

The West Midlands – A Familiarisation Trip

With a population of over 1 million, Birmingham is regarded as the UK's second city and is well placed, more-or-less in the middle of England, to be a centre for trade and industry. Its fame and fortune was founded during the industrial revolution where the meeting point of first the fledgling canal system and later the railways meant that raw materials could easily be delivered to Birmingham's factories and warehouses and the resulting goods and services transported to the ports for onward shipping around the globe. Clearly there were fortunes to be made and this possibly explains the number of large country houses and estates in an area more than a hundred miles (and therefore several days travelling) from London. Even though Birmingham's reputation as an industrial centre has declined in recent years it was still sited as the 3rd best place in the UK to locate a business and 21st in Europe as recently as 2007¹ and ranked as the 55th most liveable city in the world (2nd in the UK behind London)².

The Screen West Midlands' recent invitation to a familiarisation trip to Birmingham and the West Midlands was to see locations both in Birmingham and the surrounding areas, taking in the Staffordshire Moorlands and parts of Warwickshire and Worcestershire. It was to be a three-day trip staying in hotels in Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon.

The travel from Euston takes about 1½ hours on Virgin's 'Pendolino' trains with three or four trains an hour. Arriving at Birmingham New Street Station, Jane Soans and I were met by Stephen Badham, and Matthew Stanton As well as the rest of the group - Michael Harvey and Brian Bilgorri. Stephen is the Production Liaison Manager for Screen West Midlands while Matthew is the Manager of Film Birmingham, the City Council's film office, assisted by Sindy Campbell, who works part-time in the office. Together they are responsible for the supervision and arrangements for all the filming in the city. This has several advantages: It creates a one-stop shop for all filming; it enables all the parking and road traffic requests to be co-ordinated through one office which in turn means the possibility of very speedy turnarounds and that one member of the council deals with all the film and television productions. However it does have its drawbacks, principally that Matthew has to shoulder an immense amount of work, often at very short notice as the requirements of the various competing production companies change. Late scripts or changes necessitating in last-minute changes of plan will not help this. We all expressed concern that the particularly film-friendly parking office might change their tune if faced with too many late (or even on the actual day!) parking requests as a result of the lack of script planning that seems to plague present television drama productions.

With introductions made and our bags on their way to our hotel, we were able to make our way to our first visit – **Millennium Point**.

The building was designed by the architects Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners as an inspiring building to celebrate the new millennium. Its mission is to provide a world-class centre for science, technology and learning with its partners: Birmingham City Council, The University of Central England and The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. The building houses an IMAX Cinema; Birmingham's Science Museum – Think Tank and the Birmingham School of Acting. In addition the stunning central atrium, known as The

¹ European Cities Monitor – Wakefield & Cushman

² Mercer index



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Hub also serves as an exhibition and meeting space. The building is open 364 days of the year but is often quiet, particularly during the week in term times and it is possible to arrange for filming on the site either during opening hours (10.00am – 5.00pm) or after hours. The space lends itself well to a large modern industrial or office complex or Airport Terminal space with the futuristic escalators and steel & glass structure.

Leaving Millennium Point we made our way on-foot into the light rain for a walk through the centre of Birmingham towards The Bullring shopping centre. We passed through the famous Great Western Arcade, built in 1877 and inspired by Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace. We also saw the exterior of the Victoria Law Courts – a Victorian Gothic building completed in 1891 faced with a red terracotta clay brick. It reminded me of buildings that I had seen on an earlier trip to Glasgow.

The Bullring is now a stunning new shopping complex with Selfridges (one of only five outside London) anchoring the centre. Built on what was an earlier 60's centre and extensive road network through the centre of the city, the new centre is one of the largest in Europe. On the plaza outside stands the "Bullring Bull" sculpture and the first figurative memorial to Admiral Lord Nelson to be erected in the UK (and second in the world, the first being in Montreal, Canada?!). The statue was unveiled on the 25th October 1809 as part of King George III's Jubilee Celebrations. The one surviving part of the 60's centre is the circular building known as the Rotunda. Originally an office block it has recently been refurbished as apartments including two penthouse suites, currently occupied by actors appearing in the Kudos Production, HUSTLE which recently moved to the city.

