



# The Making of Morse

Tim Coghlan and Richard Hill report from Braunston and the Kennet and Avon Canal on the location filming for the last ever Inspector Morse episode, *The Wench is Dead*, which uses the waterways of yesteryear as the backdrop to a murder mystery. The programme will be shown on ITV during November.

## Honey Street Location with Richard Hill

THE inspiration for Colin Dexter's novel *The Wench is Dead* came from a true story. At 5am on Monday 17th June 1939, the body of a young woman, Christina Collins, was found in the Trent and Mersey Canal at Brindley Bank, near Rugeley Aqueduct.

Christina had been on her way from Liverpool to join her husband Robert. She joined one of Pickford & Company's boats at Preston Brook, bound for London, via Rugeley and Oxford. There were four crew members; 39-year-old Captain James Owen, George Thomas 27, William Ellis 28, and a young lad, William Musson.

The boatmen were reported as repeatedly drunk and offensive to Christina, and in *The Murder of Christina Collins*, a book by John Godwin, the whole sorry story is told.

A passing boatman, Thomas Grant, found her body. Later her body was carried up a sandstone flight of steps. These steps, now unused and covered by undergrowth, are known as *The Bloody Steps* and said to be



*Morse (John Thaw) and Kershaw (Matthew Finney) contemplate a murder that occurred here nearly 140 years ago.*

indelibly stained with Christina's blood.

The adult boatmen were found guilty of Christina's murder. Owen and Thomas were

hanged for their crimes and their bodies buried in Stafford gaol. Ellis was sentenced to life transportation to Australia, later reduced to





Tony Lewery supervises special signwriting of panels to be used to convert the boats for filming.

14 years, but is believed never to have returned. The trial was reported in a broadsheet headlined *The Lives, Trial and Execution of Pickfords Two Boatmen* and a copy can still be seen at the William Salt Library in Stafford.

Christina was buried in the Churchyard of Rugeley Parish Church. Her headstone reads:

*To the memory of Christina Collins, wife of Robert Collins, London, who having most barbarously treated was found dead in the canal in this Parish on June 17th 1839, aged 37 years.*

It was this story that inspired Colin Dexter to write the Inspector Morse novel *The Wench is Dead*. Set in 1989, Morse is recovering from a perforated ulcer in Oxford's John Radcliffe Hospital when he is given a book to read, *Murder on the Oxford Canal*. In this book, by Colonel Wilfred Denison, the murder victim, Joanna Franks, was found at Duke's Cut on the Oxford Canal at 5.30am on Wednesday 22nd June 1859.

Morse's mind is always puzzle solving, and

as he reads the book, he begins to spot subtle irregularities. He becomes increasingly convinced that the two men who were hanged for the murder were innocent. He enlists the help of his colleague Sergeant Lewis, and of Christine Greenaway, Senior Librarian at Oxford University's Bodleian Library.

*The Wench is Dead* is a complex and intriguing novel, set in two centuries, almost a book within a book. It would pose a creative challenge to dramatise for television.

750 million people in have seen the series of Inspector Morse films over 50 countries. Morse is no stranger to the waterways, having been involved in a previous investigation when a decapitated body was found in the canal. He even asked a 'BW' employee what might happen to a corpse's head if allowed to remain in the canal for a week.

The film differs from the novel in many ways. First the absence of Sergeant Lewis. Kevin Whately no longer plays Morse's colleague. In this film Morse is joined by a new sidekick, an Oxford educated high-flyer, Detective Constable Adrian Kershaw played by 24-year-old Matthew Finney making his television debut.

Screenwriter Malcolm Bradbury invented Kershaw to assist Morse. While in the Radcliffe Infirmary, Morse is visited by his lady friend Adele Cecil, and American scholar Millie Van Buren. In the film it is Millie who writes the book on the Oxford canal murder that becomes Morse's preoccupation.

The film is unusual in that it is set in two periods nearly 140 years apart. Tim Coghlan recalls a day on location at Braunston No2 lock, and I spent a very wet day with the cast and crew filming on the Kennet & Avon Canal.

#### The Wench is Wet!

Filming at any outdoor location has its share of problems and risks. This was no exception. Two scenes were to be shot today. The morning was to be spent filming Morse and Kershaw walking along the towpath contemplating and discussing a murder that took

place there nearly 140 years previously. The short scene, probably lasting no more than 30 seconds, had to be rehearsed and filmed many times, and from different viewpoints, from the canal, looking westwards along the towpath and then looking eastwards. The script calling for a passing narrow boat increased the difficulties. After each rehearsal and each take, the boat would have to be hauled backwards, and re-positioned correctly in relation to the actors and camera before the next take.

The canal here runs parallel to the railway, and every time a train passed, filming had to be temporarily suspended. The crew consisted of probably in excess of 20 people, confined to positioning themselves behind the cameras along the narrow width of the towpath. Between each take, crew members had to squeeze past each other to go about their respective duties. As if that wasn't enough, the constant heavy rain turned the towpath into a muddy mess. The whole process took over three hours before everyone could break for lunch.

