

SHEPPERTON



STUDIOS

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*An overview by film historian Morris Bright*

Shepperton Studios dates back to the late seventeenth century when local nobleman, Thomas Wood, built Littleton Park, the mansion house which still stands at the centre of the 60-acre Surrey site more than 300 years later. The Woods lived at Littleton Park for the best part of two centuries. Their home was grandiose and played host to many royal visitors.

A fire in 1876 put paid to such visits for many years and it was almost 25 years before the house was fully restored by Sir Richard Burbridge, at that time, the managing director of the world famous store, Harrods. Burbridge had an eye for the resplendent, with useful contacts to boot. Using timber from the original Houses of Parliament and marbles depicting the great battles of Nelson and Wellington, Littleton Park soon felt and looked positively palatial. Following Burbridge's death in 1917, Sir Edward Nicholl, a wealthy shipping tycoon and Member of Parliament who lived there until 1928, bought the estate.

Norman Loudon, a young wealthy Scottish businessman whose latest enterprising venture had been producing "flicker" books for children, then purchased the site. "Flickers," as they were known, were made up of dozens of consecutive single frame photos that gave the impression of movement as a child literally flicked through the book. Suddenly one could see a cricketer bowling a ball or a golfer swinging his iron. It was very exciting, and very profitable. Loudon bought Littleton Park with the profits of Flicker Productions. The house and its surrounding grounds cost him just £5,000; some seventy years later, the same site was sold for around £35 million.

And so it was, in the winter of 1931, that Shepperton Film Studios – or Sound City Film Producing & Recording Studios as it was then known – was born. There was certainly no shortage of film studios for producers to choose from at that time. There were several dozen

working studios in and around London at the beginning of the 1930s. The advantage Loudon had over his business opponents was that theirs had all been built during the silent era and were hastily being refurbished to take into account the advent of sound at the end of the 1920s. So while Elstree and others had to be refurbished, Sound City was able to start from scratch, erecting two purpose-built soundproofed stages within six months. Shepperton offered new, modern and fast-expanding production facilities.

By the end of 1932, Sound City's increasingly popular facilities had seen the production of no less than seven films, two full-length features and five shorts.

Littleton Park's grandiose mansion along with the conservatory, ballroom, and acres of parkland, and its ability to turn films around quickly, soon attracted production companies away from other London studios. The Studios also became a breeding ground for young and up-and-coming film directors, establishing itself even then as the home for independent filmmakers.

However, not everything that Loudon was to touch would turn to gold. Carried away with his own exuberance, he was soon to witness Shepperton's first big film being produced, promptly released, and then flopping at the box office! With a budget of around £60,000 *Colonel Blood* looked grand enough, and the sets built for filming included a reconstruction of the Tower of London in the Studios' tank. Its failure at the cinemas gave Loudon a jolt. His insurance policy was *The Cinematograph Films Act* of 1927. This enthusiastic piece of legislation had been rushed through Parliament to help save a dying film industry that had plenty of studios but was under intense pressure from America. The *Act* ruled that an increasing number of British films should be made and released on a sliding scale over a ten year period, their number to total at least 20 per cent of all film output by the end of the 1930s. The *Act* also set out the percentages of staff employed on a production that had to be of British origin. This led to a surge in films being made quickly and cheaply to meet the terms of the quota. These films became known as "quota quickies". While they did much to stabilize and then substantially increase the rate of British film production, the quickies did little to improve the industry's reputation.

Norman Loudon used the *Act* to his and Sound City's advantage. Concerned more about his company's financial worth than the aesthetic pleasures of many of the cheap productions he was churning out, Shepperton went from strength to strength. After a short closure for modernization and further expansion, the Studios re-opened in 1936, now with seven sound stages, a dozen editing rooms, three viewing theatres and large numbers of prop and scene workshops. Additionally, the old house was opened as a hotel and restaurant.

Among those attracted to Sound City, its huge facilities and riverside location were the Korda Brothers – Alexander, Zoltan and Vincent. Of Hungarian descent, the brothers were a formidable filmmaking force and, fortuitously, would in time develop their relationship with the Studios much further. For now, Shepperton was to be their base for 1934 and 1935 as they worked on the ambitious *Sanders of the River*.

The Studios continued to improve and expand and by the late 1930s, with Sound City booming, Loudon - never one to stand still - announced his most ambitious project to date, a theme park in the grounds at Shepperton. Loudon's Sound City Zoo and Wonderland, with its planned 15 themed areas and a Noah's ark of 100 species of animal, could, he predicted, be built and open to the paying public by 1940. The project would be more ambitious, popular and long-lasting than anything yet seen in this country. At least that was the plan...until Germany invaded Poland.

