

## A Visit to Somerset House

The original Somerset House was a grand palace on the riverside, built in 1552 by the ambitious Edward Seymour, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Somerset, sister of Lady Jane Seymour. The Lady Jane was a Maid of Honour to first Catherine of Aragon and later Anne Boleyn before 'replacing' her as Henry VIII's third wife. When Henry died in 1547, Edward Seymour became Lord Protector to the young King Edward (Jane Seymour's son) and had the original Somerset Palace built on the Strand, alongside the palaces of York, Durham, Savoy, Exeter and Arundel.

In the struggle for the throne between Elizabeth and her half sister Mary, Edward Seymour fell from favour and was finally beheaded for treason and when Elizabeth I became queen the palace became the property of the crown. For around a hundred years, the palace was used by a succession of monarchs and Dukes before falling into disuse and by the 1770's when George III was on the throne, the original Somerset House was in ruins. George III agreed with his government to exchange Somerset House for a newer property – Buckingham House to the west of the City. The Government demolished the original palace and a new purpose-built building was constructed on the site to house several important government departments.

As part of the agreement, George III insisted that part of the new building be given over to the Arts and Sciences and in the following years several important discoveries were made including the discovery of the planet Uranus by the Astronomer Royal, William Herschel. The rest of the building housed the Navy Board, conveniently positioned on the river and within easy reach of the naval dockyards at Greenwich and Woolwich. The building also reflected the rising influence and importance of the Royal Navy around the world. Later the stamp office, forerunner to the Inland Revenue, were based in the East and South wings.

Much more recently, Somerset House was the headquarters for the General Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths with the grand Georgian central courtyard being covered in tarmac and used as a Car Park for civil servants. In 1977, the journalist and then Editor of the Evening Standard, Simon Jenkins, started a campaign to restore the Somerset Palace as a building for the people, housing art galleries and spaces for chamber concerts and meetings, as George III had originally intended. It took 30 years of campaigning but in 2000 parts of Somerset House were re-opened to the public with the courtyard restored to its former elegance and with the addition of the first public fountain commission for nearly 60 years. The Inland Revenue only finally moved out of the East and West Wings to Bush House in 2009 leaving the whole of the building to the Somerset House Trust.



**The Guild of Location Managers**

P O Box 58010 • London • W10 6UZ

[www.golm.org.uk](http://www.golm.org.uk) • [info@golm.org.uk](mailto:info@golm.org.uk)

Filming and the many events that are held at Somerset House and in the Courtyard are organised by Grace Aza-Selinger with support from Greg Van Duin who is in charge of facilities. Grace very kindly arranged a familiarisation trip for Location Managers to see the facilities and possible filming areas that Somerset House has to offer and so quite a large group, made up of both Guild and non-Guild members met for coffee in the fabulous Portico Rooms on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor before setting off to explore.

We worked our way through the portico rooms, beautifully proportioned Georgian rooms for meetings or laid out for a scene in an art gallery and back to the magnificent rotunda staircase known as the Nelson Stair. Pausing for quite a long time to photograph and take in its design and the shapes the structure makes in the space we continued down the stairs and out into the courtyard. Here Greg explained that there is plenty of electrical power and water supplies already on-tap around the courtyard for use by the events and film companies that use the site. This would avoid the need for a generator and long lengths of cabling while working in the area. The courtyard is constructed to take heavy weight and vehicles including Cherry pickers and cranes up to 22 tonnes providing they keep off the central fountain area where damage to the fountain's water pipes and pumps would be very, very expensive to repair.

We crossed the courtyard and went down into the Lightwell areas on the East, South and West of the courtyard. The design here has a muscular Georgian naval feel with flying buttresses spanning the lightwell between the inner courtyard and outer parts of the building. This creates a fabulous filming area for anything from Georgian or Victorian London, to exterior parts of a prison, both modern and period (the Portland stone very similar to parts of Wandsworth Prison). We walked all the way round the three sides, finding a 'street' of small workshops and offices, all of which could be dressed for a Victorian city street scene and some former coalholes, excellent for cells.

From here we passed under the courtyard via the many tunnels and service roads that criss-cross the site and briefly saw the West Service Yard (formally the river access) and now the vehicle access from the Embankment. There is some limited parking here at weekends for technical vehicles though an alternative, with more space would be in the great courtyard if that were not being used for filming.

We moved on to a totally unexpected site known as the West and East Embankment Galleries. Passing into a very modern, glass sided foyer with a stainless steel staircase and views out onto the Embankment and river we were then taken to a couple of exhibition spaces and a small cinema space seating around 30-50 persons.

Finally we returned to the ground floor and passing through the public café we finished on the terrace overlooking the Embankment where we said our good-byes.

Working in such a versatile and busy space does have its problems, the building is open to the general public for 7 days of the week and so access must generally be maintained at all times. However, Grace and Greg have successfully managed some very large film shoots at Somerset House recently, including; The Duchess and Sherlock Holmes with the forthcoming Burke and Hare movie due to film there shortly. If one is using the lightwells then it is easily possible to barrier off part of the courtyard keeping access for the public to the other parts of the building. For a very large-scale shoot in the courtyard, it is possible to arrange to close this area. All filming is considered on a case-by-case basis with consideration given to the overall budget of the project when setting the fees. Grace and Greg have become very adept in accommodating filming either during the week or at weekends and in any case, many parts of the building, useful to filmmakers, are away from the public areas. In addition there is plenty of space available for crowd dressing rooms, catering areas and green rooms.

The contact details are:

Grace Aza-Selinger - Commercial Executive 020-7845 4688  
Greg Van Duin - Facilities and Estates Manager 020-7845 4625

or email: [grace.aza-selinger@somersetshouse.org.uk](mailto:grace.aza-selinger@somersetshouse.org.uk)

A huge thank you to both Grace and Greg for their time to organising the event and showing us around.