We walked to **Victoria Square**, which was renamed in honour of Queen Victoria from its previous name of Council House Square. The naming ceremony and unveiling of the statue that dominates the square was carried out on the 10th January 1901. Sadly Queen Victoria died just 10 days later. The square was re-developed and pedestrianised in 1992 with the addition of a fountain and sculpture called *River, Guardians, Youth and Object (Variations)*. This mouthful is more affectionately known as 'The Floozie in the Jacuzzi' It won Fountain of the Year Award in 1995!

With the rain really getting into its stride, we walked part of the way along the towpath of the Birmingham & Worcester Canal towards The Mailbox. There are said to be more miles of canals in Birmingham than in Venice (35 miles as opposed to 26) giving Birmingham the sobriquet 'The Venice of the North' (though Venice has never, as far as I know, been called the Birmingham of the South!).

The Mailbox is a modern development of what was Birmingham's central sorting office. The building backs onto the Birmingham & Worcester Canal and now consists of a variety of apartments, shops and galleries. The regeneration of the area of Gas Street and alongside the canal has been matched by British Waterways who have also regenerated the canal towpaths and canalside wharfs and mooring points. In 2004 BBC Birmingham moved from their studios at Pebble Mill to The Mailbox.

After lunch we headed to the **University of Birmingham** campus. This is a red-brick university built in a style which makes it an excellent double for an American University, possibly Harvard or the Old Campus at Yale. The interiors we saw included The Great Hall, located in the Aston Webb Building and part of the media centre. The main

buildings are located around the Joseph Chamberlain Clock Tower, a red-brick 'campanile' at 100m high, said to be the highest free-standing clock tower in the world. We also looked in at the Barber Institute, a world famous art gallery and concert hall situated in an Art Deco building completed in 1939.

Leaving Birmingham we headed out of the city to **Hagley Hall** in Worcestershire. Built in the mid 18th Century by George, 1st Lord Lyttleton, secretary to the then Prince of Wales and is thought to be the last of the great Palladian residences to be built in the UK. It is a beautiful, privately owned house, open to the public and used for events and weddings as well as filming. The main highlights were: The Library; The White Hall; The Saloon with its sprung floor for dancing (apart from one area where the orchestra were seated); The Long Gallery and the two almost identical staircases. We also saw some of the bedrooms and the period (but still working) lift. In the grounds and just visible through the rain was the nearby cricket ground and church, both still used on a regular basis by the local community.

The final stop of the day was **Kidderminster Railway Station** on the Severn Valley Railway. Kidderminster is the terminus at the southern end of the 16 miles of mainly single-track railway between Kidderminster and Bridgnorth. The line has several steam and diesel engines available for use. The line has appeared in a number of films and television dramas including the 1978 film *The 39 Steps* starring Robert Powell in a sequence which included the Victoria Bridge, a spectacular single span railway bridge over the River Severn.

We returned to Birmingham and our hotel The Hotel du Vin to dry out. A marvellous dinner at one of Birmingham's newest, Michelin starred restaurants and a fine night's sleep meant that we were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at breakfast and ready for the day's excitement.

Our first visit was to **Lichfield Cathedral** in the Staffordshire town of Lichfield. It is of Medieval Gothic style and the only Cathedral in England with three spires. The Cathedral is built from local sandstone and originally included a full stone roof. The Cathedral was attacked during the English Civil War in the mid 17th Century when much of the stained glass and the roof were destroyed. In the restoration that followed some 300 tons of stone were removed from the roof to try to arrest the outward bowing of the walls and pillars along the main nave as a result of the weight of stone. It is extraordinary to think that such a weight of material was lifted from the ground some 77m (over 250') into the air, using nothing more than pulleys, rope and muscle. Despite the ravages of the Civil War, Lichfield does boast some of the finest medieval Flemish painted glass in existence. This came originally from an Abbey in Belgium and was sold to the Cathedral at the beginning of the 19th Century. It is currently being restored as part of an extensive restoration of the Lady Chapel at the Eastern end of the Cathedral.

Filming in any Cathedral or Church for that matter, tends to be complicated by services and the nature of the project so careful negotiations need to be undertaken with the Cathedral and Church authorities usually led by the Dean's office. However Lichfield Cathedral and others have been successfully used for a number of film projects.