The outbreak of World War II caused major problems for film studios in and around London. Huge sound stages the size of aircraft hangers were ideal for a government that needed space to store much needed food and supplies for a nation under bombardment. Originally, Sound City looked as though it may have been spared the requisition. Indeed, for a short while production of films continued both at Shepperton and at other British studios. Patriotic flag-wavers were needed to keep up the morale of the country.

The Ministry of Defence finally requisitioned Shepperton in 1941. Four of its five sound stages were used for storing sugar. Then, when

the Vickers factory nearby took a huge hit and was severely damaged, the sugar was moved into two sound stages, with the other two being used by Vickers' workers to make bomber parts and spares.

Shepperton's designers and prop hands were not left idle. Instead of building sets for films, their talents were employed to build hundreds of decoy planes, imitation landing barges, fake guns and landing strips.

Frustratingly for studio owners and producers alike, the end of the war did not mean the end of the sound stage requisitions. Cinema attendances had peaked by the end of the war, hitting a staggering 31 million visits a week. Yet just twenty per cent of films that people went to see were British.

Alexander Korda led calls for the government to start releasing stages back to the industry. His efforts were partially successful. Studios across the country began to operate again. By September 1945, Shepperton had re-opened with two of its large stages and one small stage ready for action. Ironically, its first major film was to be an import from Pinewood, where the Rank Organisation found they hadn't yet been released enough space to produce a big British musical, *London Town*. The film was hugely expensive to make, the size of its budget surpassed only by the size of its failure. *London Town* finally pushed Norman Loudon over the edge. He was getting out. His opportunity to go came with Alexander Korda's purchase of British Lion in April 1946. This bought a controlling share in Sound City and with that controlling share came Shepperton Studios.

Alexander Korda was nothing like Norman Loudon. Born in Hungary in 1893, Korda first worked in films in his home country, then across Europe before coming to England in 1931. With his two talented brothers by his side - Zoltan, also a director, and Vincent, an art director - Alexander Korda was a filmmaking force to be reckoned with. Stars loved him and loathed him in equal numbers. But all recognised his ability to make a good film, even if his productions didn't always make a good profit. Linking up with such names as independent film producer David Selznick, Korda had ensured large-scale films with even larger appeal. Their joint Shepperton work, *The*

*Third Man* (1949), remains one of the most universally loved films of all time.

Unfortunately, the new peacetime era saw a new Government in charge at Westminster and a new quota for films was introduced. The figures - 45 percent of first features and 25 per cent of second features having to be British - were too high. The industry was unprepared and unable to meet those targets. Within weeks, by the winter of 1948 a dozen studios were laid empty and the government's original plans to promote and advance the British film industry had to be re-examined to see if ways could be found of keeping it alive and afloat.

Once again it was Alexander Korda who saved the day. Using his renowned charm and persuasion, Korda supported the government's introduction of the National Film Finance Corporation and promptly secured a loan of around £3 million to finance future production by the British Lion Film Corporation. Korda himself was not a beneficiary. Indeed, the Government loan to British Lion via the NFFC accelerated his decision to step down from producing and directing at the time of the post-1948 film industry recovery. During his last seven years – until his death in 1956 – Korda acted as an overseeing executive producer and studios administrator, using his charm until the very end to cajole some of the country's best loved and renowned film makers to switch away from organisations such as Rank and move to British Lion at Shepperton. Among them were Carol Reed, David Lean, the Boulting Brothers - Roy and John - and Laurence Olivier.

With around 15 productions made at Shepperton in 1952, it is hard to imagine that while the sound stages continued to overflow with work, the finances of British Lion continued to decline. A new company, British Lion Films, was set up in January 1955 to take control of the assets of its predecessor. The new company was to oversee film distribution and provide financial guarantees for its independent producers. There was a shake-up at board level. Korda was out. The new board comprised, among others, filmmakers Roy and John Boulting - another set of brothers who would soon take charge at the helm of Shepperton Studios.

John Boulting and his twin brother Roy were an inseparable director/producer team throughout their careers. Inseparable and interchangeable, to the extent whereby they would alternate on films, one taking on production, the other direction and then swapping for their next feature. Their Shepperton comedies of the late 1950s are renowned for the swipes they took at this country's "great" institutions – mocking the Church, the Army, Civil Service and, in the widely-acclaimed and still highly-regarded unions/upper-class bashing farce, *I'm Alright Jack* (1959).

It was the Brothers' down-to-earth, tell-it-as-it-is attitude that made them attractive to a new board of directors in need of impressive independent film-making talent. It needed their skills and those of fellow filmmaking team Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat not just for their production prowess, but also for their business acumen and knowledge of what had become a very difficult market for both the company and the Studios.

Throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s, they tried to find ways of keeping the Studios viable. Large budget productions including *The Guns of Navarone*, *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, pointed the way to a reversal in Shepperton's financial decline. In time, takings increased and the financial standing of British Lion Films continued to improve. Yet box office failures still outweighed successes. It was then that the idea was hit upon to bring producers onto the board of the company. Boards were invariably comprised of financial men and not producers. Why not engage the talents of the film-makers? Put them in charge of their own budgets and make them responsible for taking day-to-day, and often hard, production decisions. The idea worked. Between 1958 and 1961 the fortunes of British Lion turned around. The company went from being a huge loss-making enterprise to break even, and within two years was actually making money. In 1963, the company announced it's fourth year of profit and that it had repaid a recent loan of £600,000 back to the government. In return, the Government instructed the National Film Finance Corporation to sell Shepperton. British Lion had become a victim of its own success. Enough money had been lent over the years and now seemed as good a time as any to quit while they were, if not exactly ahead, than certainly in a better position than before.

Several groups expressed an interest in buying the Studios, some from within the industry and others from outside who saw it as a potential long-term investment. Finally, on 31 March 1964, British Lion was sold to a consortium headed by former director and chief of production at Ealing Studios, Sir Michael Balcon. The uncertainty over the future of Shepperton took its toll on earnings and as Balcon took over, profits dropped by 80 per cent. Profits continued to fall and in September 1965, Balcon stood down from the board.

The financial ups and downs that had plagued Shepperton from its founding days, did little to stop the continuing impetus of fresh, new, independent talent. Increased demand for filming space brought two new stages to Shepperton and few could have anticipated the slump, which was to follow in the next decade. For now, Shepperton was on a roll. An increase in British Lion's profits was announced in 1967. John Boulting, who had stayed on the Board was now managing director and things appeared to be going very well. Yet, within a very short space of time what had been thought of as a healthy trading situation had turned around 180 degrees. The number of new films being distributed started to decline from a healthy 27 in 1969 to just seven in 1971. By 1979, this figure had dropped to just two films made at Shepperton that year. This catastrophic fall was less about Shepperton's facilities or the running of the Studios and more to do with lack of investment incentives being offered by the Government, and the increasingly parlous state of the 1970s world economy.

Once again Shepperton changed hands. The board of British Lion accepted an offer by financier John Bentley who, along with Barclay Securities, took over the company in April 1972. Within weeks, Bentley appeared to be ringing the death knell for Shepperton. The man who had built up a reputation for taking over a company at a low price and then selling off assets piecemeal, seemed to be studying the component parts that were British Lion far too closely for the industry's liking. It soon became clear that Bentley wanted Shepperton shut and the land used for housing development. As a studio, Shepperton was worth £1.7 million, as housing development land its value would be nearer twice that, at £3.5 million. With Shepperton said to be losing £12,000 a week, Bentley was keen to make the argument for a quick sell off.

The British film industry pulled together. It was not prepared to see itself threatened by an outsider intent on destroying part of its heritage just to realise a profit on a short-term investment. Representations were made to the Department of Trade and Industry and the NFFC. Eventually, after a series of high-level meetings, a compromise was proposed in November 1972. The plan was no longer to sell Shepperton but to reduce the size of the Studios from 60 acres to around 15 acres. Stages 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' would stay and there would be workshops, a dubbing theatre and an area for a backlot. Permission would be requested to allow the building of some new offices to service the Studios and a selection of other ancillary services deemed necessary by the industry. That would take up another five acres, which left 40 acres for the owners to dispose of for their own purposes. The plans went out to consultation to all the interested parties.

While the consultation was taking place, films continued to be made and ironically, after an appalling year in 1971, some 18 films went into production at Shepperton during 1972 - the second highest number at the site since the war. It took until November of 1973 before a final agreement over the Studios was reached, in which Shepperton would now keep eight stages on a 22 acre-site and with no redundancies. Everyone seemed happy.

As if in direct contrast to the huge sigh of relief across the industry, production levels at Shepperton plummeted again. The upsurge of 1972 ran out of steam, with only six films being made at the Studios in 1973.

Slowly, the omens for the Studios began to look better. Lion International sold its interest to a company backed by five banks and controlled by the managing directors of British Lion films. This meant that British Lion was once again an independent filmmaking company and even if Shepperton was not as busy and thriving as it had once been, it was still very much alive, although production remained low - with just three films in 1976 and a few more in 1977.

