

The Magnet

UK : 1950 : dir. Charles Frend : Ealing : 79 min
 prod: Michael Balcon : scr: T. E. B. Clarke : dir.ph.:
*William Fox; Michael Brooke Jr; Lance Secretan; Keith Robinson; Thomas Johnston;
 David Boyd; Geoffrey Yin*
 Stephen Murray; Kay Walsh; Meredith Edwards; Gladys Henson; Thora Hird; Wylie Watson

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∞ M ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2873a	3.5	8	0	1,606	3 7 7 7 7	Yes	Dec 2002



*Not a still from the film, but a contemporary publicity shot. It's uncanny how far the expressions and mannerisms of the adult are present and correct in the boy.
 Source: indeterminate website*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Disarming study of fun-loving children at play, told intelligently from their own point of view; no phoney psychology thrown in.

Young William Fox is known today as James Fox. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above, but adding:

“...He withdrew from the film world to devote himself to religion and made a comeback in 1963. After that he was not to be seen again for years until he showed up on celluloid once more in 1982. In a religious film, naturally. *** ”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“A small boy steals a magnet and accidentally becomes a hero. Very mild Ealing comedy, not really up to snuff.¹”

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“T. E. B. Clarke wrote this unpretentious tale, filmed on Merseyside locations, which is rather more successful as a children's entertainment than as one of Ealing's comedies. An 11-year old boy² (William Fox, who became James Fox as an adult actor) tricks a smaller boy out of his toy, a magnet, and is then ashamed – a condition which becomes acute when he becomes a local hero by giving it away. Kay Walsh and Stephen Murray are Fox's parents, Gladys Henson and Thora Hird support³. ** ”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“William Fox (later known as James Fox) [plays] an imaginative 10-year old [who] swindles a lad out of a magnet, [and] is convinced the things is some sort of charm. Delightful comedy, clean and refreshing, sparkingly written. ***1/2 ”

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Cosy, charming Ealing comedy directed by Charles Frend about childhood. The leading child William Fox grew up to become actor James Fox. * ”

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on William Fox:

¹ Translation: it concentrates too much on children, never a plus for Halliwell.

² Aged 10

³ Thora Hird is virtually a walk-on

“William (later James) Fox was the younger brother of Edward Fox, but the first of the two by several years to take up acting. He was the nicest kind of upper-middle-class English schoolboy: polite but spirited, larky but easily embarrassed. In the peacetime sequel to **"MRS MINIVER"** he played Greer Garson's schoolboy son, back from evacuation in the USA with a baseball bat and some frightful slang. Then he had the lead in **"THE MAGNET"**, a modest and charming comedy in which he believes he has caused the death (through a broken heart) of a smaller boy whom he has tricked out of his dearest possession, a giant magnet. (He has in fact misunderstood an overheard conversation about a deceased budgerigar.)... ”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

TV Times note:

“A small boy acquires a magnet, thinking it is some kind of charm⁴. Starring young William Fox, who later changed his name to James.”

⁴ Nonsense. Watch the film why don't you !

Often described as a children's film, it might have amused the gentler tribes once, but its sensibilities and humour are clearly adult (without any of the connotations the word has since acquired). It lacks the elements of high farce which characterised many of the better known Ealing comedies, looking for smiles and chuckles rather than guffaws. Caught in the right mood it's delightful, particularly as a fond portrait of the 1940s English prep school boy, one with recognisable traits of the Just William about him, but who lands himself in a bit of a fix more by misunderstanding than mischief.

William Fox is a joy. There's something becomingly self-effacing about his performance, one of the characteristics that distinguishes his adult work too, and the adult James Fox is clearly recognisable in the speech and manners of this boy, training himself to write with his bare feet in bed, or discoursing on the finer points of naval torture "in the olden days" with a fisherman on the beach. He learns the old gypsy signs and markings now employed by "tramps" (a touch of 1940s political correctness there) to tell each other which homes are generous givers, and which better by-passed. "How long have those tadpoles been living in the bath?" is his father's first line in the film.

