



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



Silent Sherlock: Three Classic Cases

A Scandal in Bohemia Dir. Maurice Elvey | UK | 1921 | PG | English intertitles | 29m
The Golden Pince-Nez Dir. George Ridgwell | UK | 1922 | PG | English intertitles | 22m
The Final Problem Dir. George Ridgwell | UK | 1923 | PG | English intertitles | 23m
With: Eille Norwood, Hubert Willis, Percy Standing

Performing live: Günter Buchwald (piano, violin)

Programme notes: Bryony Dixon

Thurs 19 March 17:00 - 18:30

Screening material courtesy of BFI Distribution.

For this Hippfest screening of the BFI's restoration of *Silent Sherlock: Three Classic Cases*, I was looking for a Scottish connection in the Sherlock Holmes stories, as adapted to film by the Stoll Company in the 1920s. I came up blank - surely the great detective ventured north of the border in *one* of the 56 stories? - when it occurred to me that, of course, Holmes as a character is *all about* Scottish brain power and ingenuity. Holmes' creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a Scot, as was the man who partially inspired him, Dr Joseph Bell, the Edinburgh surgeon under whom Conan Doyle served as an outpatient clerk at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in 1877. Doyle observed that Bell seemed to be able to diagnose patients from little information, noticing minute details: "Dr Bell would sit in his receiving room, with a face like a Red Indian, and diagnose people as they came in, before they even opened their mouths... He would tell them their symptoms and even give them details of their past life, and hardly ever would he make a mistake." Doyle wrote to him that it was "most certainly to you that I owe Sherlock Holmes, and though the stories I have the advantage of being able to place him in all sorts of dramatic positions, I do not think his analytical work is in the least as exaggeration of some of the effects which I have seen you produce in the outpatient ward"

Sherlock Holmes was an immediate success, not least because of his impressive party trick of 'diagnosing' his clients from small forensic details. As soon as cinema developed, filmmakers were desperate to adapt the character and the stories for the big screen, usually licencing them directly from the author. In 1921 Conan Doyle bought back the rights he had sold to the French producer Éclair and sold them to the British Stoll company who made 45 of the stories into three series of half hour episodes and two feature films. The films were acquired by the BFI in 1938 - one of their earliest major collections are now being restored in their entirety. The '*Three Classic Cases*' are selected from each of the three series, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes ...*, *Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *Final Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and represent two very well-known stories, 'Scandal in Bohemia', the one where Holmes falls for a woman, and 'The Final Problem', in which Holmes meets the sinister Professor Moriarty. The middle episode, 'The Golden Prince-Nez', shows Holmes at his deductive best, eliminating the



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impossible as his companions look on in awe. The episodes were filmed largely on the Baker Street set built at the Stoll studio and in locations around London, and in *The Final Problem*, at a special location, a spectacular gorge in the Southwest of England, standing in for the (somewhat mightier) Reichenbach Falls.

Stoll put their best director, Maurice Elvey, on the first series. And it was taken forward, from the second series, by the multi-talented film director George Ridgwell fresh from directing in America but also an actor, screenwriter and musician. The adaptations were, as we have seen, intended to be faithful to the stories within the usual confines of adapting from page to screen. William J Elliott, who did the first series scenarios, wrote about this process in the trade press and the need to create suspense by structuring them, like the stories, going from effect to cause, giving the audience a participatory role, in trying to solve the mystery as the story progressed. So here, adopting the series form, rather than pastiching characters in a sensational serial full of cliffhangers, (a format that was going out of fashion at this time), very much chimed with developments in the craze for puzzle-solving in the early 1920s evidenced by the rise in popularity of the crossword and the detective fiction that came to be known as ‘golden age’.

Publicity around the series tended to focus on the star attraction, Eille Norwood, a handsome 59-year-old stage and screen actor, a composer of a few popular songs and tunes an occasional playwright. He is still the principal attraction - he looks right, has the required charisma and gravitas, and Conan Doyle approved of him, thinking his impersonation ‘wonderful’. Norwood prided himself, like Sherlock, on his mastery of disguises, and tried to personify the image of Holmes as imagined by illustrator Sidney Paget in the Strand Magazine. Today his performances stand up well and there are plenty of pleasures for the Holmes enthusiast.

In his preface to *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927) Arthur Conan Doyle in a rare sentimental mood about his most famous creation wrote:

“One likes to think that there is some fantastic limbo for the children of imagination, some strange, impossible place where the beaux of Fielding may still make love to the belles of Richardson, where Scott's heroes still may strut, Dickens's delightful Cockneys still raise a laugh, and Thackeray's worldlings continue to carry on their reprehensible careers. Perhaps in some humble corner of such a Valhalla, Sherlock and his Watson may for a time find a place, while some more astute sleuth with some even less astute comrade may fill the stage which they have vacated.”

Of course there is such a place – it’s called cinema!

BRYONY DIXON

Bryony Dixon is a curator at the BFI National Archive with special responsibility for silent film, and author of 100 Silent Films (BFI Screen Guides 2011) and The Story of Victorian Film (BFI 2023). She has been lead curator on recent BFI silent film restorations, including all nine surviving Hitchcock silent films, the works of Anthony Asquith, The Great White Silence (1924) and Shiraz (1928). She is currently working on the three series of Stoll Sherlock Holmes stories (1921-23).