In the early 1980s, Mills and Allen International - the new name for Lion International - that had bought the majority shareholding in



Shepperton back in 1975 was running Shepperton. Some excellent films were produced at the Studios in this period including *The Omen*, *The Boys from Brazil*, *Alien*, and *The Elephant Man*; nevertheless, Mills and Allen decided that it wanted to relinquish its hold over Shepperton and it was generally agreed that the Lee Group would be the ideal company to take over. The Lee Group (two brothers, John and Benny) hired out lighting equipment to the makers of commercials and documentaries, a flourishing business that had strong links with the Studios. With the purchase of Shepperton in 1984, the Lees found themselves owning more sound stages in Britain than either of their two main competitors, Pinewood and Elstree. The company immediately set about giving the Studios a much-needed facelift. The Lees identified very early on, that owning Studios by themselves was unlikely to make money but if the Studio owner was able to oblige incoming tenants and production companies to lease the in-house facilities then profits could be made.

Sadly, a mixture of stock market crash on “Black Monday” in October 1987, an American scriptwriters strike in 1988, and accusations that a senior employee in Lee International had been “fiddling the books”, saw John and Benny Lee lose control over their empire. Investment bankers Warburg-Pincus stepped in to take over their companies for \$60 million. The Lees were devastated.

At the end of the 1980s there was a huge increase in the amount of television programmes and commercials being produced at Shepperton in place of film. In 1990 there were five films being made at the Studios including Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet*, and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, as well as nine television series. Although many in the industry felt uncomfortable with a Studios being run by a bank, clients remained loyal and production continued.

By 1995, Shepperton was buoyant once again. Question marks over the future of the Studios were subsiding. Then in February came the news that a consortium led by British film directors and long term tenants at Shepperton, Ridley and Tony Scott, had bought the Studios. Suddenly, Shepperton was in the hands of two highly respected, and, more importantly, successful film industry players. This fourth set of brothers to own and run Shepperton promised that there would be major investment in the Studios. “Buying Shepperton

was the right thing to do for me and Tony. I had been making commercials there since the 1960s. The Studios had been kind to me. It was almost like pay back time.” And pay back there was, with at least £15 million invested in the Studios after the Scotts took over, into new dubbing theatres, the building of ‘J’ & ‘K’ stages, new offices, wardrobe departments, and general facilities. The Studios bought a backlot of 22 acres of field land for £1 million. The roads around the Studios were upgraded. There was big investment in and around the site.

With 10 features made at Shepperton in 1999 and a further 14 in 2000, as well as the continuous production of commercials and television films and series, it felt that Shepperton’s resurgence and resurrection was complete. Production companies who had had happy experiences working at the Studios were returning to make sequels.

Five years after Ridley and Tony Scott took over, the announcement came that Shepperton was to merge with what had been its biggest commercial competitor in the British film industry, Pinewood Studios. Two years before, Pinewood itself had been bought by a consortium, led by Michael Grade and venture capitalists, 3i. Like Shepperton, Pinewood had experienced great peaks and troughs as the industry gained and suffered from cyclical highs and lows.

The merger had its critics. Life-long supporters of Shepperton were concerned that the Studios would lose its reputation of being a haven for independent film production and that the two entities that were Pinewood and Shepperton could not easily be mixed. The new management was quick to act to assuage those fears, admitting that each studio, though part of the same company, could have its own style while sharing the same ethos. In 2005, Teddington Studios was bought and brought into the fold, becoming part of the company, and now also standing alongside Pinewood and Shepperton, as part of the Pinewood Group. The ethos has extended to all three studios and the mergers have worked well.

Some forty years after he first ventured through Shepperton’s gates, Sir Ridley Scott feels that the future of the Studios is more secure now than at any time in its history: “There was a time, not so long

ago, when people thought that big studios would become dinosaurs, particularly because of the advances in computer-generated imagery. Yet, in recent years there has been a resurrection of the valuation of the traditional methods of building a set for most films and so you need stages. I've always believed that was the case. I went into Shepperton with the thought that this isn't going away. The combination of the value of Pinewood and Shepperton together is huge. The merger could not have made the Studios any stronger. Just look at a map of Europe and ask yourself where is there anywhere else like it."

Enthusiasm such as that has kept Shepperton alive at times when it seemed that it had no chance of survival. Impending threats of asset-stripping, sell-offs and housing development have hung over it for most of its history. Finally though, Shepperton seems to be facing a stronger, healthier and more positive future and those who support British film and television production are more enthusiastic now at Shepperton's resurgence and chances of survival than at any time since its doors opened for filming, over 75 years ago.

*A longer and more in-depth version of this history can be found within the book, Shepperton Studios – A Visual Celebration by Morris Bright (Southbank Publishing, 2005) which is available for purchase at Amazon.*