

Olive's diary is being given a new lease of life online

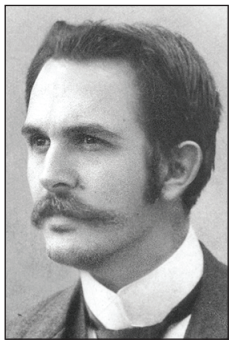
Facebook and Twitter relive 1914 youth tales

by JANE HANKS

SOCIAL media has given a new voice to two young people who lived and died 100 years ago in France, one real and one fictitious.

More than 64,000 "likes" have been registered on the Facebook page set up by the Musée de la Grande Guerre du Pays de Meaux which published the day to day account of Léon Vivien, an imaginary soldier who went to the Front in June 1914 and kept a diary up to his death in April 1915.

The museum estimates it reached nine million internet users and many left commentaries showing how much they had been moved by Léon's words which were created to give an idea of what life was really like for a soldier in the trenches.



9million have read museum's imagined soldier's diary

He writes: "A 20 year old bloke was killed this morning. A brave young man who had just arrived ... The bullet made a thud as it entered his body ... I see once more the pallor which invaded his face. The collapse of his features. The distress in his eyes as life left him. Amongst us are skillful craftsmen ... They take an enemy's cartridge case, the remains of a shell or a defused grenade, they patiently twist the metal and in a few hours create something unique. An object

which, in any case will no longer kill men."

Lyse Hautecoeur, spokeswoman for the museum, says the success took them by surprise: "This was a first for a museum in France and we think it worked because it talks about history in a new way, which speaks directly to the public." As a result of the experiment the diary has now been published in book form.

Meanwhile, the real diary of a 16-year-old English girl from Kent who was sent to school in Paris in January 1914 but who died just eight weeks later is on Twitter – where you will be able to read her story as it unfolds day to day up to her tragic and dramatic death on February 25. Olive Higgins' diary was discovered by British journalist Rob McGibbon.

He says: "I like her. A lot of her entries show that she was very homesick as she was the only English girl in her school and had very little French. But she writes with great honesty and has a real sense of humour."

She describes Paris during the final days of La Belle Époque: "All along the streets from the MOST swell-est down to the very poorest are crowds of cafes where one sits out on the pavement and has coffee or chocolate." Or when she went to the Louvre: "As well as the famous *La Joconde* with her very ordinary smile and unintelligent expression the crowds flocking chiefly to see her vacant looking head, some paintings are so realistic that one feels almost as though they are living beings."

After many years of research in which Mr McGibbon says Olive became an obsession he had the idea of putting her words on the web. "I decided that the most important thing was to give her a voice and that is the beauty of putting it on the social media. So people can read her life as it was exactly a hundred years ago, to the day."

■ **Léon Vivien:** www.facebook.com/leon1914

■ **Olive's diary:** www.twitter.com/olivesdiary1914



A team of five volunteers work all year round on the festival

Teacher's British film festival idea attracts cinema big names

by SAMANTHA DAVID

A FESTIVAL set up by a *lycée* teacher has grown to become one of France's biggest celebrations of British film, attracting famous visitors including Ken Loach.

This year, Mike Leigh and Peter Lord, two giants of British cinema, are guests of honour at the Ecrans Britanniques film festival in Nîmes, which runs from February 14-23 at three venues in the city and encompasses master classes and talks as well as screenings. This year's round table event on February 22 will be on the theme "Scottish Film: Past and Present". "We don't award prizes," says Isabelle Cases, the president of the festival. "We concentrate on presenting retrospectives and we also screen lesser-known or unseen films by well-known directors. That may be why we can attract big names."

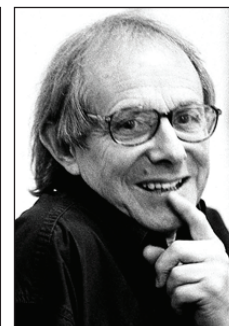
Their past guests include John Boorman, Michael Caton-Jones, Peter Greenaway, Peter Kosminsky and Terence Davies.

