

The Wicker Man

UK : 1973 : dir. Robin Hardy : British Lion : 103 min
 prod: Peter Snell : scr: Anthony Shaffer : dir.ph.: Harry Waxman
[Geraldine Cowper](#); [Jennifer Martin](#)
 Edward Woodward; Christopher Lee; Britt Ekland; Diane Cilento; Ingrid Pitt; Lindsay Kemp;
 Lesley Mackie; Walter Carr; Russell Waters; Aubrey Morris; Irene Sunters; Roy Boyd

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ♀ M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Important safety tip: steer clear of barbecues on Summer Isle

Source: Radio Times

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Harrowing, absorbing thriller by Anthony Shaffer; not really a horror film as many believe. Scot police sergeant Woodward comes to a small island investigating the disappearance of a child, and discovers a society of modern pagans. Eerie and erotic, with seemingly authentic local colour and folk music; a must-see. Shown only in truncated versions for many years; beware the 87 minute and 95 minute prints, which may still be in circulation. ***½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review (of the 87-minute version):

"A horror film with few shocking moments (but all the more eroticism) which is stamped as a classic. The original, more's the pity, was a quarter hour longer, and still more of it will disappear for television. A Scottish detective investigates the case of a disappeared girl on Summer Island, where Lord Lee is the boss and the inhabitants organise all kinds of mediaeval pageants to ensure a good harvest. A film which demands the whole attention. ***½ "

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A policeman flies to a remote Scottish isle to investigate the death of a child¹, and finds himself in the hands of diabolists². Old-fashioned but remarkably well made scare story, with effective shock moments. * "

"An encouraging achievement for those who had begun to despair of the British cinema."
- David McGillivray

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"Policeman (Edward Woodward) investigates disappearance of girl on sinister Scottish island. A cult classic. Originally publicised as a horror film, this is really an erotic thriller about paganism and repression. Despite uninspired direction by Robin Hardy, the nasty ending still works powerfully, as indeed does the whole film - thanks to an excellent script by Anthony ("SLEUTH") Shaffer, which is in some respects a nightmarish reworking of "WHISKY GALORE" (1948). Avoid all but the 103-minute version. 7/10 "

Anti:

"The trouble is that the film... doesn't make the situation acceptable either as reality or fantasy"
- Patrick Gibbs, **Daily Telegraph**

"Hardy's real trouble... is his inability to posit anything but bluntly literal images... [He] industriously shows us pagan artefacts when he should be suggesting atavistic fears."
- Tom Allen, **Village Voice**

Mixed:

"Fascinating ingredients that do not quite blend... It is the kind of film that desperately needs the transforming hand of a good director... but in Robin Hardy's hands it remains raw material... [This] offbeat and exotic story has become... an erratic and ultimately forgettable little thriller."
- Nigel Andrews, **Financial Times**

"The story turns into a barbarous joke too horrible for pleasure, but one must admire the playing."
- **Sunday Times**

¹ *inaccurate*

² *ditto*

Pro:

"A weird, disturbing story... filmed with style and a genuine sense of what is horrific."
- Margaret Hinxman, **Sunday Telegraph**

"Superb, unclassifiable thriller"
- **Cinefantastique**

"A fascinating mix of horror, sex and pseudo-religion which makes for potent terror and gives Lee one of his finest roles." - Alan Frank

"Genuinely disturbing... [It lingers] in the mind long after more polished horror movies have faded from memory."
- Ken Russell, 1993

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Anthony Shaffer ("SLEUTH") wrote this disturbing sexual parable that has since developed cult status. Morals clash when a puritanical police officer goes to the Scottish Isles to investigate a child's disappearance, and discovers a pagan society whose inhabitants believe that lovemaking³ is the best way to fertilise the earth. Provocative and bizarre. Original version runs at 102 mins. *** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Clever tosh, written by Anthony Shaffer, directed by Robin Harvey and acted by a game lot of players (including Edward Woodward, Diane Cilento, Christopher Lee) who seduce you into believing one plot, then reveal the truth is quite different. Luckily it doesn't bear two minutes' examination, so shouldn't keep you awake, after chilling you at the time. 3 "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A bona fide British eccentric near-classic: devoutly virginal Protestant cop Edward Woodward is lured to a Scottish island to

