

Cheltenham, Bristol and Bath – A Fam. Trip

The South-West of England has always been an attractive place to live and work. The Romans first established a spa resort they called Aquae Sullis in AD 43 at what is now the City of Bath, while further west, the City of Bristol with its excellent river links to the sea, quickly established itself as a major port from the Norman occupation in 1066 onwards. In the mid 17th Century the warm, slightly sulphurous mineral water, bubbling out of the ground from the former Roman baths, was investigated and the health-giving properties of the waters were brought to the attention of the wider public. This led to a rapid increase in the number of visitors arriving in Bath and the surrounding areas, including the spa town of nearby Cheltenham. During the Georgian period in particular, the City of Bath underwent massive re-development under the architects John Wood the elder and his son, John Wood the younger. They laid out the streets and squares in a classical style influenced by the architecture of ancient Greece and Italy, as seen on the fashionable Grand Tours, with their Doric columns and perfect proportions and symmetry.

In the mid 19th Century, the City of Bristol, concerned that its position as the primary port to America, was being undermined by the development of the new city and port at Liverpool, formed the Great Western Railway and commissioned Isambard Kingdom Brunel to create a new railway line to link Bristol and the West Country not only to London but also to Wales, Oxford and Gloucester. Brunel, then only 29, surveyed the entire route himself and it is said took a very close interest in the design of every trackside building from stations to tiny trackside sheds and water towers ensuring that the design was consistent and built to the very highest standards.

It seemed fitting that we should start our Familiarisation Trip at Paddington Station, Brunel's great cathedral to the Victorian industrial age with its huge glazed arches covering the tracks below. Having seen what is possible with the marvellous transformation of St. Pancras Station into a modern international terminus it would seem that Paddington could well benefit from similar re-development. However the main concourse is spacious with seating in front of the departures board where we all met before boarding the train to Cheltenham Spa and the start of our trip.

The journey to Cheltenham takes about 2hrs 15 mins and we arrived to meet our hosts for the trip; Fiona Francombe and Joe Wheatley from South West Screen. We made our way to the **Queens Hotel** where a sumptuous feast of coffee, pastries and fresh fruit had been laid on courtesy of the hotel (Mercure Queens Hotel, Cheltenham part of the Accor Group). Here we were introduced to Sue Adie, Press Officer for Cheltenham Borough Council who spoke briefly about Cheltenham and its filming possibilities as well as introducing us to the Film Cheltenham website (www.filmcheltenham.com) before leading us outside for a photo call with the local Gloucester Echo newspaper. The Queens Hotel was the first purpose-built hotel in Europe. Constructed in 1838 at a time of great expansion of tourists arriving in Cheltenham, following King George III's visit to the town to take the waters. The hotel boasts suites with 4-poster beds and a modern 4-star level of service within a classical, Regency styled hotel. It is the premier hotel for punters attending the Cheltenham Festival at the racecourse with rooms being handed down through families from year to year during the four-day National Hunt festival.

Refreshed with coffee and the excellent pastries, we set off with Sue on a short walking tour of the centre of Cheltenham, to see the architecture and visit the **Pittville Pump**

Rooms. Cheltenham was developed during the later part of the 18th Century and is now the most complete Regency town in England – unique in having been designed specifically for leisure and pleasure. Its houses built in sweeping classical terraces with elegant villas set in landscaped estates and around broad tree-lined walks.

We saw the Caryatids, sculptured Greek female figures, supporting the architectural façades of the fashionable boutiques in Montpelier Walk and dating from the 1840's. Then we explored some the broad and fashionable terraces before ending up at the **Pittville Pump Room** to the north of the city centre. The Pump Room was built in 1825 as part of a development by local landowner, Joseph Pitt. He was determined to create the area of 'Pittville' with the Pump Room and the surrounding pleasure gardens at its centre.

The building with its ionic columns and classical proportions houses a double-height ballroom on the ground floor. Further ionic columns support a gallery under a domed roof where music could be played and other rooms originally for the playing of billiards, a library and a reading room.

