

Peterborough Arts Cinema

Films that make you think

Thursday 4th January at 7:30 pm

The Levelling (2016) UK

R | 1h 23min

Director; Hope Dickson Leach

Stars: Ellie Kendrick, David Troughton and Jack Holden

Somerset, October 2014. When Clover Catto (Ellie Kendrick) receives a call telling her that her younger brother Harry (Joe Blakemore) is dead, she must return to her family farm and face the man she hasn't spoken to in years: her father Aubrey (David Troughton). She is shocked to discover her home changed forever by the devastating floods that destroyed the area six months earlier, and Aubrey a tormented shadow of his former self. As she learns what has been going on in her long absence she and her father forge a new understanding.



The rains arrived just in time for new year. By the end of January, [16,000 acres of Somerset were submerged](#). Owls starved on the wing and fell dead from the sky. In the parish of [Middlezoy](#), a farmer would later recall how he tried and failed to save a drowning hare, in the midst of evacuating his parents, his kids, and 400 head of cattle. At that moment the hare's rescue seemed the most important task in the world, like some rustic remake of Saving Private Ryan; as though by saving the hare he could save the whole country too.

Writer-director [Hope Dickson Leach](#) was told this story when researching her debut feature, The Levelling, which spotlights the aftermath of the 2014 floods. Ideally she would have liked to include it – except that her film is not Saving Private Ryan and was never meant to be. Instead it is one of a rare breed of new British social-realist dramas that abandon the inner city in favour of muddy forecourts and derelict barns. Like Francis Lee's [God's Own Country](#) or Clio Barnard's Yorkshire-set [Dark River](#), The Levelling reveals an English countryside in crisis; isolated and impoverished, stumbling towards a Brexit that it largely voted for. Hares drown in the fields and the farms are going bankrupt. There's not a lot to celebrate in this unclean, unpleasant land. In making her film, Dickson Leach took her lead from French and Belgian cinema. She likes how the Dardennes brothers bring a hand-held camera into the heart of the action; the way Bruno Dumont frames the flat, brutal landscape. "British films about the countryside are still very rare," she says. "There are so many stories that just aren't getting told."

Why so? "I think that rich, middle-class people tend to live in London. They tend to be the people who make films – and also go to see them. So there's a lack of belief that anyone would be interested in rural stories. Also, there's a tension in talking about farming. [Farming](#) is seen as old-fashioned, conservative. It's a community that city people feel they intrinsically don't understand. I understand the mistrust," she says. "It's a very closed society. You're living an isolated life and the pressures are enormous. There are very high levels of depression and suicide. Your livelihood is dependent on the weather, subsidies and migrant labour." She shakes her head. "And yet this is the community that voted for Brexit. I still can't reconcile that. I mean, I can understand the frustration and the need for change, but Brexit really worries me. It's going to make the farming community so much more reliant on the Chinese market. So you have this crazy situation born out of desperation. The countryside is broken. It's not financially viable." The statistics appear to bear her out. West Somerset recently ranked at the [bottom of the government's social mobility index](#), hobbled by a lack of industry and seasonal employment. Further afield, the picture is little better. Rural workers earn 12% less than their urban counterparts and yet pay three times more in travel costs and heating bills. Around 15% of the population is living in poverty. According to a recent study by the Local Government Association and Public Health England, "[rural social networks are breaking down](#), with a consequent increase in social isolation and loneliness." The report adds for good measure that broadband connection is fitful. The digital gap leads to more isolation. Xan Brooks, Guardian April 2017. Edited by Alex O'Reilly

