In Alberto Cavalcanti’s film Went the Day Well? (1943), the inhabitants of the village of Bramley End are visited by men of the Royal Engineers on manoeuvres in the area. From the lady of the manor to the post-mistress, the villagers provide the army with billets and assistance, until a series of small clues begins to arouse suspicion: the rough manners and physical brutality of some of the soldiers attract attention; the vicar’s daughter Nora (Valerie Taylor) notices that one of the soldiers writes his sevens ‘the continental way’; an inquisitive evacuee finds a bar of chocolate embossed with the word ‘Schokolade’. Eventually, the truth is revealed. These are German officers in disguise, sent to prepare the way for the invasion. They have had inside help from Oliver Wilsford (Leslie Banks), an apparently respectable villager, and, taking Bramley End hostage, they respond with violence to attempts to contact the outside world. Eventually, however, help arrives in the form of the Home Guard from a neighbouring village, and a pitched battle at the manor house sees off the threat of invasion.\(^1\)

Although some contemporary reviewers felt that the film had missed its moment, with the height of the invasion scare having passed by the time of its release, what remains shocking is the sudden eruption of violence in such apparently idyllic surroundings. Cavalcanti gives a semi-documentary feel to the ambush and murder of the Bramley Home Guard contingent in a country lane, presenting the sequence in a concise series of brutal close-ups. Meanwhile, expressionist-influenced camera work underlines the disjunctive nature of scenes in which a domestic space becomes the site of violent action. Shot from a low angle within a shadowy and cramped mise en scène, the postmistress Mrs Collins (Muriel George), who is under guard to prevent her from using the post office switchboard to contact the outside world, hits her captor over the
head with an axe while he sits at her kitchen table, only to be bayonetted by another soldier before she can get her message through. Similarly, in the final sequence, when soldiers stalk across the manicured lawns of the manor house to be met by gunfire, the women of the village are not slow to take up arms, with Nora shooting Oliver Wilsford at close range when she understands that her beau has been aiding the Germans all along. Such violence can be read either as emblematic of the extremes to which ordinary people would go to defend their home, or as a warning of the true meaning of ‘total war’. The villagers of Bramley End might be using violence as a last resort, but they are nevertheless having to match the brute force of their invaders with equally brute force of their own.

There is another aspect of the film’s structure which should be mentioned, however. It opens with a prologue delivered straight to camera by the verger (Mervyn Johns) who appears within the body of the film in a younger incarnation. Stressing the ordinariness of Bramley End, the verger notes its one unusual feature: the presence in the churchyard of a memorial which bears the names of a number of German soldiers: ‘They wanted England these Jerries did, and this is the only bit they got.’ At the end of the film, this prologue is matched with an epilogue, which again dwells on the village’s memorial to the Germans. Thus although the action of Went the Day Well? is clearly marked as taking place in 1942 – when the film was made – it is framed by the prologue and epilogue as being in the remote past. The conceit of this frame is that the war is over, and the Germans defeated. Penelope Huston suggests that this device could be interpreted as a means of ‘soothing [the] audience before getting down to the business of unsettling them’ (12).2 Certainly, framing the war as past, as a series of events that has already been memorialised, is a conceit that would appear to have straightforwardly reassuring intentions.

Earlier in the film, a brief discussion between Oliver Wilsford and the German Commanding Officer, Ortler (Basil Sydney), takes place in front of a plaque in the church wall commemorating those who died in the 1914–18 war. That there will have been English dead, as well as Germans, to be commemorated at the end of the present conflict is a side issue here; what is important is that the church, the churchyard, and the village itself, embodied by the now aged verger, will still persist.3

The apparently enduring qualities of the English countryside are an important touchstone for many writers, but just as Went the Day Well? uncovers the potential for violence in the English village, so other representations are often ambivalent rather than simply nostalgic. I will examine the relationship between nostalgia and pastoral and will suggest