

A short trip to South Warwickshire - October 2011.

It has been some time since the last familiarisation trip and so I was pleased to be included in, what turned out to be, quite a small group who met on Marylebone Station concourse. We were there to travel to South Warwickshire for a day visiting; **The Lord Leycester Hospital, Compton Verney House & Art Gallery** and **Ragley Hall**.

We, the we being Michael Harm, Camilla Stephenson, Rebecca Pearson and yours truly, were met by **Emma Gascoine** (07771 668793), PR representative for Chiltern Railways and who had very kindly arranged our train transport. Chiltern Railways, almost uniquely in England, own both their stations (Marylebone being the London terminus) and the rolling stock. This has huge benefits in that one doesn't have to negotiate with two or more separate organisations when trying to arrange filming on trains or platforms. A more practical point is that the station only serves diesel trains and therefore there are none of the problems with boom mics and ladders or high camera positions on or near the platform area due to the very high voltages involved with overhead electrical supplies and the chance of the current jumping across and electrocuting the boom swinger or spark. Another consequence of the diesel only engines is that the Chiltern Railways rolling stock reflects quite a wide range of period, from ex-intercity carriages to smaller modern diesel multiple units (DMUs). While nothing is ever quite as straightforward as one would hope when filming on the railway, Emma assured us that it is perfectly possible to charter a train for filming (or an expensive 'away day' with a large and extended family!) on a moving train and even stopping at stations or repeating a section of track if required.

Marylebone Station serves the commuter belt for London stretching out to the North West towards High Wycombe and following roughly along the line of the M40 before swinging north into Warwickshire. Built in 1899, Marylebone was the London terminus for what became the Great Central Main Line Railway and was the last and smallest of the London stations to be built. The line has had a somewhat chequered career. In 1897 the line ran from Manchester into London with ambitious plans for onward travel through a channel tunnel into France. As a result the whole line was built to accommodate a European loading gauge and with nearly all the stations en-route built with island platforms so as to be able to cope with wider European trains. Unfortunately the line to the continent was never built and the majority of the track became a major part of Dr. Beeching's cuts in the 1960's as well as one of the most controversial. Over the years and with the privatisation of the railways in the mid 1990's and its subsequent purchase by Chiltern Railways, the line has flourished again with trains now running to Birmingham and beyond.

Marylebone has a long and distinguished film CV having appeared in amongst others: *The Ipress File*; *Magnum P.I.*; *A Hard Day's Night*; *Spooks*; *Gavin & Stacey*; *Green Wing* and *Dempsey & Makepiece*. It often stands in for Paddington Station in films and has the honour of having a Monoply Square named after it.

We boarded the train for our journey to Warwick and enjoyed a quiet and relaxing 90mins ride through the countryside before arriving at our destination, to be met by **Paula Jones**, Head of Development at Compton Verney House and Art Gallery (07890 998 393) together with one of those large MPV-style taxis that are ever increasing in towns outside of London and allow 7 persons to travel in comfort to their destination, which in this case turned out to be some 10 mins travel from the station.

The Lord Leycester Hospital was founded in 1571 by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and special favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, as a retirement home or Hospital (in its original sense as a place of hospitality) for disabled soldiers. The buildings however are far older, dating back to the medieval period with the Chantry Chapel being originally built in 1126. The current building was completed in the late 14th Century with King Richard II (of "*Now is the winter of our discontent...*" fame) granting a charter for the chapel in 1383. The chapel has been in continuous use as a place of worship ever since.

Our host was **Lt. Col. Gerald Lesinski**, Master of The Lord Leycester Hospital (01926 491422). He explained that the building is lived in by up to eight former members of the armed forces and their wives.

The other buildings are later, dating from the mid 15th Century and beyond and consist of **The Guildhall**, formally a meeting place for the Warwickshire Guilds; **The Great Hall**, an area used for celebrations and banquets; **The Galleried Courtyard**; **The Brethren's Kitchen**, where we had a fine

cup of coffee and **The Master's Garden**. The garden was truly a surprise; nestling behind The Master's House, which looks out onto the courtyard at the front, the garden has a large lawn area and the Hospital's vegetable garden at the rear. There is a delightful summer house and a very early Pineapple Pit where pineapples were grown using heat from a fire with the warm air being fed around the pineapple beds much like a Roman hypocaust.

Although the buildings front onto a fairly busy main road and there is therefore some road traffic noise, the road itself is at a lower level than the buildings. This, together with period buildings opposite, mean that it is possible to film out through the courtyard gate, towards the buildings opposite and miss all but the tallest modern vehicles.



Our next visit was to **Compton Verney House & Art Gallery**, hosted by **Paula Jones** (Tel: 01926 645 562, mobile : 07890998393 email: paula.jones@comptonverney.org.uk).