³ *or copulation, to be more precise*

investigate a schoolgirl disappearance, and finds himself embroiled in a pottage of erotic paganism. Expertly scripted by Anthony Schaffer, and cast to get Christopher Lee into drag and Britt Ekland to play Lindsay Kemp's daughter, the movie is let down only by ham-fisted direction. A cult favourite in the U.S."



Choosing who to side with – between a cult of horny wiccan villagers and a sanctimonious Presbyterian policeman – is not a straightforward matter.

Source: indeterminate

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"One of the most unusual British horror films since Hammer pumped new blood into the genre in the mid-Fifties. **"THE WICKER MAN"** was treated somewhat unfairly by its distributors, being sent out as a second feature to **"DON'T LOOK NOW"**, which meant that it was hardly noticed, and, indeed, half-missed by many. It turns out to be a chilling relative of **"THE DARK SECRET OF HARVEST HOME"**, all about pagan worship on a Scottish offshore island, and very persuasively written by Anthony Schaffer, author of **"SLEUTH"** and other big stage-into-film hits. A very good, unsettling performance from Edward Woodward is far removed from his famous portrait of **"Callan"** in the long-running TV series. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"**"THE WICKER MAN"** was lensed entirely on location in Scotland and is possessed of a weird and paganistic story. Anthony Schaffer penned the screenplay which, for sheer imagination and near-terror, has seldom been equalled. Frightening aspects build one upon the other as a Scottish police sergeant arrives on a little offshore island to investigate the disappearance of a young girl. He finds, under the regime of an all-powerful, benevolent and suave despot, a sinister situation dating back to the days of pagan practices and fertility rites. Edward Woodward plays the role of the sergeant who arrives to find a conspiracy of silence and is forced into a fatal part in the paganistic rituals. Christopher Lee is the cultured feudal Lord Summerisle, lord of the island. Both score in their roles."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"An anonymous letter that implies a missing girl has been murdered brings Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward), of Scotland Yard⁴ to Summer Isle, an island off the coast of England⁵. The islanders are anything but co-operative. Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee), the ruler and religious leader of the island, seems to take it all as a joke, so Howie swears to find the truth. Rated "R". ****½ "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"Sgt Neil Howie (Woodward) is a devoutly Christian policeman and lay minister, still an unmarried virgin though middle-aged. After receiving an anonymous lead pertaining to the whereabouts of a missing girl, Neil heads out to Summerisle, a Scottish island community within his jurisdiction, in search of clues. What he finds on the island is a pagan cult led by Lord Summerisle (Lee), which offers a human sacrifice every year⁶.

Here we have the unusual case of a film about a pagan cult that has developed a cult of its very own. Drastically cut by its original distributors (from 102 minutes to 87 minutes), poorly marketed, and subsequently little seen, **"THE**

⁴ no he isn't

⁵ no it isn't

⁶ Absolute nonsense

WICKER MAN" developed a reputation as a lost masterpiece of mystery and the macabre. Fuelled by actor Christopher Lee's comments that the film contained his best performance, a rabid group of fans went about extolling the movie's virtues. When director Robin Hardy's reconstructed original cut of the film was finally released on videocassette (seven minutes are still missing), opinion over the much-anticipated film was split: people either loved it or hated it.

While no masterpiece, the film is a fascinating examination of the conflict between fundamental Christianity and paganism. The performances are uniformly excellent, and Hardy's direction is quite evocative, bizarre, witty, erotic, and downright chilling. ***½ "

[no listing in "The Good Film and Video Guide" or "Rating the Movies (1990)"]

Metro review:

"A classic suspense thriller from 1973, in which director Robin Hardy creates a scary, isolated Scottish island community whose members know how to keep secrets. Christopher Lee is Lord Summerisle, who presides over a society that embraces paganism *[sic]* and ritual and apparently knows nothing about the disappearance of schoolgirl Rowan Morrison. Devout Christian policeman Neil Howie (Edward Woodward) faces numerous distractions when he arrives on the island to investigate and is deeply suspicious of the forthcoming May Day festival. It may be old but the film's conclusion still terrifies."

