

## James Whale and Bristol



Whale on the set of *Bride of Frankenstein*  
1935

Dudley born Hollywood film director James Whale (1889-1956) is best remembered today for two iconic and classic films of the horror genre: [Frankenstein](#) (1931) and [The Bride of Frankenstein](#) (1935). Honest if not outspoken about his homosexuality, the fact he lived openly with another man for 23 years did not seem to affect his career or reputation. During the First World War, long before his move to Hollywood, he spent time in Bristol and forged a friendship which was to endure for 25 years, and he made many return visits to the city.

In October 1915 Whale joined the Inns of Court Officer Training Corps and early in 1916 was stationed in Bristol and billeted with No.3 Battalion at the former Deaf and Dumb Institute building on the corner of Elmdale Road and Queen's Avenue, Tyndall's Park (now the site of an office block).

The cadets drilled daily on Elmdale Road and, on a winter's day, a couple took pity on one particular cold looking five-foot ten, thin, red-haired and rather ungainly young man and

invited him into their house for a warming cup of cocoa. 26 year-old James Whale was befriended by Arthur and Maria Wills who lived at 20 Elmdale Road. Over the coming months they welcomed James into their home, giving him sweets and cigarettes; he was also to spend many public holidays such as Easter at their house.

Arthur Wills was in his 60s and a son of the "H.O" (Henry Overton Wills) of Bristol tobacco manufacturers, W.D & H.O Wills. It is not hard to see why the young James Whale became in some ways a surrogate son; only two months earlier their own son, Michael, had died of wounds at Ypres, Belgium, aged 21.

In the summer of 1916 Whale was promoted to second lieutenant and posted to Flanders. He saw action at Passchendale in the spring of 1917. In August he was taken prisoner and sent to Holzminden POW camp in Germany where he spent the rest of the war. It was here that Whale became involved in producing highly successful amateur theatricals which proved to be the beginning of his creative stage and film career.

After the war he became an actor and in 1919 played several small roles in a provincial touring production of John Drinkwater's play *Abraham Lincoln*. The tour took Whale to Bristol again in June 1921 when he played the part of Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, at The Prince's Theatre, Park Row, and stayed with the Wills in Elmdale Road during the week run of the play.

In 1925 Whale designed the set for the first production of the play *Prisoners of War* by [J.R. Ackerley](#) which has been called "the first twentieth century play produced upon the London or Broadway stage to deal with homosexual desire". Openly-gay Ackerley had also been a POW during the war and the play was described as "a study of pent up emotions in men cooped up in a Swiss hotel during the war, and the gradual mental decay and tragic effects". The play opened on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1925. Because of its 'controversial' nature it was performed at The Three Hundred Club which as a private theatre club did not need a licence so was able to circumvent the licensing rules of the Lord Chamberlain. Word got around this was the 'new homosexual play' and it later transferred to the Playhouse Theatre in the West End. The central theme of the play is the longing

of Captain Conrad (based on Ackerley himself) for attractive 19 year old Lieutenant Grayle and includes the line spoken by Conrad "The fair sex? And which sex is that?". The play would have definitely spoken to Whale as a story of repressed and forbidden gay desire.

In 1928 Whale was again set designer and also directed the first production of R.C. Sherriff's classic play of the First World War *Journey's End* which opened on December 10 at the Apollo Theatre with a 21 year old Laurence Olivier in the lead role of Captain Stanhope, a part which later in the run was played by Colin Clive who was to eventually play Dr Frankenstein in Whale's 1931 film. *Journey's End* was a success and a Broadway production opened in 1929; the following year Whale directed (for the first time) a talking picture film vision with Colin Clive as Stanhope.

The stage play of *Journey's End* was first seen in a touring production at The Prince's which opened on 28 April 1930 and according to the *Western Daily Press* review the following day opened to "a crowded house" and received "several curtain calls".

James Whale again stayed with the Wills in May 1930 while in England to direct RC Sherriff's new play *Badger's Green*. An article in the *Western Daily Press* on May 21<sup>st</sup> was headed "THE PRODUCER OF 'JOURNEY'S END' STAYS IN BRISTOL". He told the reporter how on "one bitterly cold morning" when he was a cadet in Clifton during the war Maria Wills had given him a cup of cocoa. "Many kindnesses of one sort or another were shown".... and despite his success, James Whale always visits the Wills when in England". Whale told the reporter he earned seven pence a day as a cadet in Bristol, and his last film job had earned him £500 a week!

