

Naked
ambition

CALENDAR GIRLS UNBUTTONED

Twenty years on, here are the lessons we learnt from everyone's favourite charity

It's hard to believe it's been 20 years since *Calendar Girls* first appeared in cinemas. Featuring a star-studded cast of icons such as Helen Mirren, Julie Walters, and Celia Imrie, the heartwarming film was an ode to womanhood. Forget coming of age, this is the coming of their golden age...

Based in the fictional Yorkshire town of

Knapely, the movie was inspired by a true story. Back in 1998, a Women's Institute group decided to raise funds for research into blood cancer after one of their members was tragically widowed. In true WI fashion, a calendar was on the cards – but this time, it was to be nude. They ended up raising million of pounds, and – as well as the 2003 film, which featured

some of the UK's biggest acting names whipping their kit off – it also inspired a 2017 musical by Gary Barlow.

Two decades since the film's release, *heat* looks back at the lessons we've learnt from the ever-so-inspiring *Calendar Girls*...

BREAKING THE MOULD

Annie (Julie Walters) and Chris (Helen Mirren) are

two best friends, content with their picturesque life spent snickering in the corner of straight-laced Women's Institute talks and doing yoga on rolling hills. But after Annie's husband John (played by John Alderton) dies following a battle with cancer, the women set their sights on buying a new sofa for their local hospital's visitors room. With snaps of Yorkshire's

churches being so last year, the women decide that a “not naked, but nude” calendar is the best option to raise money – protecting their modesty with mere watering cans and iced buns.

And, if there's one thing *Calendar Girls* hopes to teach viewers, it's that we can all break the mould. No landscape in cinematic history screams old fashioned quite as much as

the quaint British village. With its tight-knit community and stunning scenery, to live in Knapely is to accept the simplicity (and sometimes mundanity) of the day to day. With a goldfish bowl mentality, the risqué calendar puts the ladies in the firing line for ridicule and shame.

Getting naked is a risk, but it's one worth taking. It's a rare feat for a film to

focus on women over 50 as anything other than simply wives or mothers – yet *Calendar Girls* subverts it all by casting them as the ultimate rebels. The calendar is far more than a fundraiser, it's an act of defiance from women who demand more than jam-making and tea-towels. As the film's director Nigel Cole said, “These were middle-aged women who

TFW it's just been suggested you all whip your bras off

Feelgood vibes

Helen and Julie: what a pair... of dames



It was a right giggle

wanted to breakout of the mould.”

ALL BODIES ARE ART

Viewers only get to spend 20 minutes of the film with Annie’s late husband John, but his impact is felt through every second. In one of his final scenes, John shares that the “flowers of Yorkshire are like the women of Yorkshire: every stage of their growth is more beautiful than the last, but the last phase is always the most glorious.”



The best kind of bum notes

Taking John’s mantra on board, the movie is an ode to women – insisting that our bodies are, and always have been, works of art. As Chris tells her fellow models, “These pictures are going to be us girls as we come. Gray hair, cellulite, the lot.”

And, after meeting the real-life calendar girls, the cast decided to leave their self-doubt at the door and truly strip down. “A bottle of Champagne would be waiting whenever anyone finished. They were all women in their fifties and sixties, and were thrilled by roles that recognised their sensuality,” Nigel has said. He also laughingly remembered, “After one nude shoot, I recall having to tell Helen Mirren to put her robe back on three or four times.”

In one memorable scene, Celia Imrie questions whether she needs “bigger buns” to cover her boobs – with the now-iconic nickname still following her 20 years later. She shared, “I have never been a pretty young thing, and stripping off is far more daring when you don’t have a figure to die for – but I love a challenge. The



No, you’re crying: Annie and John giving us the feels

real-life calendar girls taught all of us in the cast not to take ourselves too seriously.”

Alongside Celia, the cast list of *Calendar Girls* was veritable feast of British cinema’s elite. The film was released the same year Helen Mirren would receive her damehood, while Julie Walters’ TV and film appearances had already solidified her status as a national treasure. To see these two women, alongside a cast of other truly spectacular actors, “whip their bras off” (to quote Penelope Wilton’s character) was not something audiences of 2003 had anticipated.

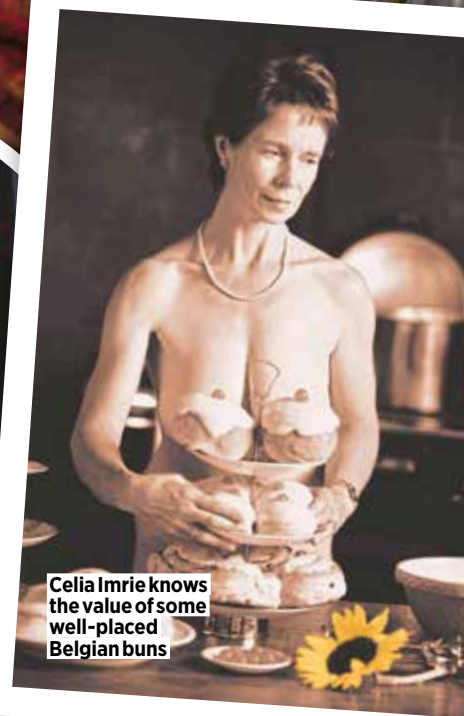
But that was exactly what the spirit of *Calendar Girls* was trying to capture. Turning the prim and

proper WI into something much cheekier, the film showed that those ladies who you might have politely nodded to at the local corner shop had a streak of naughtiness just itching to get out.

THE GRASS ISN’T ALWAYS GREENER

After the calendar becomes a success (spoiler alert) the WI are transported from their beloved Knapely to the technicolour of Hollywood – but stardom isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. In the journey to find more, the women lose what made it all so fun in the first place: Yorkshire, and Yorkshire’s people.

Showing that the grass isn’t always greener, the



Celia Imrie knows the value of some well-placed Belgian buns

story of *Calendar Girls* is a reminder that nothing is more important than family and friends. Upon their return to Knapely, all wrongs are put right – with a new leather sofa purchased, and a new sense of respect developed for the quiet heroes that are our everyday women.

A feel-good film, *Calendar Girls* revolutionised what it meant to be a woman of a certain age – telling the story of those who supported each other through the toughest times, those who weren’t afraid to take risks, and those who knew *exactly* how important having the right sized Belgian buns can be. ■