



## **Account of Purley on Thames**

# Participation in the Media

R200533 3/3/2018

### *Introduction*

Many Purley people have written to newspapers, had articles published and appeared on radio or TV but it is very difficult to get a comprehensive picture. One person however made an enormous contribution to the local media and that is Honor Gutch who was the correspondent for the local newspapers for many years and who left her copies of her contributions to form part of the Project Purley Archive.

However we do have some articles from local media recording Purley people's participation as extras in movie making.

### *Hot Flushes and Mr.Darcy*

*Sylvia Conquest writes about her part in the TV adaptation of Pride and Prejudice Ex R000039*

There can't be too many t.v.screens which, in 1995 on a Sunday night, didn't smoulder as Mr.Darcy invaded our sets in hot pursuit of the taunting Elizabeth Bennet, alongside the neurotic Mrs.Bennet trying sadly to marry off her five daughters. With this in mind, an advert in the Newbury newspaper sent an avalanche of would-be "extras" along to Basildon Park to sign up for four days of cinema filming of *Pride and Prejudice*.

We arrived and were asked for names and addresses and given a tape measure for vital statistics (HELP!) and, after a week, were invited along to the House for costume fittings. This was every little girl's dream, a large marquee full of ball gowns, satin slippers, long gloves, pretty head gear and boxes of corsets and bodices. After two hours of trying on five gowns, my "dresser" then happy sent me through to another marquee to be fitted and glued into a wig. The attention for EXTRAS was phenomenal, and the detailing was very exacting.

Catering for the mass was satisfactory; breakfast, dinner, tea and bottled water was always available even while on set, trying to get the many scenes just right. With foresight, you didn't have another breakfast until you were corseted up! Laces became tighter and tighter, and bosoms were reshuffled somewhere else, like so high you ended with "ear muffs." Needless to say, if your satin laces came undone, bending down was a no go area. What a good excuse to ask a young handsome and virile soldier to help out. Even taking a natural break was a marathon effort, especially as your gown could be wider than the w.c.

It rained heavily for the first two days and in respect of costumes and satin shoes, we were ferried from the marquees to the House in mini buses. (Mr.Darcy in a Mercedes of course!). An amusing sight was soldiers in their striking red jackets, gold braiding and white breeches, plus their trainers, chatting on their mobiles – a real ancient and modern syndrome. You are aware there is much hanging around, so you prepare with your favourite activity, reading, tapestry work, word and card

games. We even became involved with a lady making fairy dolls that occupied one whole day.

There were many new friends to be made, after all we were a very mixed bunch. There were noisy hod carriers, delicate upholstery ladies, musicians reviewing their scores, plus many young students with time on their hands needing cash, as was the case with us O.A.P.s. Muslin gowns were mostly cream or off-white in colour, remembering that the Bennets were not high on the social structure and the upper crust wore clothes of more lush colour and material. So many young girls looked a dream, with much detail on their ball gowns, including buttons, gathers, feathers, beads and fanciful fobs for the men.

Every possible precaution was taken into consideration to say nothing of the safety and care from the National Trust stewards who saw that the fabric of the House was always observed.

First day we were “padding” out for the ballroom scene, as Basildon Park represented Netherfield Park, where Elizabeth Bennet and Mr.Darcy became acquainted and the love-hate relationship began. The third day meant waiting outside the House to join the celebrations because, in the village, the ball would have been the highlight of the year. For two hours we waited for the sun to disappear behind the clouds for it needed to be dusk. Then the urns were lit and the atmosphere was now right so on came the horses and carriages. It really was a sight for sore eyes. Those well groomed horses just stole the show.

After filming four fantasy days, you come down to earth with a bang! Arriving home to builders, fighting councils and depressing news it was difficult coping with reality. Having said that, the camaraderie was superb and, as we hugged and kissed our new friends goodbye, I realised they’d made an olde lady very happy. I’d loved them all, especially Mr.Darcy.

### ***Project Purley and the Basildon Park Extras***

*David Downs recalls the parts played by other members of Project Purley - ex R000042*

Impeccable timing ensured that Project Purley’s September meeting took place on the day that Universal Pictures big screen production of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ went on general release throughout the UK. One of the best attended and longest gatherings of recent years listened enthralled as Society members plus invited guests spoke of their experiences as support artists in the Netherfield Ball scenes filmed at Basildon Park in September 2004.

John Southall ‘topped and tailed’ the meeting. Although not involved in the actual filming because he was reluctant to shave off his beard, he was on site throughout as a member of the Basildon Park staff. He explained that the film unit comprised 90 camera and technical crew, and that he and his colleagues had to close the house as early as July to accommodate them. They were helped by a conservation expert as they wrapped and stored away precious and irreplaceable items, then took up valuable carpets that would be permanently damaged by the footsteps of the 200 extras who had been recruited by Working Titles. The film village gradually assembled, including huge hairdressing and costume marquees, catering vans, stage sets, scaffolding, a rebuilt Octagon Room, and motor homes for the stars who included Keira Knightley, Donald Sutherland, Matthew MacFadyen and Brenda Blethyn. Basildon Park staff also had the mundane task of directing traffic and checking identity cards, as well as ensuring that no gravel from the driveway was trodden into the house.

