

## PINEWOOD STUDIOS

**An Overview by Pinewood Historian, Morris Bright**

When Heatherden Hall was put up for sale in 1934, the estate agents responsible for its disposal described the manor as being “situated in the Ecclesiastical Parish of Iver Heath in the County of Buckingham” and went on to boast with some pride that the Georgian Mansion was a building on which “vast sums have been spent from time to time.” Potential new owners were asked to imagine what the building could next be used for; suggesting perhaps that it was “suitable for hotel, institution or clinic.”

Heatherden’s history had been colourful if somewhat chequered. Early in the last century, the Canadian financier, Lieutenant Colonel Grant Morden, bought the estate and set about modernising the Victorian house. It was Morden who added the huge ballroom, the largest indoor swimming pool in the country at that time, a Turkish bath, squash courts and perfectly laid out gardens and lawns on the many acres of land at his new home.

Morden lavished in excess of £300,000 on his Buckinghamshire estate (well in excess of £5 million in today’s money) but the economic crisis that struck in the 1930’s robbed him of much of his wealth and his fortune disappeared almost overnight. On his early death in 1934 the estate was put up for sale at just a tenth of what Morden had spent on it. As well as the Mansion, with the sale came almost 100 acres of grounds. For building tycoon, Charles Boot, it was too good an opportunity to miss. Boot snapped up Heatherden and immediately set about recouping his investment by turning the hall into a country club for the rich and famous.

Yet Boot’s main aim for buying Heatherden and its grounds was far more adventurous. He planned to turn the land into a film studio. Construction work on Boot’s dream began in November 1935. Building was quick, each stage being completed in just three weeks. Boot officially renamed Heatherden Hall, Pinewood, in his own words, because: “...of the number of trees which grow there

and because it seemed to suggest something of the American film centre in its second syllable.”

Investing large sums into this venture, Boot was more than aware that it would be important to bring other wealthy investors on board. He teamed up with J. Arthur Rank, the Methodist miller and millionaire to joint-finance the project. The Ranks were a staunch Nonconformist family with a vigorous interest in the Methodist Church. J. Arthur's father founded the Joseph Rank Benevolent Fund and it was this practical interest in church work that led him to put up the capital for several short films on a biblical theme made for showing at Sunday school and churches. Rank found the experience rewarding and immediately set about entering the world of commercial film-making – a move which would ultimately lead to the development of the Rank Organisation which embraced not only film production, and film distribution at home and abroad, but also catering, leisure time activities and a wide field of manufacturing interests which would, at its height, employ more than 30,000 people.

The completion of building at Pinewood was fast and the Studios were opened officially on 30 September 1936, when Charles Boot handed over the opening key to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade in front of more than 1,000 guests on sound stage 'D'.

Production at the Studios got off to a flying start, *London Melody* being one of eight productions shot at Pinewood within months of its doors opening. Carol Reed made *Talk of the Devil* (1936), a drama of double cross and crooked deals, notable less for its cast and production values than for being the first film that was both started and completed at Pinewood. Wally Patch and Wifrid Hyde-White starred in Paramount's *The Scarab Murder Mystery* and a young Margaret Lockwood appeared in Maurice Elvey's *Melody and Romance*. Within months of its opening, Pinewood had become the busiest studios in the country.

In 1937, Pinewood saw 24 films made within its Studios. Several were quota quickies, which the studios' management did not object to as they could be filmed in between other larger productions and so kept workers employed consistently throughout the year. Busy with productions great and small, Pinewood became a home to directors and producers from all filming backgrounds.

Pinewood's lavish surroundings attracted the Americans. It was very typically British and very untypically what they perceived as a film studio. They were attracted to the grounds, the old mansion house and its history. The Studios continued to see refurbishment and improvements to the old mansion house that became the centrepiece of attraction at the site. The former gun room and room in which the Irish Free State Treaty was signed was now converted into a small but opulent cocktail bar and the ballroom that adjoined it now served as a spacious wood panelled restaurant in which diners could sit, eat and relax while looking out onto the well-groomed lawns outside. In the gardens, fresh vegetables were grown for serving at lunch. The mansion house had its own art gallery and billiards room as well as several suites ornately fitted with marble bathrooms.

The frenzied activity at Pinewood in the late 1930s wasn't to last. The depression, which was hitting the British film industry in general, now had its sights set on Pinewood. The Second World War saw the Studios requisitioned by the Government for storage - its great sound stages becoming home to mountains of sugar, flour and other much-needed wartime supplies. A site of almost 100 acres close to the capital peppered with empty sound stages the size of huge warehouses was an opportunity too good to be missed by the Government as war descended on Britain. Already occupied by the Royal Mint, other important industries were soon to enjoy being evacuated to Pinewood, particularly Lloyd's of London who moved into the Studios just days before hostilities broke out in September 1939.

