

The Cult of Poldark : a transcript

A twenty-nine-minute documentary first broadcast on BBC Four on 17 February 2008. [CLIP] denotes a clip from the first (1975-6) or second (1977) BBC series of *Poldark* from which, with one exception, the dialogue has not been transcribed. The narrator is Meera Syal.

Narrator: For fifty percent of the population, at least, Sunday night TV was never going to be the same again. [CLIP] With its daredevil hero, black-hearted villains and dramatic cliffhangers, *Poldark* became the Sunday night drug of choice for millions of addicts.

Nina Myskow (journalist and broadcaster)

It was something you could treasure. It was like having a box of chocolates all to yourself really.

Angharad Rees ("Demelza") (1944-2012)

It is a rip-roaring yarn, and with wonderful characters.

Robin Ellis ("Ross")

The story is the hook and if you get a good story, then it works.

Norma Streader ("Verity")

Lots of horses and carriages and beautiful girls and lusty blokes.

Richard Morant ("Dwight") (1945-2011)

It's about love, it's about betrayal, the things that hurt us, the things that give us joy.

Jill Townsend ("Elizabeth")

I was told that they had changed the church services on Sunday night in Cornwall because nobody turned up – they were watching *Poldark*.

But the differences between the original novels and the TV scripts caused nearly as much drama off-screen as on.



Millions of women swooned over Captain Ross Poldark, the darkly brooding hero who rode about Cornwall righting wrongs and fighting against evil. Mr. Darcy, eat your heart out. [CLIP]

Hilary Oliver (broadcaster)

Ross Poldark was the quintessential romantic hero. He cut a very fine figure in his riding boots, I remember particularly. He was slightly effeminate-looking, I suppose – the longer hair – but nonetheless he did it for a lot of young women at that time.

Nina Myskow

I remember thinking I was the only one that fancied him and then you suddenly realised it was like a secret society. Everybody fancied him.

Paul Wheeler (writer) (below)

Robin Ellis really got that part nailed beautifully, because it wasn't long before he was getting fan mail. People never knew quite what he was thinking and that's always a catch. [CLIP]



Robin Ellis

[Ross] was a bit of a rebel, a radical, he was an outsider to some degree, I think, and that's what was attractive about playing him. [CLIP]

Martin Worth (writer)

He behaved very outrageously from time to time. That's part of his charm, that somehow he managed ... was able to get away with it.

Also perfectly capable of behaving outrageously was Demelza, Angharad Rees's sparky heroine. [CLIP] When Ross and Demelza found each other, they became one of TV's great love stories.

Paul Annett (director) (1937-2017)

You know, it's Heathcliff and Cathy, you think of those pairings, and Ross and Demelza were written like that. [CLIP]

Paul Wheeler

That was the central romantic theme. All the rest was interesting, but you didn't really want to know whether a bank was going to foreclose more than you wanted to know whether Ross and Demelza were going to get it on.

As well as romance, *Poldark* also showed us the darker side of eighteenth century life. [CLIP]

Paul Annett

It wasn't lots of teacups and lifted fingers and all the usual costume period drama niceties; it was quite rugged and it was quite outside and it was scruffy as well as beautiful, and I think that's what appealed to people.

And there was plenty of outside for the viewers to enjoy.

Richard Morant

It's about a place. It's strongly about a people and a place, and in a way the main character in the book is Cornwall.

The series was adapted from Winston Graham's Cornish novels and aimed to build on the success of two earlier BBC period dramas, the highly successful

Forsyte Saga in the sixties and *The Onedin Line* in the early seventies. To turn the novels with their cast of thousands into gripping television, producer Morris Barry (1918-2000) first turned to the master adapter of the time, Jack Pulman (1925-1979), who had proved he could turn a period drama into a modern phenomenon with *I, Claudius*. But when author Winston Graham saw the first four scripts in which Ross gets together with Demelza, he was outraged at changes to Demelza's character.

Christopher Barry (director) (1924-2014) (below)

It went to a sort of tribunal and they argued and I lost and so it ended up the way Winston didn't like it. [CLIP] I know he would have liked to have cancelled the thing, but he obviously couldn't. It had gone too far by then.