In 1929 Whale met Hollywood film producer [David Lewis](#) (1903-1987) and they lived openly as a couple for 23 years. Lewis was a prominent film producer in the 1940s and 50s. Some of his best known films include *Dark Victory* (1939), *All This and Heaven Too* (1940), both classic roles for Bette Davies, and *King's Row* (1942). In 1931 James Whale directed what would become a classic of Hollywood horror, *Frankenstein*, with Camberwell born Boris Karloff as The Monster and Colin Clive as Dr Frankenstein delivering the classic line "It's alive! It's alive!". Loosely based on Mary Shelley's 1818 novel (largely written in Bath) and the 1927 Peggy Webling play the film gave us the definitive image of Frankenstein's monster. Whale is said to have designed the basic idea of Karloff's make up created by makeup artist Jack Pierce which was to become forever associated with the character, but this claim remains controversial.



David Lewis

Whale was interviewed again in the summer of 1932 while "paying a flying visit to an old friend, Mr Arthur Wills, who befriended him in his cadet days during the war". The article appeared in the *Western Daily Press* on August 31<sup>st</sup> 1932 under a photograph of himself and the headline "MEET MR JAMES WHALE FROM HOLLYWOOD". The report noted that "Frankenstein .... had made him famous" and went on to say "A man who is famous all over the globe walked the streets of Bristol yesterday entirely unrecognised" ... "Jimmie", as he is popularly known across 'the big pond' is regarded by Carl Laemmle Jnr (the head of Universal Studios 1928-36) as one of the best directors in the film industry". Whale told the reporter that in England "All my films have been cut by the censor" and he thought the best parts of *Frankenstein* had been cut. The film had been first seen in Bristol in May 1932 at the New Palace (later the Gaumont) Baldwin Street and The Scala, Zetland Road, but had been banned in some cities such as Leicester on the grounds of its "gruesomeness".

Whale visited England again in December 1933 and spent June-August 1936 here and it would seem likely he visited Clifton at these times.

In 1935 Whale directed *The Bride of Frankenstein*, regarded by many as his masterpiece. Lewisham born Elsa Lanchester played the title role and also Mary Shelley in the prologue. The design of the Bride's distinctive hair and makeup were again based on Whale's design. Because of its perceived 'gay sub text' the film is often considered as a 'camp classic', particularly because of the performance of Chelsea born Ernest Thesiger as Dr Pretorius. Whale liked to employ actors and film crew to work on his films who were either British, gay, or both. In *Bride*, Colin Clive (believed to be bisexual ) reprised his role as Henry Frankenstein but tragically died two years later aged 37 from alcoholism and tuberculosis. Thesiger was bisexual and although married is widely believed to have been in love with his brother in law, artist William Ranken. 17-year old Irish actress Valerie Hobson played Elizabeth Frankenstein and went to become of the wife of John Profumo MP, the centre of the notorious 1963 political sex scandal.



**Boris Karloff as  
Frankenstein's monster  
in *Bride of Frankenstein*  
(1935)**

Arthur Wills died aged 90 in January 1940 and was buried in the family plot in Canford Cemetery. As it was wartime it is unlikely Whale made the journey overseas to attend the funeral but the *Bristol Evening Post* obituary noted James Whale "looked upon Mr Wills as a personal friend and never failed to pay him a visit when in England. Even when on a flying visit from Hollywood one of his calls was invariably to his old friend who had been a host to him during the Great War".

While in Paris in spring of 1952, 63 year-old Whale became infatuated with Pierre Fogel, a 25 year-old French bartender who could barely speak English. In August Whale went to London, with Foegel in tow, to begin rehearsals for the premiere of Franklin Lacey's play *Pagan in the Parlour* which he was to direct. The play was set to have a six-week provincial tour which opened at the Theatre Royal, Bath, on September 15<sup>th</sup>. The production began by playing to packed houses but, owing to the heavy drinking of female lead Hermione Baddeley, the play never reached London and was abandoned.

Whale returned to California in November and told David Lewis that Foegel would be moving into the house they had shared for over 20 years. Lewis walked out and their relationship was over. Foegel did come to California and stayed with Whale for about five months, returned to France and then came back to America in 1954 and was with Whale until his death.

Although Whale could not swim he had a swimming pool built at his home and enjoyed ogling the bronzed handsome young men who attended his all-male "pool parties". After a series of strokes in 1956 which resulted in pain, depression and diminishing mental faculties, Whale drowned himself in the swimming pool on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1957 aged 67. Although separated, Whale and Lewis had remained close friends and Lewis kept Whale's suicide note until his own death 30 years later.

In 1998 Sir Ian McKellen played Whale in *Gods and Monsters*, a fictionalised version of Whale's final years.

Today 20 Elmdale Road is occupied by offices and the house goes unnoticed, no one knowing it was once the homely refuge for a young officer cadet and was frequently visited when that young man had become one of the greatest film directors of the twentieth century, who was also openly gay in an age very unlike our own.

Jonathan Rowe 2021

For further information about James Whale see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Whale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Whale)  
*James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* by James Curtis (1998).