Compton Verney is a Grade 1 listed house in 120 acres of grounds, laid out by Lancelot "Capability" Brown. Built for Richard Verney, 11th Baron Willoughby de Broke in the early 18th Century, it was extensively re-modelled by Robert Adams in the 1870's while Capability Brown re-landscaped the surrounding parkland. The house was acquired by the MOD during the war and was left vacant when the war ended.

In 1993 the house and land were bought by the Littlewoods Pools millionaire, Sir Peter Moores, who has spent considerable sums of money renovating the house and adding a modern wing to house a permanent collection of British Folk Art and a British Portrait collection as well as providing a venue for touring exhibitions of both art and sculpture.



The real benefit as a film location is in their flexibility and ability to move pieces of art or close rooms, galleries or in the case of a recent shoot, the whole ground floor! Gone are the problems of trying to film in the National Gallery or similar space in London. With Compton Verney one gets the same architectural style, but with none of the problems of time, cost or lack of space. (The huge lawn to the west of the house was recently host to an entire feature film Unit Base all within walking distance of the location).



Compton Verney also has a fine restaurant where we enjoyed a delicious lunch, hosted by Dr. Steven Parissien, Director of the Compton Verney Gallery, before continuing our journey.

Finally we arrived at **Ragley Hall**, Alcester and near to Stratford-upon-Avon.

The land was originally given to nearby Evesham Abbey in around AD 711 by the then King of Mercia. 700 years later Ragley was sold to the Rous family, who built a castle on the site of what is now the Rose Garden.

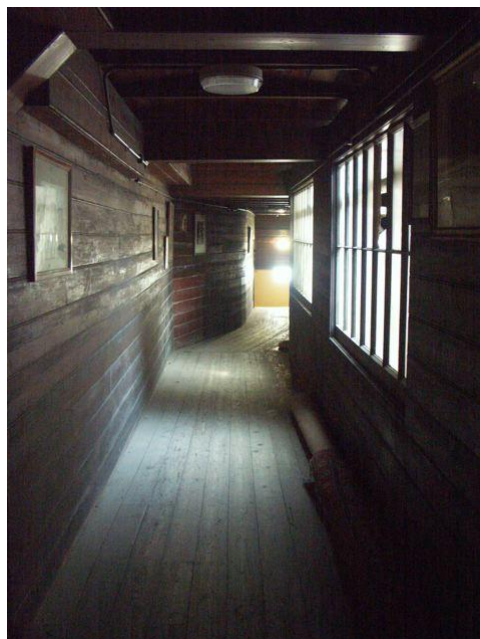
In the 16th Century, during the reign of Elizabeth I, Sir John Conway bought the house and lands and it has remained in the same family ever since.



The present house was designed by the noted Architect and Scientist; Robert Hooke. Hooke, a contemporary of Christopher Wren, designed a grand Palladian house with an imposing front and huge Great Hall (70ft x 40ft x 40ft high). The baroque plaster ceiling design is by James Gibbs and was completed in 1750 with the neo-classical architect, James Wyatt adding the portico and the decoration to the Red and Mauve rooms in 1780. The Mauve Drawing Room was re-painted in 1981 to match the original Wyatt ceiling design. The Red Saloon remains exactly as designed in 1780 with the wall coverings having been replaced twice (1870 & 1970) with identical silk damask.

Ragley is clearly a family home, as evidenced by the family portraits in the rooms and on a previous visit, the table tennis table in the grand hall. The house is open to the public during the summer months but is well used to film crews and has played host to: *To Play the King* (BBC TV) - *The King's Gym at Buckingham Palace*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Vanity Fair* and in an episode of *Doctor Who* where it doubled for the Palace of Versailles.

As well as the main rooms on the ground floor, Ragley also has wonderful attics, complete with corridors and back stairs and the original luggage lifts to get guests' luggage from the ground up to the bedrooms.



In the grounds are the extensive Georgian Stables and Coach Houses as well as the Laundry area (now offices) with a drying green and covered walkway for drying clothes in more inclement weather.



Contact details for Ragley are: Judith Izzo - Acting Hall Manager & Alan Grainger - Estate Manager **01789 762090**.

We left Ragley and were driven to Warwick in time to catch our train back to Marylebone Station. Our return journey was on a newer Javelin-style commuter train and in what felt like no time at all we were back in the bustle of central London. Warwickshire felt like a world away.

Our list of thanks are:

Emma Gascoigne - Chiltern Railways (07771 668 793)
Lt. Col. Gerald Lesinski, Master - The Lord Leycester Hospital (01926 491 422)
Dr. Steven Parissien, Director - Compton Verney
Paula Jones, Head of Development - (01926 645 562)
Leonie Fletcher, Development Coordinator - Compton Verney
Alan Grainger, Estate Manager
Judith Izzo, Acting Hall Manager - Ragley Hall 01789 762 090

And to all those who opened rooms for us, supplied us with delicious refreshments and meals, answered our questions or stayed behind to ensure that we could see such beautiful and diverse locations, a huge thank you.