Fortunately for the viewers it did go ahead and the first series turned out to be a big success – a fabulous mix of tragedy, betrayal, romantic passion and suspense.

Paul Wheeler

I think there was something in it for everybody. There was a bit of history, but it was a romp. Writers were told to work towards

a cliffhanger and you don't have many cliffhangers in classical novels, but this had to be that at the end of the episode the audience couldn't wait for the next. [CLIP]

The first series got off to a cracking start as our hero came back from the war in America to find everyone including his ex-girlfriend Elizabeth thought he was dead. [CLIP] His uncle was selling off the family tin mine – enough to make anyone head straight back to the colonies, but Ross refused to let his inheritance go. [CLIP] Robin Ellis made the role of the beleaguered hero his own, but he wasn't first choice for Ross.

Christopher Barry

We tried to find out if Leigh Lawson was available – he was quite a big name then – and I'd written down "Timothy Dalton" who of course went on to become James Bond.

Paul Annett (below)

I know we offered it to Ian McShane who I knew from previous work – I'd done a film with him.



Eventually they decided to see a little-known actor who had appeared as an undercover cop in *Fawlty Towers*.

Robin Ellis

Having done two interviews, I knew that this was rather a good part and I rather wanted to play it and I had an agonising wait to hear whether I got the part. [CLIP]

The role was his, but every hero needs a woman to stand up to him, and none better than Demelza.

Nina Myskow

She was a great match for him. That strength that she had and that determination and that kind of almost wilfulness that she had was very, very attractive and that's what made the series so wonderful.

But Demelza seems a very unlikely heroine when Ross, still pining for Elizabeth, first meets her at a fair. [CLIP] But she scrubbed up rather well and Ross couldn't help but notice. [CLIP]



Angharad Rees (above)

Well obviously she fell madly in love with Ross because he was dashing and handsome and [she] just fell in love with him. But

all the time there was this thing in the background of him loving another woman. There were three people in that marriage, as they say, and I think that hurt her very much. [CLIP]

Nina Myskow

I suppose nowadays you'd term Elizabeth the Camilla, really, in the whole set-up.¹

Hilary Oliver

I was absolutely rooting for Demelza, every step of the way. Elizabeth to me was a bit of a cold fish and I could never really understand why Ross Poldark wanted her in his life.

Jill Townsend was surprisingly cast as the frosty upper-class Englishwoman that Ross couldn't get over.

Jill Townsend

The director had seen a review of a movie I had just completed² and the review was that I played the upper-class English girl to perfection, and he said: "Oh, that's what we need for Elizabeth." [CLIP] He was telling everybody why he chose them and when he told me that, I said: "Isn't it funny, since I'm American." [He] freaked out and he said: "Well, are we going to do accent coaching or whatever?" I said: "We can do it. It's alright. It's alright."

Ross's cousin Verity was there to encourage him to get over Elizabeth. [CLIP]

Norma Streader

I was reading the paper and it said that the BBC were going to do a series of Winston Graham's novels, *Poldark*, and I totally

fell in love with the character of Verity and I thought I would really like to play that, so I wrote personally to Morris Barry – he was the producer – and I said: "Please, please, see me for Verity" and he did and I got the job. It was amazing. [CLIP]

Having put together a great cast, the producers made sure that the action came thick and fast.

Paul Wheeler

Morris Barry would look at my script and say: "Why does he just have to walk through the door? Why can't he kick the door down?" Which meant that every few minutes, something jolted an audience and it got them interested. [CLIP]

Angharad Rees

Everything was heightened. Living at that time was very heightened, so it needed that. You couldn't stroll through *Poldark*.

The intensity was only added to by the battle between the brooding hero, Ross, and the smiling villain, George Warleggan, played by former Hammer horror star, Ralph Bates (1940-1991). [CLIP]

Robin Ellis

He was the dark side. He absolutely, passionately believed as much as I passionately believed in what I believed in, and so the clash was real. [CLIP]

Nina Myskow

There's a great temptation to, you know, [makes inarticulate yokel sounds] "do your accent" and, you know, have a peasant

there somewhere and everything's over the top and actually I don't think Ralph Bates was over the top. He played it very straight, but, ooh, he was chilling, wasn't he?

