

NILE BE BACK!

EGYPTIAN LONDON ON FILM

Words and Images: Chris Elliot

Film poster with kind permission of Gavin Watson

London may be a great city by a river, and its connections to Egypt go back as far as its foundation in Roman times, with a temple of Isis now buried somewhere beneath it, but the British capital isn't necessarily the first place you'd think of when looking for shooting locations that reflect Ancient Egypt. London's history with moving pictures of Egypt however, goes back before the first flickering images on celluloid were ever created.

In 1849, the artist, architect and pioneer Egyptologist Joseph Bonomi helped to create a moving panorama of a journey up the Nile, complete with pyramids and temples. A sort of early form of back projection, it was essentially a huge painted fabric scroll, translucent and lit from behind, which was rolled from one side to the other with accompanying commentary. It was even advertised with the equivalent of movie posters, painted on the sides of a horse-drawn van, and exhibited at the now demolished Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, one of the earliest and most impressive buildings in England in the Ancient Egyptian style. The Egyptian Hall went on to become the home of one of the country's earliest true cinemas, showing Bioscope pictures in 1895. You probably know the story about an early audience running from the cinema in panic when images of an oncoming train were shown. According to Walter Macqueen Pope's book Goodbye Piccadilly, this happened at the Egyptian Hall.

The advent of cinema as we know it saw the creation of actual Egyptian picture palaces. These were never very common, but London had four, all built between 1928 and 1930. The Luxor in Twickenham had Egyptian features inside and out, the Astoria in Streatham had an Italian-style exterior but splendid Egyptian murals within and the Carlton cinemas at Upton Park and Islington had superb Egyptian façades. All, except for the Carlton in Essex Road, are sadly now vanished, victims of demolition, remodelling or Nazi rockets. (The Astoria still stands, but the interior was completely rebuilt in 1962.)

Egyptian-style cinemas, and in particular the Carltons, with their polychrome tile-work, may have brought a bit of Luxor to London, but that isn't the same as the city featuring in actual films about Ancient Egypt. This happened mostly with mummy movies. Before the advent of X-rays, the only way to know what was inside a mummy was to unwrap, or to use the preferred term at the time 'unroll' it, and Victorian London hosted numerous high-profile unrollings, often at prestigious venues like the Royal College of Sur-

geons, in front of audiences from the upper echelons of society. Numerous mummies were also brought back from Egypt for museums and private collections. All very well, no doubt, from a scientific or archaeological point of view, but what appealed to moviemakers was the idea of the mummy as the embodiment of occult forces, wreaking vengeance on those who had desecrated its supposedly eternal rest.

Stories linking England to Egypt and the occult went back as far as 1827, with Jane Webb's *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty Second Century*, there were also a number in the 1890s and early 1900s, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories *The Ring of Thoth* (1890) and *Lot 249* (1892), Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) and Ambrose Pratt's *The Living Mummy* (1910). One of the best known, and most influential, is Bram Stoker's novel *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903), in which a misguided Egyptologist revives an Ancient Egyptian queen, who wreaks her vengeance on one and all. A number of films are loosely based on the book, both before and after it came out of copyright. Well before the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and the death of Lord Carnarvon, objects in the British Museum (BM), including a mummy board, had become linked to the Curse of the Mummy with the help of articles in newspapers and publications such as Pearson's Magazine. These may have had more to do with urban myths than investigative journalism, but they fed the public appetite for tales of the sinister occult legacy of the pharaohs.

The first actual mummy movie is almost certainly George Méliès's *Cleopâtre* (1899), also known as Cleopatra's Tomb or Robbing Cleopatra's Tomb, but by 1915 there was a mummy film set in London: Charles Calvert's four reel short *Wraith of the Tomb*, also known as The Avenging Hand. The 1932 classic *The Mummy* wasn't set in the capital, but did star the London-born Boris Karloff, who has a Blue Plaque at 36 Forest Hill Road and a memorial plaque in St George's Church, Covent Garden. Audiences then had to wait until 1964 for *The Curse of the*



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Mummy's Tomb, which is partly set in London in 1900. The mummy was worth the wait and was billed as "Half-bone, half-bandage, and all blood-curdling horror". Hammer Studios' The Mummy's Shroud (1967) wasn't set in London, but has a possibly unique connection, which we'll come back to later. my, also known as Talos the Mummy, which featured yet another London-bound mummy.