Being so close to London, Pinewood was always considered a likely target for bombing. Yet much of the site was surrounded by thick and dense woodland, which ensured that Pinewood remained, unlike other studios such as Shepperton, relatively bomb free throughout the war. Pinewood's nearest bomb, a V2, landed in a field just south of the gardens and apart from a large hole in the ground, caused little damage.

Production on film was revived with the arrival of the Crown Film Unit, the Army Film and Photographic Unit, and the Royal Air Force Film Unit, to the studios in 1941. The Polish Air Force Film Unit joined them. Sadly, for some, the safety of the Studios gave way to the dangers of being on the frontline collecting images for the

wartime productions and a number of service cameramen lost their lives in action.

The first film to be made at the newly re-opened Pinewood Studios after the war had come to an end came from one of Rank's Independent Producer teams, Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat. *Green for Danger* became an instant classic. There was a resurgence in the fortunes of the British film industry in general and a revitalised Pinewood in particular, which was now seeing large sums invested into the site to bring the studios up to post-war specifications. Early post war classics made at Pinewood included, *Great Expectations* and *Black Narcissus* – both of which were early Oscar winners for the British studios. Yet on screen success was matched by financial pressures behind the scenes with Rank's debts estimated at £1.5 million in 1946 (more than £20 million today).

John Davis, who joined Rank in 1939, was to become managing director in 1948, his cool head under the burden of the heavy financial pressures that were now facing the organisation, made him regarded as the ideal man to get Rank out of a huge financial mess. Davis set about cutting costs of productions being made at Pinewood. He slapped a limit of £150,000 on films and made it quite clear that any film with a budget above that limit could not be made. It naturally followed that with smaller budgets came less lavish and more workmanlike productions. Cheaper (to make), populist entertainment was the order of the day at Pinewood. Under Davis's care, Rank's overdraft fell by almost £4 million in the first year. No one on the board seemed too troubled that they weren't making films like *Great Expectations* or *Oliver Twist* anymore, and although films made in the early 1950s were often accused of being bland, there was no doubt to the money men that thriftiness and sticking to the carefully laid out rules about what could and could not be spent on film production at Pinewood was having results.

There were several reasons for the continuing falling back in Pinewood's woes in the 1950s, not least, a run of highly successful film comedies which ensured that even though audience numbers at cinemas were dropping – much in part due to the advent and increasing success of commercial television from 1955 – the films people did go to see in large numbers were coming from just a small handful of producers.

Indeed in the seven years from and including 1954 to 1960, five of the top moneymaking films in Britain in those years were made at Pinewood. More interestingly, four out of those five were medical film comedies, *Doctor in the House* (1954), *Doctor At Large* (1957), *Carry On Nurse* (1959), and *Doctor In Love* (1960). The films were made separately by a husband and wife couple, Betty Box and Peter Rogers. The non-comedy Pinewood film to have topped the box office charts in Britain in 1956 was the war actioner based on the exploits of Douglas Bader, *Reach for the Sky*, starring Kenneth More.

Film comedy series-wise, there were to be seven *Doctor* outings, 31 *Carry On* films (to date) and 12 Norman Wisdom star vehicles, with many of these films and their respective series playing a part in lifting Pinewood out of its difficulties in the 1950s and 1960s – comedy proving to be a very serious business indeed.

Pinewood Studios celebrated its twenty-first birthday on Monday 30th September 1957. Over five hundred guests sat at sixty-seven tables in a big marquee erected in the Studios' gardens. Lord Rank (- he had been elevated to the peerage that year -) received a special presentation, as did Managing Director John Davis, following a host of speeches including one from Dirk Bogarde, who described himself as 'the oldest living member of the contract artists.' Bogarde who was filming *A Tale of Two Cities* at the Studios, attended the lunch in costume, as he was needed back on set immediately afterwards.

There was a host of well-known actors and actresses at the lunch, all of them big stars, whose performances and very appearances in a film helped improve chances of box office success. Among those names were Dirk Bogarde, Stanley Baker, Diana Dors, Peter Finch, Anne Heywood, Glynis Johns, Margaret Lockwood, Virginia McKenna, Patrick McGoohan, Donald Sinden and, on the top table - for he had now become Rank's biggest screen star - Kenneth More.

With the 1960s came the most iconic figure to have emerged from any production made at Pinewood before and since - James Bond. In the words of Sean Connery: "I don't think a single other role changes a man quite so much as Bond. It's a cross, a privilege, a joke, a challenge. And it's as bloody intrusive as a nightmare." And he would know, having played the part of the world's most famous

secret agent through the long-running series' formative years. All of Connery's outings as Bond and almost each and every other title in turn to date have had a base at Pinewood Studios. Indeed the words, Bond and Pinewood have almost become synonymous over the forty-five years that the films have been produced. Nobody does it better than Bond and many believe that few Studios can do it better than Pinewood.