Radio Times reviews:

"A devoutly Christian policeman finds his beliefs tested to the limit when he investigates the disappearance of a young girl on the pagan shores of Summerisle in one of the all-time fantasy cult classics. With a literate script by "SLEUTH" playwright Anthony Shaffer, and a memorable Scottish folk score, director Robin Hardy's fascinating mixture of horror, eroticism and religion is a thoughtful, challenging and highly provocative mystery thriller, which delves into strange goings-on within an island community. Christopher Lee, who plays the lord of the island, thinks it's the finest film he's ever made - and he's right. ***** "

"A policeman gets an anonymous letter suggesting that a girl has disappeared from a small island community. He begins to investigate. ***** "

"The director's cut of the occult thriller, showing in the Fear season. A policeman investigating the disappearance of a girl from a small island community soon discovers that life on the island is not all it seems. ***** "

What's On TV review:

"City policeman Edward Woodward arrives on the remote Scottish island of Summerisle to investigate the disappearance of a young girl. He soon finds his Christian principles under threat from the strange local community who seem to have reverted to pagan ways. Intricately plotted and with an excellent folk music score, this is one of the most original British films of the Seventies. With Christopher Lee in drag and Britt Ekland in nothing at all, it has a suggestive atmosphere and a cruel logic unlike any other horror movie. 3333 "

"Thriller. A Glasgow policeman travels to the remote Scottish island of Summerisle to investigate the disappearance of a young girl. When he gets there, he discovers that this isolated community seems to have reverted to a pagan way of life - including rituals..."

"Thriller. Edward Woodward stars as a mainland policeman who flies out to a remote Scottish island to investigate the death of a child."

"Horror movie. A policeman discovers a grisly secret on a remote Scottish island. Stars Edward Woodward, Britt Ekland and Christopher Lee. 3333 "

Sunday Times review:

"A British cult classic, it is an unnerving horror film set in one of the Western Isles, where a morally upright policeman from the Scottish mainland (Edward Woodward) is investigating a girl's disappearance. He finds himself up against a sinister landowner (Christopher Lee) and an unhealthy interest among the islanders in pagan rituals. Eventually, it degenerates into a human sacrifice."

Readers' letters to **Movie Collector** magazine:

"Following Brad Stevens' mention of the various versions of **"THE WICKER MAN"**, can I say that I've actually seen the full-length version, on (projected) video, at Illumination, the British Science Fiction convention, over Easter weekend 1992 in Blackpool. Where the video came from I don't know - my guess is that it was an American NTSC copy. I timed the full version at 103 minutes at 24 frames per second (which agrees with the running time listed in Maltin's Film Guide). The major differences are as follows (I'm relying on memory, so this may be a little vague).

The opening sequence is completely different: the title thanking Lord Summerisle is still there, but is followed by the credits rolling over a scene showing Howie arriving at a crime scene by seaplane. Howie wanders around the scene (vandalised, with graffiti on walls). Then Howie drives to the police station by car and has a short conversation with a fellow police officer in which Howie makes clear that he thinks society is in a moral decline. There is a short scene where two policemen talk about Howie ("saving himself for his wedding day" ie a virgin) before Howie enters the room. The next scene is the one of Howie in the church that begins the 93 minute version. There may be other small additions.