Helping George was Ross's jealous cousin Francis, who managed to foul up Ross's life and his own. [CLIP]

Paul Annett

He so managed to combine that sort of tragedy and romance and loss. I thought he was quite marvellous. Of course, originally he would have loved to have played Ross, to have played Poldark, but he was perfect in that part, which was such a vital part and a vital linch in the whole drama of it.

And because Ross wasn't your typical goody-two-shoes, we often saw him getting it wrong and putting himself in peril. [CLIP]

Richard Morant

I thought Robin captured the essence of that moral man who's battling with his own demons, he's battling with his own desires and his own passions. That's why it captured so many people's hearts.

And to balance the angst and betrayal, there was humour too. [CLIP] For a show that was meant to be family viewing, *Poldark* had plenty of more adult moments. [CLIP]

Hilary Oliver

An awful lot of that just went over children's heads as they watched it. They got the excitement of, you know, the fights and the riding out on the moors and so on and the adults fully understood what was going on behind closed doors. [CLIP]

Robin Ellis

There was enough sauciness to interest an older audience, as it were, although Winston always objected to it being called "a bodice-ripper", I think. He didn't like that phrase. He thought that was rather common.

A combination of sex, suspense, romance and fantastic locations proved as popular as the BBC hoped and *Poldark* ran for twenty-nine episodes over two series, attracting audiences up to twelve million.

Richard Morant

It really captured people's imagination and there was that feeling of, you know, seven o'clock on a Sunday evening when the Sunday series was on, the streets were empty. It was like, you know, there was a big match on now. [CLIP]

Hilary Oliver

We all went to offices the next day and we all got on with our lives, but that Sunday night television serial lifted us out of all of that.

Even novelist Winston Graham came round to [the] charms of the show and he became a regular visitor on the set, where one member of the cast in particular had become a hot celebrity.

Robin Ellis

I went to see somebody in a play at The Aldwych and there was a group of Irish schoolgirls who were over and *Poldark* was very big in Ireland [CLIP] and I spent the second half of the play hiding in various parts of the building because they were pursuing me.

Robin and Angharad had become known as TV's sexiest couple, well beyond the confines of Cornwall.

Angharad Rees

We went to Madrid and they had announced it on television that we were arriving and we were completely mobbed as we got off the aeroplane.

Robin Ellis

There were two thousand people to welcome us and on the motorway we got waved at, you know. It was kind of just an interesting moment to understand what it was like to be a Beatle – for a second, for just a second.

Although *Poldark* was attracting a lot of fans, not everyone liked it.

Robin Ellis

I remember Clive James's review – I think I'm rather proud of it now – he said: "Ah, yes, and there's *Poldark*, which I notice is an anagram of *Old Krap*. I rest my case," he said. [Laughs].

In their desire to make the series as authentic as possible, the producers sometimes made life hard for themselves. Filming in a disused mine was a hazardous operation. [CLIP]

Christopher Barry

It meant trekking down several flights of ladders carrying lamps and cables and cameras and sound equipment and props and everything else [CLIP] and then working down there, very wet, dripping water everywhere, slippery and, of course, lit ostensibly by candles stuck on their hats with wax. [CLIP] Some

of these mines had adits in them and they just – you'd be walking along in water and, if you didn't know, suddenly there wouldn't be any ground underneath you. There'd be a hole going straight down goodness knows how many feet. Health and Safety would have a nightmare today, I think. I don't think we'd have been allowed to do it today.

And using locally hired horses also made life tricky for the cast and crew.

Jill Townsend

I had all the hair and curls and the outfit and I was to ride along the cliffs and the horse was a bit skittish because it wasn't a picture horse – what they call a picture horse, used to being around cameras – so I said let me just exercise it and off we went at a gallop, all along the cliffs of Cornwall and of course the hair all came down and I wasn't very popular by the time I got the horse back, but what a ride!

Paul Annett

Horses are notorious for moving, quite naturally, so when they had these jolly scenes where one person rode up to another and they started a conversation, the horse would be constantly moving and the cameraman would be going crazy.

For the women who had to ride side-saddle, it was even more terrifying.

Norma Streader

I had a great fear of horses. I could just about rise to the trot, but that was astride a horse and this, of course, was all side-saddle. So they got me up on this horse, you know, amazing frock, the wig and the hat, and I was absolutely terrified and I said to the groom: "What do I do if it rears up?" and he said: "This horse is so old she would rather drop dead than rear up."