The 1960s saw a boom period for Pinewood, a huge turnaround from the difficult financial days that befell the Studios in the decades that preceded them. The decade saw a host of big movies made at the Studios along with further expansion of the site to allow for the burgeoning evolution of television and the larger scale shows and dramas that were now needed to feed this increasingly voracious beast.

It was good to have the Americans back in town too. With them came some big stars and some big pictures. Most importantly came the big money, which helped contribute towards keeping the country's studios afloat and staff, at all levels, in work. Large-scale productions such as *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*, *The Heroes of Telemark* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, were welcomed by management and crews alike. By the end of the decade it became abundantly clear that there was large American investment in the British film industry. Some £15 million in 1965 had risen to £20 million just a few years later and questions were being asked as to exactly what would happen if that money ever dried up. Meanwhile, Billy Wilder, whose hit films had included, *Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment* arrived at Pinewood in 1969, to make *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

The 1960s became the 1970s and there were still big films arriving at Pinewood's doors. Norman Jewison directed the emotional and highly regarded, award-winning epic musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1970), while Ken Russell's eighteen month production schedule on *The Devils* (1970) had very different types of emotions running high with its controversial scenes causing outcry both inside and outside of the Studios. More than 30 years after having made his first film at Pinewood, Alfred Hitchcock returned to make the adult thriller, *Frenzy*.

Sadly, at the end of March 1972, Lord Rank died aged 83. His death coincided with a downturn for the British film industry, as over a period of years through the 1970s, weakening exchange rates, a strike-torn Britain with its power cuts and three-day weeks and exorbitant tax rates for higher earners forced investment and film makers away from the UK.

There were still some great films being made at Pinewood. Among them were the Oscar nominated film version of Anthony Shaffer's play of a policeman pitting his wits against a scheming detective thriller writer, the super two-hander, *Sleuth* (1972), starring Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine. Jack Clayton directed Francis Ford Coppola's version of *The Great Gatsby* (1973), starring Robert Redford, Mia Farrow and Sam Waterston. And Alan Parker's musical gangster spoof starring just children in every role, *Bugsy Malone*, was shot at Pinewood in 1975. As *The Illustrated London News* declared: "I only wish the British could make adult movies as intelligent as this one." Sadly, the number of British movies of any kind was diminishing fast. The year *Bugsy Malone* was made, there were just eight films produced at Pinewood and only one, Bryan Forbes' *The Slipper and the Rose* having anything like a big budget.

So the industry was in the doldrums and studios across Britain were getting nervous. Who could save it? Believe it or not it was to be *Superman*. Just as the comic book hero had saved the world on countless occasions since the character's creation in 1938, it was now planned that *Superman* could do more of the same on the big screen, while hopefully, at the same time, lift the ailing fortunes of Pinewood Studios. *Superman The Movie* began filming at Shepperton on 28 March 1977 but the space the production had booked could not accommodate the increasingly grandiose plans for the film. With Pinewood very quiet - not even a Bond occupying the sound stages in 1976 - the film moved studios. Ironically Pinewood has been the preferred studios choice when initial pre-production discussions were taking place but at that time, a year or so earlier, Pinewood hadn't enough space to occupy the production. Now the Studios welcomed *Superman* with open arms. And what a success story that would turn out to be.

Pinewood celebrated its golden anniversary in September 1986. Fifty years after opening its doors to filmmakers, the Studios were very much still in business even though business was not as good

as it could have been. Frustratingly, things were to get worse, with 1987 seeing one of the poorest years for film making in Pinewood's long and glorious history. In the autumn of 1987, Pinewood's managing director, Cyril Howard, decided that the site could no longer survive as a fully serviced studio. It would have to go the way other studios had gone and become "four-wall" – a facility where Pinewood would hire out the sound stage space and filmmakers would bring in their own teams of labour to work on their productions. Pinewood was the last of the British studios to go four-wall. It had little choice if it was to survive. The payroll was slashed almost overnight from around 500 staff to 150. Fortunes wouldn't change overnight, but now the studios had a chance again. Pinewood, which had shied away from commercials and pop videos in the past, was now happy to hire out space to companies who wanted to use the facilities in that way. There was a lot less film and a lot more television. And while commercials alone couldn't keep the studios afloat, they helped Pinewood through the dark days of the 1980's.

