

A Familiarisation Trip to Eastbourne

Monday the 2nd March was one of those fabulous late winter days when you can really believe that the summer is on its way back. A warm sun was shining from a clear blue sky and birds were singing in the trees. So it was a shame that the Guild's latest familiarisation trip to Eastbourne took place on the Tuesday and Wednesday when the attractive young lady had taken refuge in our Swiss-chalet style weather house to be replaced with the grumpy-faced man with the umbrella, which my children claim has been modelled on me!

Weather in the channel was not pleasant with squally rain, winds gusting to 50 or 60 mph and a heavy swell running and so speculation about the proposed boat trip was rife as we met on the concourse of Victoria Station for our trip to Eastbourne.

Southern Rail runs a convenient and frequent service from Victoria to Eastbourne using some of their newest rolling stock. The trip takes about 90 minutes, arriving at Eastbourne Station in the centre of the town.

Here we were met by members of the Eastbourne Council Film Liaison department; Annie Wills; Neil Gallini; Emma Wilkinson and Olly Seymour; and escorted to a coach for the brief trip to the new Sovereign Harbour Waterfront for refreshments and coffee before heading out for a walking tour of the harbour area.

It was announced that the boat trip had been cancelled due to the weather and the film department displayed their admirable skills in flexibility and fast thinking by re-organising the itinerary at such short notice.

The harbour has been re-developed into a pleasant mix of housing and small business units surrounding the northern and southern parts of the harbour area. There are numerable berths for visiting and long-stay vessels as well as support services and chandlers creating a yachting village area within the town. The harbour boasts 24-hour access to the sea and is one of the largest man-made marinas in Europe. The nearby Yacht Club can provide function rooms, useful for changing areas if required.

We left the harbour and headed for Pevensey Bay and Castle a few miles outside Eastbourne. Pevensey is an old fishing village, founded in the 1600's on the site of a Roman settlement. It is thought to be where William the Conqueror came ashore in late September 1066 (although this is now disputed and the actual site is thought to be Bulverhythe, to the west of Hastings). The remains of the castle show that it was once an impressive site. The outer walls include part of the original Roman fortifications with a later medieval stone Moat and Keep in the centre. On the cold and wild afternoon that we visited, the site looked suitably dark and forbidding.

Returning to the coach we drove back to the centre of Eastbourne to visit the Redoubt Fortress on Royal Parade. Built around 1800, the Redoubt and the Martello towers along the coast that it supported, were a response to the invasion threat from Napoleon. Originally the Redoubt was to house up to 200 men, living in 15 of the casements that surround the parade ground. However after the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, the threat of invasion retreated and by 1859 advances in warfare and artillery meant that the Redoubt and the towers were no longer felt to be an important part of the security against attack and fell into disuse. The building is in excellent condition and is being slowly restored by the staff and volunteers. At present much of the space is taken up with displays and

museum exhibits, which would limit the practical working areas for filming without some considerable re-dressing, however the exterior of the building and parade ground are pretty much as they were in Napoleonic times.

Next was a visit to Eastbourne Pier and the Grand Parade along the seafront. The pier is a cast iron frame with wooden deck and buildings with amusements and a Camera Obscura situated at the far end. It is some 300m long and dominates the views of Eastbourne from the surrounding area. Although the interior of the amusement arcade is now modern and slightly tacky as these places tend to be, the exterior of the pier is traditional with some fine period features and small shops and cafes, sadly all closed for the winter.

We walked along The Grand Parade towards the Bandstand. Built in 1935, the bandstand has a unique semi-circular design and roof and is complete with a tiered seating area on two levels. 1,400 patrons can be seated to hear a fine selection of traditional and modern music concerts throughout the season.

Nearby is the Chatsworth Hotel, one of the very many large traditional hotels that line the seafront. The Chatsworth has a rare working open lift situated in the reception area with the main staircase for the hotel winding around the lift shaft. Although it would be difficult to record a major scene in the hotel foyer without causing some disruption to the hotel and its guests, a smaller film or stills shoot would be welcomed by the hotel. The style of the interior of the hotel is in keeping with the lift and is decorated in a late 60's or 70's style including a restored, mirrored reception desk dominating the foyer.

Further along the seafront we visited the Cavendish Hotel, another large Victorian hotel commanding a premier seafront position on the Grand Parade. The current owners have spent millions of pounds, restoring the interiors back to the hotel's former glory while incorporating all the requirements of a contemporary 4-star hotel. The interior has a lovely period feel with modern touches, particularly around the reception desk and main reception rooms. It is a shame that some of the decoration seems to jar a little with the 1920's décor in some of the smaller reception rooms such as the Library area, off the main reception. A feature of these large hotels is the huge formal dining rooms, which are difficult to find in the more modern hotels. Both the Chatsworth and the Cavendish are excellent examples of large hotels with a period feel, which are now almost impossible to find in London and would justify the trip to Eastbourne should this sort of location be required.

After checking in to our hotel and freshening up we were due at the magnificent Grand Hotel for dinner and a show round, hosted by Norman Kinnish, Director of Tourism for Eastbourne Council. The Grand must be one of the UK's most magnificent Victorian Hotels. It dominates its position on the seafront and looks out to sea and the cliffs at Beachy Head. Like its sister hotel at Brighton, The Grand has hosted many political party conferences and has the rooms to match. We were shown the main grand suites including the vast Presidential Suite with its four-poster bed, separate sitting room and meeting area; ideal for planning political skulduggery; a remake of "House of Cards" or a similar political period thriller. Like the other large hotels along the seafront, the Grand has the feeling of 'period' throughout the building, which works well.