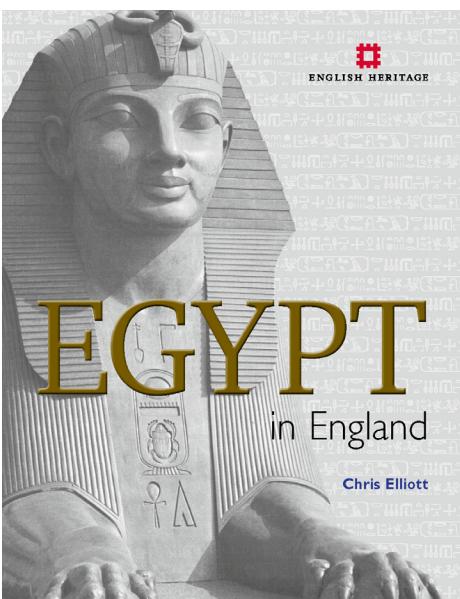
In Hammer's later Blood from the Mummy's Tomb (1971), the body of an Egyptian queen known for her magical powers is brought back to London. The film acquired its own curse legend after the initial director Seth Holt died during filming, and the actor Peter Cushing withdrew because of his wife's fatal illness. The Spanish got in on the act with the London-set La Venganza de la Momia (1973), and 1998 saw Tale of the Mum

Films with a few seconds of stock footage to set the scene, or studio sets pretending to be London, aren't however, the same as the real thing and some of London's most Egyptian-like locations do feature in films. Take, for example, Cleopatra's Needle on the Embankment. Can't get much more Egyptian than that, but the first film it seems to have featured in was a Stoll two-reel serial based on the Fu Manchu stories of Sax Rohmer. In The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu (1923), the Devil Doctor, played by Harry Agar Lyons, watches from beside the Needle as one of his henchmen tries to persuade someone to stick their head out of a hotel window so that they can drop a noose over it from above and strangle them.

In complete contrast, the film Indiscreet (1958) sees Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman disturbed by autograph hunters at the foot of the obelisk, and the musical What A Crazy World (1963) featured not only the Needle, but Joe Brown, Marty Wilde, and a cameo appearance from

Freddy and the Dreamers. Although a long way from Whitechapel, the monolith even had its own cameo in the Ripper movie From Hell (2001). The British Museum, and pieces of sculpture from its Egyptian collections, appear as photographic backgrounds in chase scenes in the Hitchcock classic Blackmail (1929), and possibly in the penis transplant movie Percy (1971), which has a scene in the British Museum "sculpture court". If you want a really tenuous connection, try Hudson Hawk (1991), which has scenes shot in the disused Post Office Underground Railway fifty feet below Holborn, where the Rosetta Stone was moved in 1917 to keep it safe from German bombs.

All very well, but not very Egyptian. We're on firmer ground with The Mummy's Shroud (1967), which boasts the strappingline: "Beware the beat of the cloth-wrapped feet", and whose mummy,



Prem, played by Eddie Powell, bears a remarkable resemblance to an anonymous Graeco-roman mummy in the BM (EA 6704). And talking of body doubles, the BM has its own.

Mike Newell's film The Awakening (1980) is one of a number inspired by Bram Stoker's novel The Jewel of Seven Stars (1903). As well as the scenes shot in Kensal Green Cemetery (although sadly not featuring its numerous Egyptian style monuments) and at the National Theatre on the South Bank, it is claimed that it featured scenes shot in the British Museum's Egyptian Sculpture gallery. These are almost certainly studio sets, although several iconic statues are clearly intended to evoke those in the BM, but interestingly the sets themselves seem to be based on the interior of University College London (UCL). Cut to the exterior of UCL, and you have the setting for the chase scene from The Mummy Returns (2001).

Despite the partially-glimpsed sign implying that Imhotep has been revived in the basement of the British Museum (whose interiors were shot in a London warehouse and at Mentmore Towers), the bus chase actually starts outside UCL, which is again acting as body double for the BM. Both institutions are north of the Thames. From UCL, with cinema's cavalier attitude to topography, the bus passes the Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich, south of the river, continues without apparently crossing the river again to head north along the west side of Gordon Square, on the north side of the river, where it hits a lamppost, then collides with a taxi on the east side of Gordon Square, again going north, before crossing Tower Bridge, heading south. Still. How important is accuracy really, when you have a mummy raging about the streets of London?

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Chris Elliott is the author of Egypt in England, a guide to Egyptian style buildings in England published by English Heritage. He also offers walking tours that explore London's often unexpected Egyptian connections.

Egypt in England



Page 25

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