The 1990's began much as the 1980's had finished. Pinewood was quiet and few were optimistic about the difficulties that studios across the country found themselves in. Financially, it was still proving more cost effective to make films abroad. After America and its allies went to war with Iraq following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in the mid-1990, the world's finances, stock markets, oil industries and so on, were thrown into disarray. Just as worryingly for filmmakers, some big name actors refused to fly out of the States, which didn't help casting big movies either. At the beginning of November 1992, a new managing director arrived. Cyril Howard had retired and Steve Jaggs joined the studio for a two-month hand over period before taking the reins on his own at the beginning of January 1993. Jaggs was soon to gain a reputation as a hard man but a fair man. His honest and down to earth approach was appealing and comforting to those who were nervous as to what would happen next to the site. Jaggs set about bringing Pinewood into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While more television productions were welcomed to Pinewood in the mid 1990s, big star names also continued to return for big budget films. The late 1990s continued to see a slow but steady resurgence of big films arriving back at Pinewood. At the same time plans for the site meant building was now getting underway to increase the number of sound stages and facilities available. By 1997 things were very busy.

As the nineties drew to a close there were many changes at Pinewood. Gone was the old “gong man”, as Rank focussed on a new brand name, Deluxe, that it had acquired a few years previously. Two new sound stages were finished along with an adjoining block to accommodate office space, named The Stanley Kubrick Building, dedicated by the studios in his honour and opened by his widow Christiana. ‘R’ and ‘S’ studios were hugely important for Pinewood’s survival. Until that time the studios only had three large stages and the 007 stage. These could accommodate any large pictures that came to Pinewood, but what if two pictures needed big facilities at the same time? The two new stages helped put paid to that problem, Pinewood was now easily in a position to accommodate two large movies on their site concurrently.

As the new Millennium dawned, it became clear that Pinewood was about to enter a new era. In February 2000, the news broke that a consortium of investors led by Ivan Dunleavy and former boss of Channel Four and BBC1, Michael Grade, had bought Pinewood for £62 million. Rank had been looking for a buyer for its Studios for a while and sold its cinema chain, *Odeon*, for £280 million at the same time. Dunleavy, who was to become chief executive, had had his eye on Pinewood for some time. Fears that Pinewood would be turned into a film-styled theme park were quickly allayed by Grade who became Chairman of the Board. Existing MD, Steve Jaggs, was invited to stay on in the role. Together, he and the new owners, sought to assure a nervous industry that further positive plans for the Studios’ future were afoot. Exactly one year later, the announcement came that Pinewood was to merge with one of its former rivals, Shepperton Studios. The merger of Pinewood and Shepperton created a firm valued at £100 million and meant that the enlarged business would have the same number of stages as its Hollywood counterparts. With Studios across Europe and Australia all vying for the same trade now, competition for studios in Britain, such as Pinewood and Shepperton, had never been stiffer. No longer taking each other on, but joining together to take others on and win the business for Britain, was a rational way forward.

So far, it appears to have been a successful way forward. Pre-merger, in the year 2000 for example, filming of Stephen Sommers’ hit sequel *The Mummy Returns* was divided between Pinewood and Shepperton. Post-merger, it has been easier to

accommodate entire productions in one or other of the studios, a move which the majority of producers seem pleased about.

The Company went on to buy Teddington Television Studios in 2005, allowing the group to diversify even further across the spectrum from blockbuster filmmaking to light entertainment small-screen fare. There are now more than 200 companies based at the Studio company sites – from legal advisors and accountants to special effects houses and prosthetics makers. The merged spaces now mean that Pinewood, Shepperton and Teddington are spread across 200 acres, have some 41 stages - including six digital television studios - and more than 80 acres of back lot for film sets, as well as one of Europe's largest outdoor water tanks and a new dedicated underwater stage. Pinewood continues to have its formal gardens, adjoining fields, woodlands and orchard, and magnificent mansion house.

Fans of film both from within and outside the industry can now log on to the company's website and study plans for future developments, which include large-scale building programmes that will further increase capacity for both stage and office accommodation across the sites. Pinewood, Shepperton and Teddington evidently aren't going anywhere. And despite some hard times – when the dollar hit \$1.90 to the pound, and tax breaks from the Exchequer were, until the 2006 budget, far too low – Pinewood and its counterparts seem set for the future.

As a wise observer on the film industry once stated, there are no such things as bad films; there are well made films and badly made films. After 70 years, most people in the industry will tell you that Pinewood helps people to make well-made films. It is a proud Studio with a proud heritage and a seemingly positive future. Across the world filmmakers, studios, peers and customers continue to hold Pinewood in high regard. The special mystique that has built up at this favoured Buckinghamshire site continues. Some seven decades after Pinewood first opened its doors to filming, the Studios are still very much open for business.

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