

# The Blue Plaque

## Boris Karloff

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The silent film star Lon Chaney once advised William Henry Pratt, better known as Boris Karloff, that the route to success in the movies was to find something that other actors can't or won't do.

Karloff was in his forties before he found the opportunity to make the most of Chaney's advice but his appearance as Frankenstein's monster in the 1931 film began his long and successful career as Hollywood's favourite horror actor. It was a role that Bela Lugosi had turned down, on the grounds that he would have nothing to say and his fans would be unable to recognise him beneath all the make-up. Karloff had no such worries even though his name was replaced by a question mark in the credits to increase the mystery of the monster.

The son of a civil servant, Karloff was born in the house in Forest Hill Road, SE22 that now has a blue plaque on it. He was educated at an English public school and at London University and his family expected him to join the diplomatic service. However, he had other ideas. He emigrated to Canada in 1909, choosing that country rather than Australia after tossing a coin, and soon found himself work as an actor with a small touring company. He had always wanted to be on the stage. He once said, jokingly, that, 'When I was nine I played the demon king in Cinderella and it launched me on a long and happy life of being a monster.' He worked as a jobbing actor in Canada and the USA for the next decade.

For the decade after that he appeared in small roles in silent films before sound hit Hollywood and, a few years later, Karloff got his lucky break in Frankenstein. He continued to appear in horror films for the rest of his life, playing parts that ranged from an ancient Egyptian priest brought back to life in The Mummy to a devil-worshipping cat-lover who keeps bodies in the basement of his mansion in The Black Cat.

His last appearance on screen was, appropriately, as a legendary horror actor returning from retirement in a 1968 movie called Targets.



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