Johnny Brent is home from school under quarantine for scarlet fever. Meandering on the beach he spots a smaller boy with a horseshoe magnet, and tries to barter a swap for this with the inscrutable contents of his pockets, but the boy will not budge. Thwarted, Johnny offers the boy his "invisible watch", and the deal is done. The boy's nanny scolds Johnny for taking advantage, and demands he return the magnet at once, but Johnny panics and runs off, nearly throwing himself under the wheels of a passing car. At this moment a man passes by with a sandwich board promising "The Wicked Shall Be Punished" etc, and he decides he must get rid of his ill-gotten gains at the soonest opportunity.

Of course, the more he tries, the more difficult he finds it to put safe distance between him and the magnet. Finally he gives it to a fellow who has just developed an "iron lung" machine for use in local hospitals. The man is so touched by this gesture he retails the story in a fundraising speech, with splendid results. Encouraged, he elaborates the tale with each new fundraising event, until the anonymous urchin benefactor of the sick and needy has become a bye-word across the city. A reward is offered by the mayor if he can be located.

Johnny, suspecting nothing of this, thinks he has seen the last of the magnet, but on the train returning to school he sees the nanny of the little boy on the beach, discussing with a friend (Thora Hird, in a tiny role) the passing away of her dear little one, of a broken heart, she feels quite sure. She's referring to a budgerigar, but guilt-racked Johnny realises he has foully done the little lad to death. His parents grow mystified at his attempts to keep away from public view, and his psychologist father constructs an elaborate rationalisation (as they are wont to do) which is not even on nodding terms with the truth.

Cornered on the street one day, Johnny dives into the back of a biscuit van and is deposited at the Liverpool docks, where a ragged bunch of local boys, believing him a murderer on the run, agree to hide him away. The magnet, of course, is not quite done with him yet.

The bare bones of the storyline are uninspiring: various bland, insipid titles have covered the same territory of a child's "innocent" and misplaced guilt - **"THE YELLOW BALLOON"** (52), had Andrew Ray mistakenly suppose he's responsible for a friend's death; **"THE BOY AND THE BRIDGE"** (59), had Ian MacLaine, believing himself a murderer, hiding out on London Bridge, and **"THE LITTLE FUGITIVE"** (US 53), saw Rickie Brewster wandering forlorn through Coney Island, thinking he has killed his brother.

"THE MAGNET" predates all of these, but is also far less patronising of its central figure and, as a comedy of errors rather than a weepie, is more entertaining. If British children's cinema had been producing films of this calibre in the 1950s and 60s, I would have very little complaint about them. It is no **"TIGER BAY"** of course, but nor does it set out to be.

As with any film at this remove, it has added curiosity value in some of the topical asides it makes – on the still-newish N.H.S., or trendy psychoanalysis (worried mum diligently scribbling down all of Johnny's eccentric daily doings, at daddy's request). When Johnny returns to school, he must be careful not to forget his ration books, and the nanny is still a familiar figure in the landscape. Edwardian middle-class suburbia, still relatively unchanged in the post-war austerity period, is about to have its core values hit by a seismic shock called the sixties, but for now it all seems placid, safe and comforting. It must have been a good time to be a boy.

William Fox, whose father just happened to be a talent agent, was himself 11. The year before, he had a supporting part in the divorce tearjerker "**NO PLACE FOR JENNIFER**", and in 1950 also made "**THE LAVENDER HILL MOB**", "**THE MINIVER STORY**" and "**ONE WILD OAT**", but essentially this was his only screen outing of note, more's the pity. Michael Brooke Jr went on to appear in "**THE MUDLARK**" (51) with Andrew Ray, "**THE LONG ARM**" (56), "**X THE UNKNOWN**" (56) and "**THE SECRET PLACE**" (57). The strikingly-named Lance Secretan, also 11, made "**HIGHLY DANGEROUS**" the same year, and in 1952 the prosaic-sounding "**THE STOLEN PLANS**". Nothing else is known of the other boys named.

See subject index under **CHILD FUGITIVES, COMEDY, POLICE / SOCIAL WORKERS / CHILD PSYCHOLOGISTS, TOYS / DOLLS / MODELS**, and under **SEASIDE TRIPS & HOLIDAYS** for other seafront larks.