Janet Southall, John’s wife, was an extra in the crowd scenes and spent four days on the set, and can see the back of her head, wearing a mop cap, in the film. She particularly remembered the stifling heat in the ballroom scenes on the Thursday afternoon shoot, and how terrified she was that one of the large candles would set alight a lady’s ball gown. Continuity meant that filming often had to be stopped to ensure that candles were seen at the appropriate length, and the musicians of the English Chamber Orchestra were hearing piped music through their earpieces in some scenes, as

were the dancers, to enable the sound crew to record the conversation between the actors. But the real highlight came on the last day, when having missed the minibus transport back to the dressing room, she was given a lift in film director Joe Wright's Mercedes!

Cold feet almost prevented Sylvia Conquest from auditioning for a part, but once she was accepted and had seen the wonderful costumes, she was delighted to be involved in the filming of the Jane Austen novel she most adores. She received her £20 fee for a fitting and worked on each of the four days. The organisation was superb, including the first-aid facility for an injured lady who fell heavily, plus the 'Real Meals' catering van which could produce hot meals throughout the day. Sylvia was embarrassed by her sore throat, even though she had a non-speaking part, but made up for it by acting out an exaggerated swoon on the settee during the ball scene. She had a sense of anticlimax once the filming was over, but in retrospect enjoyed the whole experience, even if Colin Firth was not playing Mr Darcy.

Christine Wall, Sylvia's friend from many years ago, had joined a casting agency without any opportunity of work until she saw the advert for extras for 'Pride and Prejudice' in the Newbury Weekly News. At her fitting she noticed that the costumes had been supplied by five different companies, and some dresses were in dire need of repair. The hairdresser attached a bun to her short hair, added a feather and she was told to wear no jewellery or make-up. A devotee of period drama, Christine loved the film when she saw it, and managed to recognise her own back view in one of the scenes.

Peter Mason, a member of the Basildonians amateur dramatics group, auditioned, was enlisted as a footman, then rapidly promoted to a gentleman guest at the ball. He spoke of the problem for background artists in miming animated dialogue for take after take, and at the same time making suitable accompanying facial expressions. Peter was called back at the end of the week to film an additional scene, this time as a footman, and can be seen covering the house furniture with dustsheets before closing the huge double doors as the curtains are brought down at the far end of the corridor. For him, an equally memorable part of the experience was meeting other extras including a former investment banker, a taxi driver, a children's game designer and the man who sold George Harrison his first electric guitar for £17.

Working as a volunteer in the tearoom at Basildon Park meant that Edward Dingwell, an M.A. student at Reading University, was in pole position for a part as a crowd extra. He used a superb phrase to describe his feelings when he said that during the week he was "able to get under the skin of the film". He had been told to mingle in crowd scenes, but like many of the extras was too starstruck to do this immediately. He also had a narrow escape when he survived an attempted seduction by Sylvia and Christine during some enthusiastic background action, and accidentally clobbered one of the stars, Rosamund Pike, whilst waving his arms about too animatedly during the Netherfield Ball.

I was originally offered all four days, but this was cut to two when the heavy rain meant that no outdoor filming could take place on Monday or Tuesday. I had only been accepted as a crowd member after promising to shave off my beard, and suffered more humiliation when the hair stylist said my hair was a bit "Doris Day". I learned from one of the costume assistants that this was rhyming slang for "gone astray!" I spent two long days wearing a heavy wig, thick clothes and tight silk stockings, and at times felt like a stray dog in Battersea Dogs Home, as assistant directors looking for people to fill out crowd scenes walked straight past me in the marquee. But I was impressed by the attention to detail in the scenes in which I was included, such as the correct way to hold a glass, the constant attention of the hair stylists and dressers between takes, and the provision of water bottles in the heat of the Octagon Room, which then had to be tucked away out of sight. Like the rest of the speakers, I enjoyed the kindness and thoughtfulness of all the film unit, and the camaraderie among the extras. The only disappointment came when the director asked for a couple

to indulge in a passionate embrace as background to the dancing. I suggested to the lady standing next to me near the piano that we might oblige, but she replied, "Certainly not, we're far too old!"

John Southall finished the evening by saying what happened after the extras had left. There were a further six days filming for the principal actors, with the house staff spending much time raking over the grass and gravel after each take of the horses and carriages travelling over it. On the warmest day the Fire Brigade arrived to work the rain machine, and Keira Knightley had glycerine applied to her face to produce artificial tears. John and his colleagues were able to eat gourmet-type food alongside the actors, and this also gave him the opportunity to collect autographs on prints from a 1964 reproduction of an 1896 edition of the book. These much prized signatures are now in the safe at Basildon Park. The house needed a fortnight's work before it could revert from a film set to a National Trust property, but now includes, at no extra charge, an exhibition of the items connected with the filming of 'Pride and Prejudice'.

Looking back on those exciting days at Basildon Park in September 2004, those of us who were lucky enough to be involved will remember several highlights. Not the £60 per day we were paid, or the excellent way in which we were fed and watered, but the friends we made, the opportunity, however brief, to rub shoulders with the stars of the silver screen, the patience we all showed in standing through seventeen takes of the ballroom scene, the director's cries of "Lovely, lovely, lovely!", but more than anything, the fun of it all. Go and see this marvellous film. Blink and you'll miss us, but I promise you, we are there!