

*Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret* is a 2011 documentary made by Channel 4.

Directed by Kenny Scott, the film provides an insight into and a depiction of mummification and embalming techniques used by the Egyptian 18th Dynasty (2011). Because the film was created by a public broadcaster, the intended audience was likely the general public.

*Mummifying Alan* has two main purposes as a documentary. The first is to depict, as accurately as possible, the process used to prepare the Pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty for their entombment. The other purpose of the documentary is to remind the audience of the fact that Egyptian mummies were living humans at one point. The inclusion of narration from Alan Billis helps to cement this, as it brings together the Alan seen at the start of the film with the body being worked on and mummified. For example, after the removal of the intestines, liver, lungs, and stomach from Alan's body, Alan is heard saying: "I've got nothing on my body that I'd like to keep, so whatever bits they want to put in jars and hide away, they can do ... It doesn't make any difference to me, I'm not going to feel it" (Scott 2011, 31:39). Alan bringing up the fact that while he knows everything that is going to be done to his body in order to mummify him, the Alan being shown to the audience that is being worked on is completely unaware, does an effective job at connecting the man seen with his wife, the dead body, and the disembodied voice back into one person.

Prior to watching the documentary, my knowledge of Egyptian mummification and embalming techniques was limited. I was aware of the general steps that were taken, as well as the reason why mummified bodies, and archaeological artifacts in general, preserve so well in Egypt. Although my knowledge was limited, I still expected to see four major steps taken to mummify Alan: preparing his body, removing his organs, drying his body with salt, and wrapping his body. I was also aware of some of the religious aspects of the mummification

process, such as the presence of priests and the reading of religious spells and other texts during the mummification process, though I did not expect those aspects to play a part in the mummification of Alan Billis. The main question I had going into the film was what made the natron salt used by the Egyptians different from other salts like sodium chloride or sodium bicarbonate.

As previously discussed, the film covers the embalming and mummification of Alan Billis, which was performed by a team created by Dr Stephen Buckley. The two main members of this team who worked on the embalming were Professor Peter Vanezis, a forensic pathologist, and Maxine Coe, a pathology technician. The team worked out of the Medico-Legal Centre in Sheffield, UK (Scott 2011, 21:29). The embalming process was done following a procedure created by Buckley. The initial work done on Alan was not shown, though Vanezis discusses how well Alan's body was preserved prior to his working on it (Scott 2011); it was likely prepared by Medico-Legal Centre staff. The first step taken by Buckley's team was removing Alan's intestines, liver, stomach, and lungs through a small incision on the abdomen (Scott 2011, 27:23). When the organs were fully removed, the shape of Alan's abdomen was restored using bags of linen cloth before the incision was closed (Scott 2011, 30:12). After closing the incision, Alan's body was treated with a mixture of oils, natural resins, and wax, before being submerged in a concentrated natron solution (Scott 2011, 48:24). In a guest lecture on March 19th, Dr Buckley stated that the concentration of the natron solution was devised thanks to the works of Alan Lucas. After Alan had soaked for about a month and a half, his body was removed from the solution and placed in a room with a temperature and humidity resembling that of Egypt and allowed to air dry for two weeks (Scott 2011, 1:03:57). After the two weeks, a mixture of water and tree resin was used to kill maggots that were found in Alan's ear before his body was

wrapped. After wrapping, Alan was left for another six weeks to dry further before being partially unwrapped to allow the team to confirm that Alan had properly mummified (Scott 2011, 1:34:45).

Although the embalming process was the most important part of the film, there were other important parts as well. Dr Joann Fletcher, the other key researcher for the project alongside Buckley, made multiple appearances discussing the importance of mummification, and was present during the inspection of Alan after his drying had completed (Scott 2011, 1:34:30). Forensic anthropologist Professor Bill Bass, the creator of the “Body Farm”, provides insight into how humans decompose alongside Rebecca Taylor (Scott 2011, 23:34). Taylor is even shown at the Body Farm to help provide insight into why the maggots found after the initial drying period were problematic toward Alan’s mummification (Scott 2011, 1:05:24). Another key piece of the film that is not directly related to the embalming process is the inclusion of Alan’s wife Jan. Jan Billis’s inclusion is primarily to aid with the film’s second purpose, and does an excellent job at humanizing Alan’s body, even after he had been deceased for multiple months; when Jan is viewing Alan with Maxine after the wrapping, she speaks directly to his body as though he were still alive (Scott 2011, 1:24:28).

The effects for the film were relatively limited, which is unsurprising given that it is a documentary. The soundtrack did an excellent job at matching the general mood of what was happening on screen. The filming of the scenes themselves was also well done, as it was able to portray graphic subject matter, such as the removal of Alan’s organs or the decomposing bodies at the Body Farm, in a way that was respectful to the deceased. While limited, the digital graphics that were used, such as in the explanation for using the natron solution, showed what was being described very clearly (Scott 2011, 44:43).

The film *Mummifying Alan* provides excellent insight into the Egyptian mummification process. Watching it greatly improved my knowledge not only of the physical process, but of the cultural significance as well. While some of the film's visuals may not be suitable for everyone, I would still recommend watching it to anybody interested in Ancient Egypt.

Works Cited

Channel 4. 2011. "Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret" Accessed March 22, 2026.

<https://www.channel4.com/press/news/mummifying-alan-egypts-last-secret>

Scott, Kenny. 2011. *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*. October 24, 2011, on Box of Broadcasts.