Next we headed for **Shugborough Hall** about 4 miles from Stafford and on the edge of the heathland area of Cannock Chase. Shugborough was the home of Patrick Anson, 5th Earl of Lichfield until his death in 2005 and houses part of his collection of photographs. It is now owned by the National Trust but is leased by Staffordshire County Council making it, in effect, the largest council house in the country. An earlier member of the Anson family was Captain George Anson who commanded HMS Centurion – a 4th Rate ship-of-the-line built in 1732. HMS Centurion is famous not only for bringing back the largest treasure bounty ever recorded, following Anson's circumnavigation of the world but also under an earlier Captain (Cpt. George Proctor) it carried the Harrison H1 Chronometer on its first sea trials on a voyage to Lisbon in 1736.

The beauty of Shugborough is that it has the feeling of a working estate and family home despite its size. The main rooms are beautiful but it is in the 'backstage areas' that the house really comes alive. We were met by Corinne Caddy who showed us around the house and introduced us to the many costumed staff that demonstrate how the house was run during the 18th and 19th Centuries. Highlights included; meeting the cook in her kitchen and seeing how the baking was organised, the laundry maid who broke off from her ironing to show us the working of an early laundry press and a purpose built cast-iron stove for the heating of irons and the brewery where beer is still brewed using local barley from the estate in the original brewing vessels. Later we were presented with a bottle of the beer and some of the wholemeal bread flour (and very good it is too – it's being turned into bread as I write this).

The Shugborough estate features many follies including the now famous Shepherd's Monument with its mysterious cryptic inscription around the base. There are many explanations for the inscription including one posed in the 1982 book; *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, which put forward the theory that the inscription pointed to the location of the Holy Grail. A more prosaic theory is that it is simply a secret message between two lovers. Apparently the ciphertext has resisted even attempts by codebreakers from Bletchley Park to decipher its meaning.

Finally we enjoyed lunch in the tearoom made from ingredients grown or produced on the estate.

A short drive brought us to **Biddulph Grange and Gardens**. Biddulph is another property now owned by the National Trust but was until fairly recently an Orthopaedic Hospital. The house has been converted to private flats but the garden has been lovingly restored to its former glory as possibly the best example of Victorian plant collecting and gardening. The estate now consists of a series of interconnecting gardens each showcasing plants from various different parts of the world. These range from the exotic Chinese 'Willow-Pattern' landscape complete with lake, bridge and the two temples, to the damp of a Scottish Glen and the fine planting of the Italian Garden. The paths through the gardens are cleverly laid out so as to prevent the visitor from seeing the next garden until one enters it. One of the famous plant collectors who bought back plants to Biddulph was Robert Fortune. Fortune was a plant collector and adventurer in the Indiana Jones mould. He smuggled tea plants out of China and brought them to India for the East India Company and thus created the tea industry in India. The cockney rhyming slang '*tea leaf*' for thief is said to be based on Fortune's activities.

How useful Biddulph Grange Gardens would be as a location would depend on the project and crew size bearing in mind that the summer months, when the garden is at its best is also the most popular time for visitors. However the gardens are closed for part of the week during the spring and early autumn months.



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Finally, with the light and the weather beginning to deteriorate we headed for the Staffordshire Moorlands. This includes a gritstone escarpment area known as The Roaches (from the french les roches meaning rocks!) where many of the UK's climbers have begun their careers. The area is now a National Park with many beautiful views and iconic Staffordshire villages with the houses built from the dark grey Staffordshire gritstone.

The following day we headed first to the fine Palladian house, **Ragley Hall** near Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire. Ragley Hall was designed by Robert Hooke with building starting in 1680 although the house was not completed until the mid 1700's. It stands in extensive parklands laid out by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and is still a private home, although open to the public on various days throughout the year. The grounds were a contrast to the later Victorian planting scheme at Biddulph Grange that we had seen the previous day.

Ragley is still the family home of the 9th Marquess of Hertford and his family. On our walk round it was fun to see evidence of family life, including a table-tennis table and cricket gear in the truly enormous great hall. Ragley has extensive attics and a marvellous set of Georgian stables which presently house the Marquess' collection of carriages as well a working stables for the estate horses. The main staterooms include a very fine dining room and drawing room, decorated in red silk to the original 1780 design and colour. The wall hangings have only been changed twice since 1780 (1870 & 1970).

