.

[The] film is openly, unashamedly polemical and partisan – an eloquent cry of rage and grief at what we once had and what we've allowed to be taken away from us.

It's a challenge, too. Building on the impassioned testimonies of his interviewees and on his superbly chosen archive footage – courtesy of archivist Jim Anderson, who did an equally skilled job for Terence Davies's *Of Time and the City* (2008) – Loach challenges us to resist, to fight back against the forces of private greed and indifference. The film ends with shots of mass protests – Occupy, UK Uncut, Defend the NHS – as 'Jerusalem' swells on the soundtrack. Loach is too intelligent a filmmaker to suggest that resistance will be easy – but too optimistic to say that it's impossible.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, April 2013.

\*\*\*\*\*

The events and attitudes revived in Ken Loach's documentary-homage are so exotically distant that the "the spirit of '45" might as well mean the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. It consists of archive clips from the postwar Attlee government that brought in the welfare state, and interviews with surviving members of that generation – not the high-ups, but the doctors, nurses, trade unionists and general citizen-consumers of the new statist consensus that survived until Margaret Thatcher arrived in 1979. There is perhaps something a bit patrician-nostalgist in Ken Loach's movie, but I found myself increasingly swept along by the calm

simplicity of its presentation, which makes it clear that the NHS is our last stand, the last survivor of the Beveridge spirit; it arose from the war, and this film reminds us that admiring the health service has become a distinctively patriotic virtue [...] The Loach '45 spirit may be mocked – yet it seems preferable to the 21st-century spirit of austerity and paradox in which we found money to nationalise failing banks, maintaining the spirit of what Milton Friedman called socialism for the rich, free enterprise for the poor.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2013.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ken Loach's documentary is skilfully compiled from archive footage and newly recorded interviews with elderly socialists who remember the 1930s and 40s and with youngish leftwing academics of today. But rather than the provocative polemic one might have expected, it's more of an over-extended party political broadcast for a phantom old Labour party that is forever waiting in the wings. It celebrates the Labour landslide at the 1945 general election and the resolve never to return again to the miserable conditions that the working class endured in the 1930s.

The 1945 elections had surprised almost everyone, and only a minority had the will to endure austerity in the cause of a social transformation. Discontent abounded (look at the messages sent out in 1949 by the three consecutive Ealing comedies, *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whisky Galore!* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*), and the Tory party cunningly recreated itself quite rapidly, ready to seize power from a tired Labour government in 1951 in the manner of the Sicilian aristocracy's survival in *The Leopard*.

Labour confronted terrible difficulties (most of which go unmentioned in this oddly insular and materialistic film) and made few fundamental lasting changes. What now remains for old nostalgists like myself are the Festival Hall on the South Bank, the National Health Service (that last set of cutlery left over from the sale of the family silver), and enough disappointment and disillusion to last a lifetime. There are heartening moments in Loach's film and evocative images. But *The Spirit of '45* lacks the force and humanity of his fictional films and is a thin, misleading and sentimental account of history, and how we got from there to here.

Philip French, *The Observer*, 17 March 2013.

### **Our next presentation:**

**Like Someone in Love**, Tuesday, 24 September, at 8:00pm.