- Gary Couzens, Aldershot"

"With regard to **"THE WICKER MAN"**, while I abhor Warner Home video's release of the 84 minute cut version and applaud the BBC for transmitting a more correct 89 minute print, I must ask why this British horror classic cannot be seen in this country in all its full 97 minute (at 25 frames per second) glory. Surely if a print exists in the US then some enterprising video company or TV executive can obtain it? Collectors are forever paying out extra money for "special editions" and "widescreen" prints and would therefore be willing to fork out the extra pounds a full version of **"THE WICKER MAN"** would cost. Perhaps Nigel Wyngrove of Redemption Video would be interested as he appears to be sensitive to the needs of collectors and always obtains the best and most complete prints available. I live in hope.

- Neil Irving, High Wycombe, Bucks"



Christopher Lee in seventies fashion scare. See the bright lemon turtle neck! Experience the coiffure!
Source: Metro

Caption to front page still from The Encyclopedia of Horror:

"According to Julius Caesar, in the first century BC some of the Celtic tribes used to build colossal images of wickerwork which they filled with criminals and set on fire as a sacrifice to the gods. Scene from **"THE WICKER MAN"**."

Anthony Shaffer not only penned "**SLEUTH**" (with its gee-whiz twist ending), but also "**ABSOLUTION**" (with its gee-whiz twist ending), so that audiences familiar with his tricks will be smelling a rat far sooner than Edward Woodward, just as crossword puzzlers become familiar with the favoured devices of individual compilers. Shaffer likes to lead us up the garden path, cavorting like Christopher Lee at the head of his Mayday procession.

One of the more intriguing aspects of this – to my mind greatly over-rated – film is the opening caption, which thanks the incumbent lord of Summerisle for granting the film-makers a privileged insight into the beliefs and practices of his island community. Given that the film goes on to portray his island as a hotbed of debauchery, whose inhabitants are happy to sanction human sacrifice, one is bound to wonder what actually *does* go on there!

It was certainly unfair of the distributors to release this in tandem with "**DON'T LOOK NOW**", a vastly superior and more disturbing chiller, and perhaps the only reason it acquired cult status among horror devotees is that the general standard of British horror films is so appalling (many thanks, Hammer) that any halfway competent or literate title will come as a welcome respite. "**WITCHFINDER GENERAL**" enjoyed a similar status, for example, although in many ways it is a pedestrian, leery work. Certain flourishes of craftsmanship set it apart, as they did "**BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW**", which resembles this in its lip-smacking concentration on licentiousness as the bedrock of what Christians are pleased to call "paganism" (any myths and rituals which preceded Christian myths and rituals).

The ideological clash between Woodward's priggish protestantism and the shag-happy pagan islanders is conveyed in such a way that we're not encouraged to side with either one, but recognise both as dangerous mass delusions, and this was no doubt part of Shaffer's purpose. Lay preacher Woodward is anything but a sympathetic figure, his impatience and disgust at the practices he finds on Summerisle seem more prudery than piety. His protests about a parthenogenic rite involving young nude maidens are quickly stunned into silence when Christopher Lee remarks that Christ was supposedly the child of a virgin impregnated by a ghost. In the grisly final scene, Woodward's chanting of "The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" blends seamlessly with Lee's chanting of "Summer is ikumen in, loud now sing cuckoo". A lesser film would have invited the audience to join in the policeman's pious condemnation of the pagans (notwithstanding the blood sacrifice which is the basis of their own belief), but "**THE WICKER MAN**", to its credit, does not do so. We are disturbed at what religious frenzy and obedience will countenance, especially if we do not ourselves trudge regularly to the church, synagogue or mosque.

Although not a horror film in the general sense, it belongs to a recognisable sub-genre which spans horror, Westerns and science-fiction: an outsider rides/drives/sails unwittingly into a remote and closed community where he/she finds all the occupants colluding in something hidden and unsavoury. It is the basic strand that links "**THE STEPFOOD WIVES**", "**HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER**" and many a more conventional horror tale. The islanders of "**THE WICKER MAN**" are the hillbillies of "**DELIVERANCE**" – hostile, inbred and disturbing in their lack of awe for the great "civilised" world beyond. Their self-sufficiency is an affront to the outsider's preconceptions of superiority.

