

David Copperfield

UK : 1913 : dir. Thomas Bentley : Walturdaw
 prod: : scr: Thomas Bentley : dir.ph.:

Silent : 125 min

Eric Desmond (Reggie Sheffield); Edna May
 Kenneth Ware; Len Bethel; H. Collins; Alma Taylor; Jack Hulcup; Jamie Darling; Amy Verity;
 Cecil Mannering; Ella Fineberg; Miss Harcourt; Johnny Butt; Miss West; Shiel Porter;
 Tom Arnold; Harry Royston; Marie de Solla

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Not a still from the film, but a contemporary portrait of Eric Desmond, and the shadow of his later son, Johnny Sheffield, is plainly visible on him.
 Source: The Moving Picture Boy

The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985 listing:

"Drama. Runaway orphan is adopted by aunt and eventually finds love. (First British 8-reel feature)."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Desmond:

"Matthew Reginald Sheffield Cassan came from a family with a strong sense of pedigree. He claimed direct descent on his father's side from the 17th-century soldier, poet and courtier John Sheffield, 1st Duke of Buckingham, and on his mother's side from Benjamin Franklin. Hopes of a transatlantic dynasty were not, as it turned out, to be wholly disappointed.

The sturdy, curly-haired little boy was discovered by the British director, producer and inventor Cecil Hepworth, and appeared as Reggie Sheffield in what is said to have been his debut film, "**LIEUTENANT PIE'S LOVE STORY**". In August 1913 he changed his screen name to Eric Desmond (after the Earls of Desmond?) but appeared on the London stage the following month, in a Charles Hawtrey farce, as Reginald Sheffield. It was as Eric Desmond, though, that he continued busily to perform for Hepworth until 1915, when he became a war evacuee to the USA and appeared in his first American film - as Reginald Sheffield. All very confusing.

In 1939 a sturdy, curly-haired little boy called Johnny Sheffield burst into the Hollywood jungle wearing nothing but a loincloth, but otherwise looking the spitting image of pre-1914 Eric Desmond. Needless to say, this was the evacuee's son, and the evacuee himself had made a very useful Hollywood career as a debonair, aristocratic character actor - one which he kept going right up to his death in 1957. He played President Grant in "**CENTENNIAL SUMMER**" (46).

It hadn't, though, lived up to the hopes of one who had played the hero of "**DAVID COPPERFIELD**" both as a child (in 1913) and as a man (in 1923). The boy David in Thanhouser's 1911 "**DAVID COPPERFIELD**", incidentally, was played by one of the company's female stars, Flora Foster."

Cast:

David (as child)**Eric Desmond**
David (as youth)Len Bethel
David (as man)Kenneth Ware
Wilkins MicawberH. Collins
Uriah HeepJack Hulcup
Betsy TrotwoodMiss Harcourt
Little Emily (as child)**Edna May**
Little EmilyAmy Verity
Dora SpenlowAlma Taylor
Daniel PeggottyJamie Darling
SteerforthCecil Mannering
Agnes WickfieldElla Fineberg
Mr MurdstoneJohnny Butt
Mrs MicawberMiss West
Mr WickfieldShiel Porter
HamTom Arnold
Mr CreakleHarry Royston
Mrs GummidgeMarie de Solla

[no listing in "Classics of the Silent Screen", "A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen", "Silent Movies: A Picture Quiz Book", "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. This is the second of dozens of adaptations of Dickens' favourite novel, and the first to be shot in England with an English cast. At 125 minutes (calculated at the silent film frame rate) it is also a substantial feature even by modern standards (the 1935 Freddie Bartholomew version was only five minutes longer). Holmstrom says that the earlier "**DAVID COPPERFIELD**" was played by a woman (which certainly would have been in keeping with cinema convention of the day), but stills from the film suggest to me he was played by Thanhouser boy star Leland Benham.

Eric Desmond was 12. He also featured in "**THE PRINCES IN THE TOWER**" (13), "**ENTERTAINING UNCLE**" (14), "**LITTLE BOY BOUNTIFUL**" (14), "**THE MAGIC CLASS**" (14) and many others. Nothing else is known of Edna May, who plays Little Emily, but by a happy coincidence it was namesake Edna May Oliver who played Betsy Trotwood in the 1935 film.

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