Getting the Cornish accent right wasn't easy either. [CLIP]

Richard Morant (below)

I started the character Dwight with what I thought was quite a slight, nice Cornish accent. It wasn't overstated, but, you know, it had a bit of a Cornish accent there [CLIP] ...



But one of the directors, Kenneth Ives, wasn't keen.

... and he said to me: "Oh, Richard, what are you doing about that accent, by the way?" [CLIP] and I said: "Well, I don't know, I'm sort of doing a bit of Cornish." He said: "No, you're not. Drop it." [CLIP] I said: "No, I can't do that. You know, I've already been on film. People will say: 'He's suddenly lost his accent. That's not Dwight any more, he's suddenly gone English.'" He said: "No, they won't. Drop it." And I did. And I was very glad I did. [CLIP]

[CLIP] The crew employed Cornish villagers as extras, but they could prove, um, *unpredictable*.

Paul Annett

We did this whole thing when Robin had to go down and all the villagers went down to pillage the wreck [CLIP] ...

Robin Ellis

They're told that there's a wreck on the high seas and they're supposed to fight the local police and get into the water and bring stuff back and so they did ...

Paul Annett

They went tearing down into the sea and they began ripping everything apart and all of that and suddenly they started to punch one another like crazy and it was horrendous – there was *blood* and everything [CLIP] ...

Robin Ellis

I heard one of the professional stuntmen say at one point: "Hold on, mate, it's only a play!" because they were fighting as though it was for real ...

Paul Annett

We finished and the chief stuntman came up and said: "If that guy does that to me again, I'm gonna kill 'im!" He said: "What are they doing?" and we didn't discover until later that apparently they'd hired two villages of different people and these villages had always had a tremendous feud [CLIP] and so these villagers were actually taking it out on one another under cover of period costume and drama in the sea and they were punching each other's lights out – and the women, too. They really were going for it.

But the biggest problem to hit the show was another row over the adaptation, this time with the actors, about a scene between Ross and his doctor, Dwight Enys.



Richard Morant

We decided that there was a scene which we had got which we could really go to town on and it would be much punchier and much stronger [CLIP] ...

Robin Ellis

I felt that my dealing with Doctor Enys was not right. It didn't feel right for my character. I played it for six episodes and it just didn't feel right and I went back to the book and I discovered that Winston had written it as I thought it should be played ...

Richard Morant

In the book, there's a fight, a row, between Ross and Dwight [CLIP] ...

Robin Ellis

And so I rewrote the scene and presented it ...

Richard Morant

We all thought it was rather good and it was met with absolute stony silence. No, no, sorry, you can't do that. You're contractually bound to do the script as per written and we're not going to allow any script changes. So we got quite upset and quite heated about this and it all got blown out of proportion [CLIP] ...

Robin Ellis

It was as though I'd sort of altered *Genesis* or something, or a Shakespeare play; rewritten "To be or not to be" [CLIP] ...

Richard Morant

Being actors of principle (laughs) and all of that, and opinion, we decided that we would sort of stick to our guns, but anyway it got quite difficult [CLIP] ...

Robin Ellis

The producer took me out for a lunch at the canteen at the BBC and said: "Come on, Robin, it's only a play", you know, and bought me two steaks and said: "Would you like another steak?" and "Will you give way and play the scene?" and by that time I felt fairly secure in the part – that I wouldn't be dumped before the end of the series – and I said: "No, I won't." [CLIP]

In the end, both sides compromised, but the row left Richard Morant, who played Dwight Enys, disenchanted with the production, so, when approached

for the second series, he said "No" and was replaced by Michael Cadman, giving the writers a bit of a problem to solve. [A clip is played featuring Cadman's first line of dialogue: "I'm not the same man who went away!"]

Angharad Rees

We couldn't believe it was in the script, but actually that's quite a clever way of covering it, so that everybody has a laugh and then they get on with the story.