Re-boarding our coach and with time already against us, we headed for **Cheltenham Race Course** to meet Susie Bradshaw and to view the facilities. Preparations were in full swing for the Cheltenham Festival the following week so we could see how the large tented area giving over to sponsors pavilions and private dining areas was taking shape. As well as filming racing scenes, racecourses lend themselves as doubles for other locations where there are large numbers of people, in particular airport terminal buildings. It's often quite an easy dress to turn the main grandstand area into part of a terminal with the addition of check-in desks and some signage. The other benefit of a racecourse and Cheltenham is no exception; is the large areas for parking, large-scale Unit Bases or outdoor build spaces in a secure and enclosed area.

Leaving Cheltenham, we headed to **Gloucester Docks**, location for many a film and TV series from The Onedin Line in the 70's to a production of Martin Chuzzlewit in 1994 and the recent feature film, *Amazing Grace* starring Ioan Gruffudd and Albert Finney. The original warehouses that surround the water are in the process of being converted into new flats and offices with a brand new university building having just been completed on the waterside. This means that any filming would need care to line-up shots in order to avoid more modern extensions or additions to the original warehouses. The wharfs and water are owned by British Waterways with the surrounding areas and warehouses belonging to private landowners. Nestling in amongst the warehouses is the unique **Mariners Church**, a tiny chapel dwarfed by the towering warehouses alongside. Built in 1831, it still functions as an evangelical church with services on Sundays for the now increasing population of local residents from the new warehouse apartments.

Now running well behind our schedule we drove to **Chavenage House** near Tetbury in the Cotswolds. Chavenage is an Elizabethan manor house built of Cotswold Stone with a stone tiled roof. The exterior is used in the BBC 1 television drama – *Larkrise to Candleford* as the manor belonging to Sir Timothy and Lady Adelaide Midwinter. The house has also starred in a number of other dramas, including *Poirot* and *Bonekickers*. The exterior of the house and grounds boast uninterrupted views across the valley and towards the lands belonging to the neighbouring estate, Highgrove House. With not a pylon or wind farm in sight, it's a perfect period location. Inside the rooms on the

ground floor include the original medieval grand hall and the oak dining room with panels dating from the late 16th Century and upstairs the Oliver Cromwell bedroom.

Leaving Chavenage House, we headed to **Kemble Airfield now rebranded Cotswold Airport**. One of the exciting things about a Fam. Trip is the unexpected locations that we visit and Kemble proved to be no exception. We drove through the Cotswold countryside until rounding a bend we suddenly saw a couple of Boeing 747 jets apparently parked in a field. On getting closer we discovered we had arrived at a sort of Jumbo graveyard where commercial airlines are mothballed or broken up at the end of their useful life. Currently a number of cargo 747's are stabled there along with some smaller passenger planes. Our visit included the control tower with its fine view over the runways and taxiways as well as the interior of a passenger jet, currently waiting for a decision as to whether it will be broken up or sold to a new owner. The Airport is set to be the location for Luthansa's technical training facility when they relocate in May 2010 and will feature a purpose built training facility with simulators and space for a full-size aircraft for more practical training. It is possible to arrange to film in the aircraft though it would be wise to check what aircraft are likely to be on-site at any one time. The runways have also been used by various programmes, including Top Gear, Casualty and ITV's Ultimate Force and would be a good double for the outer areas at Stansted Airport where any hi-jacked aircraft landing in the UK are directed to (see our fam trip in early 2009).

Next was **Badminton House**, principle home of the Duke of Beaufort as well as the famous Badminton Horse trials. We didn't have much time here as the light was going fast but we did see the lodge buildings either side of the original gate entrance to the estate, some of the servants' quarters and principal ground floor rooms and the stable block with its marvellous tack-room and period horse stables.

Leaving Badminton and with the light beginning to fade we headed towards **The Road to Nowhere**. This is a partly completed section of dual carriageway, which literally goes nowhere. Originally built as part of a by-pass project, the route included crossing a busy railway line. However the planners had not agreed who would pay for the bridge over the railway and in the ensuing discussions and cost cutting, the road was finally abandoned leaving $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of two-lane dual carriageway with a slight slope and a gentle bend. The road is now a cycle and walking route but has been used for numerous car accidents, chiefly by the BBC Casualty programme.