Woodward is on fine form as inspector Howie, and although his performance is not really distinguishable from the one in "**BREAKER MORANT**", this would probably count as his best film. Not so Christopher Lee, kitted out in a preposterous toupée and lemon turtle neck sweater. Given that he's named in the Guinness Book of Records as having made more films than any living actor, it would be a sorry reflection indeed if this were his best performance. And the wholly inappropriate soundtrack of singalongawicca folk songs only confuse the issue with echoes of "**WOODSTOCK**" and hippy nature worship, conflating the two perhaps deliberately.

But the main flaw here is the perennial British anxiety about S – E – X. How *could* a British film ever hope to convey the steamy passion of Dionysian rites while contending with our draconian film censorship? The more we try to be trendy and permissive, the more starkly we reveal our terror of carnality. British mainstream pornography – as typified by the "**CONFESSIONS...**" series – is about as far from genuine eroticism and sensuality as the "**CARRY ON**" films they most resemble. "**THE WICKER MAN**" strives to create an atmosphere of seething sexuality and it fails pitifully. The steamy nocturnal gambols of innkeeper's daughter Britt Ekland are intended to raise the sap of every red-blooded (heterosexual) male, but only show us Ekland acting poorly again (as she did in "**NIGHT HAIR CHILD**" two years before with Mark Lester), and the full-length nude shots of her are all taken from behind in any case, and clearly used a "body double", not Ekland herself.

This is "eroticism" on the level of the tabloid pin-up. It is just too absurd to essay a portrayal of concupiscence when the film dare not let us glimpse a penis, or even a vagina, but only Ekland's wriggling bottom. The "nude schoolgirls", dancing round a fire as Woodward drives out to meet Lord Summerisle, are all over 18 and not in fact nude, and since "**THE WICKER MAN**" was released around the time that "**FELLINI-SATYRICON**" and the bawdy romps of Pasolini were on general release in the UK, its limitations were only too apparent to audiences of the day. Ironically, there is more graphic and highly charged sex in "**DON'T LOOK NOW**", where it has no bearing on the central plot, than in "**THE WICKER MAN**", where it is the central motif.

From the archive's perspective its interest is very slight indeed. 12-year old Rowan Morrison (Jennifer Martin), the girl whose disappearance brings Howie to the island, is glimpsed only for a moment. Howie briefly interviews her 9-year old sister Myrtle (Geraldine Cowper). There is a scene where the policeman visits the island school, to find young boys capering about a maypole (more writhing bottoms) and a class of girls being taught that the maypole is a symbol of the phallus (so that's enough stroking the maypole, you boys outside!). At the inn that night, Howie overhears a "boy" in a kilt being delivered into the embraces of Ekland, who supposedly represents the embodiment of Aphrodite (scarcely a Celtic deity), and Howie encounters one or two other children when he attempts single-handedly to search the whole village for the missing girl.

But needless to say, and for the very same reasons about censorship constraints, the children of the village go mysteriously AWOL during the island's crucial Mayday celebrations, even though by the story's own logic mainland laws regarding notional "ages of consent" would have been jettisoned along with Christianity. Children and sex is a powerful tabu – even more so now than in the 1970s – and instead of harnessing audience shock by suggesting that tabu has been crossed, the film shies away and keeps to the unproblematic premise of rustic rutting, as did "**BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW**".

The film intends to convey a community governed by the worship of earth spirits and fertility gods, practising in other words "the old religion" ("Wicker" in the title is also a pun on Wicca) but it fails to create a credible aura of superstition and folk magic. It is not, as it ought to be, a sinister film, partly because the grim fatalism of rustic superstition is absent. For these people to be dabbling in earth religion seems mere dilettantism rather than the deep-ingrained beliefs of farming folk. It amounts to nothing more than a village pageant taken to extreme literalism.

See also "**ABSOLUTION**", where Richard Burton plays a Catholic internate father whose prize pupil uses the seal of the confessional to announce a murder, and subject index under **LOST & FOUND, RELIGION, SEX & SEXUALITY** and **HORROR / SUPERNATURAL**.