Finally we returned to the Big Sleep Hotel for our overnight stay, ready to start bright and early at 8.00am the following day.

The following day the weather was much better, though the swell in the Channel meant that the boat trip was still cancelled. However we were able to take advantage of the improved visibility and lack of wind to visit the coastline around Beachy Head, including going up onto the Downs themselves. The Eastbourne Film Office had arranged a number of 4X4 vehicles and drivers, which meant that we could quickly and easily get to the more remote areas of the downs and down to the beach areas below the cliffs. Although the cliffs are part an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and are therefore subject to a number of restrictions and regulations, it has been possible for a number of film and photo shoots to take place on the beaches and cliffs. The restrictions, particularly regarding working close to the edge, are strictly enforced and with good reason as the cliffs are more than 500' high and the edge drops away vertically straight to the beach and sea.

While in the area, we also visited the Belle Tout lighthouse, which starred as a main location in the BBC drama, *The Life and Loves of the She Devil*. The lighthouse, now a private home, has been moved back from the cliff edge recently as the cliff erodes into the sea.

Saying good-bye to our 4X4 drivers and having de-camped back into our coach, we were driven back towards the town centre and the Devonshire Park Theatre. Awarded the Martini/TMA Regional Theatre Award for 'Most Welcoming Theatre' in 1994, the Devonshire Park is a beautiful example of a medium-sized Victorian theatre. Originally built in 1884, it was re-modelled by the celebrated theatre architect, Frank Matcham, in 1903 and retains many of Matcham's architectural touches especially the excellent sight lines and the quality of the design in the auditorium. The intimate auditorium seats a total of 1600 persons, though their normal capacity is around 930 and enjoys touring productions as part of the No. 1 touring circuit as well as producing their own pantomime and summer season shows. The exterior of the theatre has its own turning circle meaning that period arrival or departure scenes can be shot here with the minimum of re-dressing and some careful framing of the shots.

Next we made our way to Compton House, a period Georgian property originally belonging to the Duke of Devonshire. The house is now home to the GEOS-LTC International College, a foreign language college. The interiors however are in good period condition including the original floorboards, which have been left down and not covered by modern carpets or other flooring. The problem with filming at this location would be finding a time when the college was not operating. They are particularly busy in the summer and this might make scheduling difficult.

We took a brief look at the entrance hall and main staircase of the Town Hall before repairing across the road to the Bibendum Restaurant for an excellent lunch.

With time now a little short despite the speed with which the Bibendum were able to get out all the meals, we headed towards Eastbourne College. The college is now an independent co-educational boarding and day school in the middle of Eastbourne. The buildings are of red brick, reminiscent of the late and much lamented Bushey Campus (now a Comer Homes housing complex). We briefly saw the Library; Science Block; a

1960's Gym and the school's impressive swimming pool. The school is busy during term times and also during the summer when it holds a thriving summer-school but might be available at Christmas or during the last weeks of the holiday in early September.

A short walk took us to the International Lawn Tennis Centre where the Eastbourne Tennis Championships are held as part of the build up to Wimbledon. There are good views and rooms overlooking the Centre and No.1 courts with the remaining courts built on the perfectly manicured lawns as required for the championships. Eastbourne is much more film friendly than say Wimbledon and so would be a good location for any tennis-based scenes.

Next we visited the Winter Garden a Victorian steel structure building similar in design to the Crystal Palace and housing a huge Ballroom with stage area. The space is used for conferences, banquets and large dance-based activities and is run by Eastbourne Theatres

We were keen to see the Hydro Hotel with its period entrance and approach road. The Hydro is the absolute definition of genteel! Its clientele tend to be the well heeled elderly for which the quiet, slightly old-fashioned décor and service is ideal. The hotel is set on a hill overlooking the town and the sea with a large conservatory for snacks and light meals as well as a huge formal dining room and another period lift, though without the open-mesh doors of the Chatsworth Hotel. The exterior road drops away towards the sea and is free from modern street furniture or yellow lines with the exception of just outside the hotel. It is possible to close the road to permit filming though access has to be maintained for the residents that live in a cul-de-sac opposite the hotel.

We just had time for lightening visits to the Eastbourne Sports Park with its impressive outside track, changing facilities and indoor tennis courts; and Eastbourne Borough Football Club ground in Priory Lane before heading towards the station. We stopped briefly at the Fort Fun Amusement Park where the management kindly stayed open to allow us to see the exteriors with the amusement rides looking rather forlorn, as these places tend to do out of season.

A feature of all the locations that we looked at was the possibility for closing roads and diverting traffic, meaning that the filming of period dramas is achievable throughout the town. It was particularly refreshing to hear this can-do attitude from a council and their willingness to assist in the filming rather than take the money and run as they might do elsewhere.

There is a comprehensive website with the necessary forms and information regarding filming as well as contacts at www.eastbourne.gov.uk/eastbourne/film.

The main proviso being that the filming is not detrimental to tourism within the town and is absolutely nothing to do with suicides (they get enough of that as it is!).

A huge thank-you to Annie, Neil, Olly and Emma for all their hard work and making this fam trip one of the very best.