We saw the site with the light fading and so our photographs are not ideal, but it was possible to see how the road terminates in a useful technical parking area at the end of the road, down a slight slope which means that vehicles parked here would be out of sight from cameras sited on the road. It is unfortunate that the top level of tarmac has never been laid, apparently the cost would be £70,000.00. This would make the location far more useable. I wonder whether the location fees paid to the council over the years for the use of the road would have paid for this valuable addition? You can find the Road to Nowhere on Google Maps at postcode BS37 5HT. Look due south of the Yate Railway Station, with the map in *Satellite mode* approx 500m across a common, to see the dual carriageway running approximately NNW off a roundabout on the **Westerleigh Road**. Contact the South Gloucestershire Film Office on film@southglos.gov.uk for further details.

Now it really was dark so we headed back to our hotel to change for drinks and dinner courtesy of hotel bookings specialists ACCESS BOOKINGS. Our hotel was the extremely modern and well-equipped, Mercure Doyle Hotel, Bristol; part of the ACCOR Hotel group. It's an ideal Cast and Crew Hotel with beautiful rooms in a central part of Bristol, within easy reach of restaurants and amenities. We enjoyed drinks with key members of the hotel and group staff and met our hosts from Access Bookings before the short walk to the **Bristol Hotel du Vin** restaurant for a delicious evening meal.

Day two dawned with cold grey skies and slight drizzle as we set off on foot to explore more of Bristol. Our walking tour included areas around the former riverside landing stages and warehouses known as the **Welsh Back** with its iron kerbstones that were originally installed to protect the pavements from the cast-iron wheels of the carts as they moved goods in and out of the warehouses; the beautiful **Queen Square** with its 18th Century town houses, now mainly offices, and the Custom House, built by Sydney Smirke. A dual carriageway, part of the City of Bristol's inner ring road was removed in the year 2000 as part of the city's extensive improvement programme and the centre of the square was restored to its former glory and is now often used as an area for outdoor events. The streets are easily controlled and with the majority of the properties used as offices, make it an ideal potential filming location at weekends.

Our walking tour took us up the picturesque **Christmas Steps** and through the **St. Nicholas' covered market** and onto Corn Street with the magnificent **Corn Exchange building**, now another covered market area. Outside the Corn Exchange were the cast iron 'nails' – waist high iron tables on which the deals for the sale of the corn were struck giving rise to the saying "cash on the nail"

We passed the site where in 1791 a publisher, one Joseph Cottle, published the first works of the famous poets of the day including Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge; to the former **Bank of England** site and were able to tour the secure vaults and complicated security systems as well as seeing a unique flat, built for the Queen and senior members of the Royal Family in the event that they should become stranded in Bristol and be unable to travel to the nearby Highgrove House. The vaults were most impressive and would make the ideal location for a high-security laboratory or of course bank vault.

We also enjoyed a boat ride along the river Avon and around the harbour area, seeing the warehouse developments and travelling past the **SS Great Britain**, Brunel's fantastic Iron hulled behemoth, the worlds' first steam driven, iron-hulled ship. The Great Britain was by the far the largest ship afloat when built in 1843, but her huge construction costs and the length of time required to build her, meant that the Great Western Steamship Company, who commissioned her, nearly went bankrupt. The ship was originally used on the transatlantic route between Bristol and America; then used to carry immigrants to Australia before ending her life ignominiously scuttled in the Falkland Islands. She was returned to Bristol, to the dry dock in which she was built, in 1970 and has now been restored as part of the National Historic Fleet.

Returning to the coach we were driven to an industrial site on the outskirts of Bristol known as the **Constellation Europe site**. The site was a former wine importing and bottling plant and is now mostly empty with just the offices still occupied. South West Screen are actively promoting the site for film or television production and were hoping that it would be the new home for the BBC Casualty programme, however BBC Vision,

who oversee the in-house television production for the BBC have decreed that BBC Wales must double its output of networked programmes by 2016 and adding *Casualty* and *Dr. Who* to their productions is the simplest way to achieve this. This is a shame as the mix of industrial; huge clear-span warehouse; and office space would make an ideal basis for the *Holby Hospital*. However *Casualty*'s loss is others gain as they say and while we were there, Fiona Francombe was meeting with surveyors to discuss the costs of soundproofing one of the main warehouse spaces to create a studio space for another television drama series.

