

The Gary Cooper pub in Dunstable stands as a tribute to one of the Hollywood greats, but if fate had taken a different direction the pub could have been called The John Stuart. Cooper and Stuart were contemporaries in 1912 at Dunstable Grammar School – now Ashton Middle School – in High Street North. Both went into acting, but while Cooper went on to win two Oscars for Sergeant York and High Noon, Stuart stayed in Britain and is virtually forgotten.



Yet his career spanned 59 years, during which he made more than 160 films and 60 TV dramas and serials, and appeared in about 150 plays. His films started with silent movies and ended in 1978 with a bit part in the blockbuster Superman.

His career could have been even more stellar but for a decision he made in 1928. Just as he seemed to be on the brink of a lucrative career in US films, with the offer of a five-year contract at £25,000 a year by Paramount, Stuart opted to stay at home and support the struggling British industry

John Stuart was born John Croall in Edinburgh in 1898. He moved to London with his family aged 7 and was sent to board at Dunstable Grammar School, where he overlapped with the younger Gary Cooper in his final year. Writing of Cooper, Stuart said: "We had never seen each other since those school days of 1912, and then we met just a few months before he died [in 1961], when I happened to be working in the same studio at the time he was making his last film *The Naked Edge*."

"I went on the set to see him and we talked about the old days and had many a laugh. We were photographed together, and I shall always treasure the souvenir I have of that occasion."

Stuart developed his interest in theatre at Dunstable GS, on one occasion selling his school books and playing truant to see a production of *Hamlet*! But at 13 his parents' marriage broke up and he went to live with his father in Eastbourne. It was at Eastbourne College that he really started to act.

After leaving school, he worked in the family chassis-building firm and when the Great War broke out, he joined the Black Watch at 19 but was invalided out with trench fever.

To family disapproval, he decided to try his luck in the theatre and became an extra in *The Trojan Women* at the Old Vic and had to stop Sybil Thorndike from jumping off the walls of Troy. On the strength of his claim in his CV, that he had been "supporting Miss Thorndike at the Vic", he found a job with a touring company.

He landed his first film role immediately after the tour in 1920, aged 21 and with a new surname.



But even at home, Stuart was still a major star, cementing his place with the leading role in *Kitty*, the first British talkie (1928 silent version, 1929 sound added), in which he was an outstanding success and prompting the *Sunday Dispatch* to write: "Quite definitely proves himself to be one of the finest picture actors in the world."

Four years earlier he had taken the starring role in Alfred Hitchcock's directorial debut, *The Pleasure Garden*.

Thanks to a piece of good luck, he was at a dinner party with the director Walter West, who was making a film called *Her Son*. Because he resembled West's wife, Violet Hopson, who was playing the part of the mother, he was signed up.

According to *Studio* magazine the stars of the film were "delighted with his fresh and natural performance". And *Picture Show* magazine wrote: "John Stuart played so easily, without a trace of self-consciousness – he is the ideal type for romance."

His reputation and popularity grew rapidly, and role after role came his way. Within a year he was playing leading men, causing Picturegoer magazine to comment: "Along with Rudolph Valentino, John Barrymore and Ivor Novello, John Stuart is among the masculines who can wear fantastic clothes and get away with it."



In a Picturegoer competition in 1927, he and Novello were the only British stars to make the top ten famous film lovers, alongside John Barrymore, John Gilbert, Ronald Colman and Douglas Fairbanks.

In six years he made 23 films and 20 shorts, and in 1933 alone, he made 12 films in as many months. The Daily Chronicle said: "John Stuart is very easily the best leading man in British pictures", while Era film critic R. B. Marriott called him a genius. The Daily Sketch said: "He has been called the English Valentino."

In 1928, the Sunday Express reported: "John Stuart has admirers all over the world and his fan mail now averages several hundred letters a week." He was president of his own fan club, which published a thrice-yearly magazine, organised events that Stuart and other stars attended and had several hundred members. At one event the former DGS truant was surrounded by cheering girls, and had to be rescued by stewards.

The turning point in his career came after the release of Kitty when he was screen-tested by Paramount and offered the five-year contract at £25,000 a year – but turned it down. In later years he said: "I still wonder if I did the right thing."

A year later it seemed that he might get a second chance of Hollywood fame when Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford interviewed him. She was looking for "an Adonis" to help her to break out of the roles where she often played characters half her age. News leaked, and one report said: "He means to work for British films only and help make us the world leaders of the film industry." He heard no more.

Sadly, his career also stalled somewhat in the 1930s because of inferior films he was obliged to make under his contract with British-Gaumont

Studios, and work tailed off during the Second World War. He tried to join up but was deemed unfit because of his earlier trench fever, so joined the Home Guard.

Inevitably, as he approached his 50s at the end of the War, there were fewer leading roles and spells



of unemployment. His days as a star were over, although for the best part of 30 years he continued to work, combining countless stage appearances and small parts in films with radio and TV



appearances.

He appeared with Sam Kydd in Sink The Bismarck!, Mr Denning Drives North, Further Up The Creek and Too Many Crooks in the 1950s but it isn't known whether they knew they were both Old Dunstablians!

At the height of his popularity he told Picturegoer: "The screen has cost me myself. Always I am John Stuart the actor. Sometimes I have to run away from crowds. The person that cinema-goers mob is the black and white shadow player. I love being a shadow on the screen but sometimes I wish I could rid myself of my shadow double when the cameras cease to turn."

Three times married and with two sons, Stuart made his final film appearance in Superman (1978), alongside Marlon Brando as an Elder of Krypton. He died a year later, aged 81.