The festival was started in 1997 by Francis Rousselet, an English teacher at a local lycée, who was a fan of British cinema and often used films to help students improve their English. He and a group of like-minded teachers, friends and relations, set up an association and launched into the business of setting up a 10-day festival. "Francis is very knowledgeable about British filmmaking, and still does all our programming," says Bob Davis, the vice-president.

It takes nearly all year to organise a festival, so the team (five volunteers) starts work on it around Easter time. "We have a shoestring



Mike Leigh visits this year; Ken Loach in past



budget but we do get a small grant from the local authorities and we raise a bit of money by selling advertising in the programme, and we have membership fees, so we cover our costs," explains Bob. "But ticket receipts go to the venues, so it really is a labour of love."

Bob worked in documentary film-making in the UK before he retired to France. "But then of course I found out about the festival and got involved. It's mainly a French thing. There is one other Brit on the organisation committee and our audiences are 90-95% French. So I've really had to learn French."

He is keen to emphasise that the festival is open to everyone. "The screenings at the Bibliothèque Carré D'Art are free and you can't reserve places, so it is always possible to go along and get tickets."

The festival regularly attracts total audiences of around 7-8,000 people and its reputation is growing all the time. "It's even becoming

known in the UK," says Bob, "and people in the film industry know about it too which is really good. The association has around 200 members who are core supporters and we run an annual competition to design the poster, which also raises awareness. The prize is €400, which I think is very generous."

True to its roots, there is still an educational element within the festival. Isabelle adds: "We have strong links with middle and secondary schools in the area, and whole classes come to some screenings. It's not just about language though, we really love British cinema – that's why we don't give up when inviting guests. Sometimes we'll go on inviting someone for years before they finally accept."

Despite being a relatively small festival, she thinks filmmakers enjoy it because it is not competitive, and because they concentrate on lesser known and unseen films, retrospectives and films selected around a strong theme. "People in the area really look forward to it too. It balances cultural life in Nîmes, which has a strong Spanish flavour with the bull-fighting and *ferias*."

The team is looking forward to this year's festival. Isabelle adds: "It's going to be very special, but of course the best is always at the end. During the festival it's really hard work, solving problems, dealing with everything, running from here to there – the pleasure is afterwards when you can see it's a job well done, and the festival was a success... and then you start planning all over again for the next year."

For the programme, see the website: www.ecransbritanniques.org

Other British film events across France

■ Ajaccio, Corsica: "Under My Screen" is a competitive festival held annually in December to showcase British and Irish filmmaking. (See under-my-screen.com)

■ Dinard, Brittany: The British Film Festival of Dinard, in October, is possibly the largest in France, attracting around 30,000 film fans and acting not only as a competition but as a film marketplace. (See festivaldufilm-dinard.com/en)

■ Montesquieu, Tarn-et-Garonne: This well-established midsummer festival (August) showcases British films and offers a bargain passport costing €20 for five films. (britishfilms-montesquieu.co.uk)

■ Nantes, Pays-de-la-Loire: This new festival is held in November, showcasing around 18 British films and awarding two

prizes, one from a jury and the other from public votes. (More information at britannique.univercine-nantes.org)

■ Rouen, Normandy: "This is England", held each November, screens British shorts with prizes for best fiction, best animation etc. thisisengland-festival.com/fr

■ Rouillac, Poitou-Charentes: The small but perfectly-formed Anna Searle Film Festival (April 25-27) showcases just five of the best British films released during the preceding year and is advertised in local press and posters in local shops.

■ Villeurbanne, Lyon, Rhône: Cine o'Clock runs from February 2-10, screening British and Irish films. There are also various social events and "British style" meals. See cineoclock.com

How to do it yourself

■ Set up a 1901 Association at the local mairie.

■ Pull together a dedicated, knowledgeable, hard-working team who are ready to give their time and talent for nothing. Work includes researching films and formats, inviting guests, dealing with venues and local authorities, keeping accounts, liaising with press and organising all practical details.

■ Get support from local authorities in the shape of grants, use of venues etc.

■ Persist with the project. It takes time to build a reputation, among filmmakers and the public.

■ Appeal to as broad a demographic as possible. Present films aimed at younger as well as older audiences.