

THE BETJEMAN SOCIETY

Patron: Jonathan Glancey

Past President: Bevis Hillier Founder and Vice-President: Philippa Davies
Vice-Presidents: Tim Betjeman, Barry Humphries CBE, Edward Mirzoeff CVO CBE, John R. Murray,
Martin Revill and Jonathan Stedall

PRESS RELEASE

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BETJEMAN SOCIETY CELEBRATES HALF CENTURY OF LANDMARK TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY – ‘METRO-LAND’

Fifty years ago this month, the classic BBC documentary film *Metro-Land* was broadcast for the first time. A 50-minute film, written and presented by the journalist, poet and broadcaster Sir John Betjeman, it is recognised as a landmark in broadcasting history and has been repeated many times since. It is scheduled to be screened once again on the evening of Sunday 26 February, exactly 50 years to the day since its television debut.

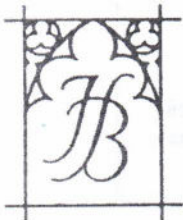
First screened on 26 February 1973, *Metro-Land* was intended from the start to be a hymn of praise to suburbia – at a time when ‘suburban’ was a pejorative term and Betjeman was determined to counter the prevailing view of outer London. In a letter to the Controller of BBC2, Robin Scott, Betjeman had written: “Most people are suburban and won’t admit it. What trim gardens we could show, what shopping arcades, front halls, churches, human-scale paths and bicycle tracks and open spaces. I see it as a thanks-giving for traffic-free privacy.”

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of *Metro-Land*, the Betjeman Society has planned a number of celebratory activities, including a special on-line event on Friday 24 February in which the programme’s director Edward Mirzoeff (a Vice-President of the Betjeman Society) and hopefully other members of the original production team will join members of the Betjeman Society to discuss the making of the programme and to reflect on its lasting impact and success.

Metro-Land takes its title from the advertising slogan used by property developers in the 1920s to promote the middle-class villas they were building in the towns along the Metropolitan Line. According to Mirzoeff, the film was partly inspired by Betjeman’s recollections of his excursions to outer-London cinemas in the 1930s when he was a young journalist and film critic.

In the film, Betjeman takes us on a tour of key locations along the old Metropolitan Railway route (now the London Underground Metropolitan Line) from Baker Street station through Wembley, Pinner and Chorleywood (“essential Metro-Land” in Betjeman’s words) and ending at the abandoned Verney Junction in Buckinghamshire, a long-closed station now reclaimed by nature. Throughout the film, Betjeman provides succinct and entertaining commentary – some of it in verse – and the 1970s scenes are interwoven with black-and-white film shot from a Metropolitan Railway train in 1910.

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Betjeman Society spokesman Andy Smith explains: "Betjeman used *Metro-Land* to highlight 'everyday' English suburban life but in a hugely engaging way, thanks to Eddie Mirzoeff's skilful direction and the poet's own memorable narration. In the film, communities in such places as St John's Wood, Neasden, Harrow, Rickmansworth and Amersham are the stars of the show. As the reviewer Richard Last wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, Betjeman 'takes you to Chorleywood and leaves you feeling you have voyaged up the Orinoco.' It is a truly remarkable film and it's no surprise that it continues to entertain, enthral and inspire viewers five decades after it was first shown."

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For further information, please contact the Betjeman Society press officer Andy Smith on 07737 271676, email wordsmithreviews@yahoo.co.uk

Editor's Note: The Betjeman Society was established in 1988 to advance the appreciation of the work of the poet, writer, broadcaster and conservationist **Sir John Betjeman** (1906-1984). We also exist to inform and inspire our members and the wider public through the study, awareness and enjoyment of his life, work and influence, both in the United Kingdom and internationally. The Society is a member of the Alliance of Literary Societies and works in partnership with a range of literary, conservation and heritage organisations, with which Sir John Betjeman was closely associated. They include The Victorian Society, Twentieth Century Society, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Churches Conservation Trust and National Churches Trust.