THE LOST AND FOUND FILM



Maddy Fry charts how a 1960s documentary recreating colourful scenes from the Abbey's history was rediscovered after decades in the wilderness

It's one of the most compelling images to come out of Westminster Abbey (which, we can agree, is saying something): James Mason, a veteran of Hollywood's 'golden age', is seen lounging in Poets' Corner while starring in the 1967 documentary *Hall of Kings*, screened by the US television network ABC.

Mason was a popular actor, bringing a brooding, sartorial edge to his roles in *Lolita* and *North by Northwest*. He came to the Abbey with a timbre that director Harry Rasky claimed was 'an instrument comparable to a Stradivarius'.

Filming at the Abbey was, and is, notoriously difficult due to the shape of the building. It's hard not to force everything else to stop when film crews arrive — something of an issue in a working church. The fact that Rasky succeeded, in the teeth of very reluctant Abbey staff, and won an Emmy for it, is all the more remarkable.

And yet, we can't hear the voices or see the moving images those stills were taken from. There's nothing on YouTube, and little available online from print media at the time, save for a small story from *The New York Times* announcing the broadcast. That cluster of photos (available on Google, but unavailable for print) is all we have left of this rare moment in the Abbey's history. Or so we thought.

This year, the Abbey's 'lost film' was found buried in the archives of the University of Toronto, and the Abbey staff have been able to see it for the first time. The key to unlocking a very British story was hidden all this time in Canada. Getting there was quite a journey. An adventure, even. To understand the story of *Hall of Kings* fully, we have to go back to a very different world.

Opposite: James Mason, publicity shot for *North by Northwest*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, MGM, 1959

Credit: Alamy