Leaving Ragley we headed to another National Trust property – **Charlecote Park**. Charlecote was originally the home to Sir Thomas Lucy. It is said that in 1583, one William Shakespeare was caught poaching deer and was bought before the local magistrate, Sir Thomas and was flogged for his trouble. Leaving for London to seek his fortune, Shakespeare is said to have got his revenge by basing his character, the fussy Justice Shallow (Henry IV pt 2 & The Merry Wives of Windsor) on Sir Thomas Lucy. In 1572 Sir Thomas Lucy went to vast expense to entertain Queen Elizabeth I including re-modelling the front of the house so that it would create the letter E. The house looks Elizabethan but is in-fact a Victorian pastiche of an Elizabethan house with the interiors created by George Hammond Lucy and his wife, Mary in the mid 19th Century. They refitted the interiors in a sort of Elizabethan Revival style and filled the rooms with heraldic stained glass and early editions of Shakespeare including a copy of the 1632 Second folio of Shakespeare's plays. As well as the main house, Charlecote also has a number of period stables and outhouses including a kitchen and brewery, laundry, tack room and Coach-house.

We left Charlecote and drove to **Warwick Castle**, originally built by William I in 1068 as a Norman Motte & Bailey castle it was extensively re-modelled in the 12th Century as a stone castle during the 100 years war and later in the 14th and 15th Centuries when the castle was extended and the fortifications increased. You can still see the original Bailey hill of the original castle with the remains of a more modern tower perched on the top. In 1604 work started to create a more comfortable large family home within the castle. In 1978 the Madame Tussauds group purchased the castle. They added waxwork style figures to populate both the castle and the 17th Century additions, showing it as an Edwardian household. Until recently the Tussauds group ran it as a tourist attraction before selling the freehold to its current owners. The castle is very popular and on the day of our visit, one of the first days of the summer holidays, it was packed with tourists

making the idea of filming anything other than with a very small news-style crew quite complicated. Later in the year on a mid-week day during term time might be more possible.

A five-minute walk from the castle bought us to **The Lord Leicester Hospital**. The hospital was founded in 1571 by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and a favourite of the Queen Elizabeth I, as a retirement home for disabled soldiers and continues to provide a home to the Brethren as they are known, ever since. The site consists of a 13th Century gatehouse over which the Chantry Chapel of St James sits and has been in continuous use since 1383. The site also has a 15th Century Guild Hall and Great Hall and a galleried Courtyard. The site sits above the level of the main Warwick road as it passes through the gatehouse and so it is possible to film towards the road and the half-timbered buildings opposite without 'seeing' modern street furniture. BBC TV's Dr Who recently used the site as the streets of 16th Century London during an episode in which the Doctor arrived in Shakespeare's London.

To the rear of the site is the hidden gem that is the Master's Garden. Unique features include a 12th Century Norman Arch and a stone vase, said to have come from a 2,000 year old Nileometer. The garden also features a very early pineapple pit where, what were the exotic and impossibly expensive, fruit were grown in a special enclosure heated by a nearby fire with the hot air piped under the soil. The Nileometer was a gauge used by the Egyptians to measure and mark the water levels of the Nile river. It was particularly important to the Egyptians to know when the Nile was likely to flood and to predict how much flooding was likely to take place. If the flood was low, then the next year's crop harvest was likely to be bad. Too much water was also likely to destroy crops. It was one of the requirements of being Pharaoh that he (or she) had to 'control' the Nile in order to ensure bumper harvests for the people.

And that was the end of our trip.

A huge thank-you to Stephen Badham for organising and hosting the trip and to Matthew Stanton for escorting us around Birmingham.

In addition I would like to thank on the Guild's behalf:

- Mark Ray at the University of Birmingham
- The 12th Viscount Cobham for allowing us to view Hagley Hall and Kate Oliver who showed us around
- The Dean of Lichfield Cathedral
- The 6th Earl of Lichfield for allowing us to visit Shugborough and to Corinne Caddy who showed us the house and estate and arranged such a lovely lunch
- To Paul Baker and Christine Doyle at Biddulph Grange
- The Marquess of Hertford and Alan Grainger at Ragley Hall
- Pam Hill at Charlecote Park
- Simon Prosser at Warwick Castle
- Lt. Col. Gerald Lesinski, Master of The Lord Leicester Hospital

And also to all those who explained the workings of the houses, gardens, breweries and kitchens and others who stayed behind or came in to work early to enable us to see such wonderful properties.



Barber Gallery



Birmingham University



Hagley Hall



Shugborough Hall



The Lord Leycester Hospital



The Lord Leycester Hospital



The Lord Leycester Hospital



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