[CLIP] The second series was as raunchy and pacy as the first, dealing with the dramatic consequences of Ross finally having sex with Elizabeth. Never one to be outdone, Demelza strayed too. The second series also introduced some new star turns. Christopher Biggins appeared as the odious Reverend Osborne Whitworth [CLIP] and Trudie Styler, sporting an enormous cleavage, played a good-time girl. [CLIP] With a hit on their hands but having exhausted Winston Graham's stock of novels, the BBC sent scriptwriter Martin Worth to talk to the author about extending the life of the show. [CLIP]

Martin Worth (writer)

Graham Macdonald, who I think was Head of Plays or Head of Drama or something, asked me if I could persuade Winston Graham to allow the series to go on without the novels – you know, we'd set up this series and he would be paid, but, with his approval, we would devise the continuation of the series.

But Winston said "No" and that, it seemed, was that. *Poldark* lovers everywhere were distraught, and the cast, presumably, were equally upset.

Robin Ellis

We didn't really want to do a third series. We'd done twenty-nine episodes, twenty-nine hours, and really the thrust of the thing had played out. [CLIP]

Angharad Rees

We had done sort of almost three years on the trot and it was quite a heavy schedule. I think it was just to have a break. [CLIP]

By the time Winston Graham started writing more Poldark novels, the BBC team had disbanded, but in 1995, HTV decided to adapt the first of these, *The Stranger From The Sea*. Robin Ellis and Angharad Rees agreed to reprise the roles that had made them famous, but negotiations between the stars and the company broke down and – *shock! horror!* – other actors were cast as Ross and Demelza.



Robin Ellis (above)

They, I think, reneged on the gentleman's agreement about the money and altogether it was a bit of a mess and we didn't do it. But in the end I think I'm happy that we didn't do it. [CLIP] I mean, clearly it was a disappointment because, as I said, it would have been an interesting thing to do, but I think if you're going to do something like that, you have to do it full out and try and emulate the success of the first two series.

Robin and Angharad weren't the only ones who were upset. For the fiercely loyal fans, seeing their favourites replaced was a travesty – so much so that the Poldark Appreciation Society demonstrated outside HTV's headquarters.

Unnamed female fan #1

We just want Robin and Angharad back ...

Unnamed female fan #2

They are Ross and Demelza and it's as simple as that.

Angharad Rees

The Poldark Appreciation Society were not happy at all. They wanted everything to be the same as the first two series, but it wasn't going to be the same because it wasn't as good – the script wasn't as good, the budget was very low ...

Winston Graham, though, liked the HTV version, which put him at odds with the Poldark Appreciation Society. The original Poldark TV series had inspired cult-like loyalty in its fans.

Richard Morant

Like *Eastenders*,³ like *The Archers*,⁴ like any kind of soap, like any kind of creation where you've got people you know expressing their feelings and going through the emotions of love, life and death, then it evokes strong attachment, strong passion [CLIP] and you love it, you love them, you love the people and you treasure them and you honour them and you respect them and you mustn't say anything bad about them.

When the video of the original *Poldark* series went on sale in 1993, it was the BBC's second highest seller. For the viewers and everyone involved, it was a wonderful experience.

Paul Annett

It was a tremendously exciting project to work on and it was a

wonderful train set – I mean, horses and thousands of extras and fights and shipwrecks and all of that and some terrific actors.

Hilary Oliver

It sits in a little time capsule of its own as a very good example of what the BBC did on a Sunday night with good writing, good actors, good script and some very good storylines. [CLIP]

Jill Townsend (below)

People are still buying it, so a testament to Winston Graham and the characters who are in it ...



Robin Ellis

I cherish it, basically. It's wonderful for an actor to have something that they've done in their career that has made some impact – you know, I'm hugely appreciative of *Poldark*.

Richard Morant

It was a very good piece of work. I enjoyed doing it, I enjoyed seeing it, I enjoyed being in it. It's a high point of TV drama.
[CLIP]

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NOTES

¹ Myskow is referring to the alleged influence exerted by Camilla Parker Bowles on the marriage of Prince Charles and Diana, Princess of Wales (1961-1997).

² *Alfie Darling* (1975)

³ *Eastenders* is a BBC television soap opera launched in 1985 and, as of 2020, still running.

⁴ Launched on the BBC Light Programme in January 1951 and still in production sixty-nine years on, *The Archers* is the longest-running radio serial in the world.

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