Regaining our coach once more, we headed out of Bristol towards the **Royal City of Bath** and the last part of our Fam. Trip. Bath is of course built on Roman remains and one of the highlights of the trip, at least for me, was the visit to the now beautifully restored **Great Bath House**. The basis for the baths is a naturally occurring hot spring, which bubbles up from deep underground where the water has been heated by geothermic activity. This is the only place in Britain where such hot springs occur naturally. Around the time of the Roman occupation of Britain in AD 43, first a temple and later a bathing complex with a huge barrel-vaulted roof some 30m high were constructed over a lead-lined tank creating the main bath. Nearby would have been the *frigidarium* and *tepidarium* that made up the bathing complex. When the Romans retreated from Britain the spring gradually silted up and the stone roof and walls were dismantled for building materials and so it wasn't until the 18th Century when the baths and waters were re-discovered, that the present buildings were constructed. We tried some of the warm and slightly sulphurous water – it tastes like medicine so must be good for you! The 18th Century additions include the famous **Pump Room**, home of many a plot for a novel or film and television dramatisation and the nearby Theatre Royal.

Walking through the Bath streets we arrived at the **Royal Crescent**. Built in the mid 18th Century and designed by John Wood the Younger, it appears to be a crescent of 30 uniform Georgian terraced houses looking out over parkland. However it is not all that it seems. John Wood the Younger built the façade but other developers were then able to complete the actual houses to their own designs. They purchased set lengths of façade; portioned by the individual house-fronts but what appear to be two separate houses may be in-fact one large house. This system of town planning occurs elsewhere in Bath and is known as *Queen Anne fronts and Mary-Anne backs*.

We also saw Bath's other great architectural triumph, **The Circus**. Designed by John Wood the Elder and considered his masterpiece, the Circus is an oval of Georgian terraced houses with a design inspired by the Parthenon in Rome. This is shown in the use of the three classical column styles (Doric, Ionian and Corinthian) on the columns that support the three storeys of the houses. The Circus is designed such that the three entrances to the centre, face a classical façade. When viewed from the air (or on Google Earth) the Circus along with the nearby Queens Square and Gay Street are said to form the shape of a key, an important Masonic symbol.

Leaving the centre, we walked along the River Avon to the famous **Pulteney Bridge**. Designed in 1770 by Robert Adam, it is based on an unused Palladio design for the Rialto Bridge in Venice and shares with its Venetian cousin the dual purpose of bridge and shopping arcade. Now it remains one of the very few surviving bridges of this type in Europe.

Finally a walk back through the elegant streets brought us to Bath Railway station for our return to London and the end of the Fam. Trip. As ever there was not enough time to see everything but we all felt we had a taste of what the region has to offer and look forward to returning with a film or television project in the near future.

As ever, the list of thanks is long and I hope that I have not missed out anyone but 'Shouts', to borrow the teenage skateboarder vernacular, to:

Fiona Francombe and Joe Wheatley from **South West Screen** for organising such a fantastic trip. Fiona's contact number is 0117 952 9977

Esther Mars and Berenice Ray from the **Bristol Film Office** Tel: 01179 223 958

Jenni Wagstaffe and Rachel Bowers from the **Bath Film Office** Tel: 01225 477711

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Gloucester City Council email: Marcus.grodentz@gloucester.gov.uk (**Gloucester Docks**)

Susie Bradshaw at **Cheltenham Racecourse**: 01242 539538

Caroline Lowsley-Williams at **Chevenage House** Tel: 01666 502329

Paul Bull – **Cotswold Airport (Kemble Airfield)** Tel: 07930 263430

Fiona Gunn – **Badminton House** contact via South West Screen

The staff of **The Roman Baths and Pump Rooms**, Gt. Pulteney Street, Bath

Access Bookings for arranging the accommodation and hosting the dinner on Tuesday night

Accor Mercure Hotels for the lovely accommodation and lunch in Bath on day two courtesy of the Bath Francis Hotel, Queen Square.

And to all those persons who stayed late or gave up time to meet us and show us their beautiful cities, properties and region and provided such wonderful hospitality,

A Huge Thank you!