In the afternoon, a few hundred yards away, a Victorian scene was filmed. The *Barbara Bray* was to be filmed as a drunken boatman enticed the luckless Joanna Franks below decks. Still more rain, more bowhauling backward as each take was carefully rehearsed and filmed. The Victorian transformation of the surroundings and boats was utterly convincing; even the British Waterways signs had been disguised or temporarily concealed. Only the 20th century media equipment and brightly coloured jackets of the crew destroyed the illusion.



And finally came the filming of the discovery of Joanna's body. In mid-afternoon, the cut was transformed into an early morning misty scene by the introduction of smoke spewing out from a polythene tube along the towpath, and clouds of smoke belching out of a hand held smoke machine.

If anyone should believe that filming is a glamorous business, today it certainly was not. Much technical equipment had to be carried by hand into position and hours were spent in the pouring rain. Everyone involved got completely soaked and covered in mud.

The whole process of writing and producing a television film is a costly and complex one. What makes it justifiable is that each episode of Morse attracts an audience of around 15 million people. The day spent on location probably resulted in



A special effects man with a smoke machine provides a ready-made misty morning on the banks of the Kennet & Avon.



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little more than a minute of screen time.

*The Murder of Christina Collins* by John Godwin is available from the author at 12 Doudney Close, Stoney Stanton, Leicestershire LE9 4TG. ISBN 0 9515913 0 4 Price £2.75

*The Wench is Dead* by Colin Dexter is published by Macmillan and is available at most bookstores. ISBN 0 330 31336 3

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## Braunston Location with Tim Coghlan



*Tim Coghlan recalls a day on location at Braunston No 2 Lock for the filming of positively the last mystery for Inspector Morse - The Wench is Dead. In it Morse is lying in hospital with a perforated ulcer. With nothing better to do, he looks again through the papers of the murder in 1859 on the Oxford Canal of Joanna Franks, a single woman travelling on a fly boat to London. Morse realises that the boatmen who hung for it were innocent, and proves who really did it.*

IT had been a long day, with much progress backwards as the canal at Braunston returned to the mid-Victorian age. From early morning the travelling circus had begun to arrive - first the tea wagon and then a multitude of vans, converted old buses, new smart buses, horse boxes emptying their contents to munch the grass and sniff clean air again, carts and carriages, old cars and then later new smart cars of the men who held the strings - as the field normally used for parking at the Braunston Boat Show began to take on the air of a fairground.

Then to a carefully choreographed routine, planned to the last detail, the platoon of scene setters moved up the canal to the



Number Two Lock where the day's shooting would take place. In no time at all they had the placed taped - literally. Victorian scene setting is now stock in trade to the British TV companies and the competition for authentic accuracy is intense. Someone had discovered that in 1859 there was no such thing as white external window paint - what they tried to make simply went yucky yellow in the sunlight. It was any colour as long as it was black.

So all the windows of that famous little lock keeper's cottage facing camera were black taped. The larger sheets of glass in the windows were paned down with tape to make little ones. Then a look-alike paper thin door in rough shed brown arrived and was panel pinned over the existing one. Finally the whole place was given a quick rough up authentic look - hurdles to hide the hideous; sand, straw, and dirt, to finish off the months of neglect BW had given to the chosen place on strict instructions from the location manager - no winter painting, grass cutting or anything. The locks were sprayed yucky yellow over BW's last year's fine white paint work. And beside the lock was placed a sign - every vandal attacked lock keeper's dream, 'The punishment for tampering with these works is transportation'. A travelling tea urn arrived on a trolley pushed up the towpath from the Bottom Lock. We all sat back and looked at the bridge and through the bridge hole to the lock keeper's cottage. In that quiet moment before the circus arrived Braunston had indeed gone back 140 years.

Towards late morning new faces began to arrive. Amongst the first was a canal version of the RNLI, a man in inflated rescue launch, complete with everything including a stand-by frogman's kit - but no BW day canal licence. The next was the real diva, the star of the show the horse drawn butty *Barbara Bray* - in real life the recently restored *Australia* - and transformed by Tony Lewery and David Blagrove into an authentic looking Shropshire fly boat. She had arrived the night before from the Black Country Museum where the town scenes had been successfully filmed.

The scene to be filmed that day was the arrest scene. In it the four luckless boatmen arrive at the lock above the Duke's Cut at Oxford, find their way barred by a squad of the boys in black, and are charged with the murder of Joanna Franks who the boatmen thought had jumped ship the day before, after behaving in the most strange way.

It was now mid-afternoon and boatmen, police and peasants abiding in the fields were all in place. But still after hours of comings and goings, nothing had happened. Then it all started. The assistant director - who would equally have been at home in a Glenn Hoddle training squad and had nothing of the



Director, Robert Knights goes through the script with actors playing a party of arresting police officers.

stereotype Labour luvvie about him - lifted his megaphone and bellowed 'Quiet please' in the general direction of the mass of gongoozlers who had come from who-knows-where and had draped themselves across the gates of the Bottom Lock. He announced a rehearsal, and this was how it was going to be done...

The *Barbara Bray* was hitched to the good horse *Domino* and led by the young lad dressed like the Artful Dodger. They began to move from the Bottom Lock toward the waiting police above the bridge and the cameras and the grips and everyone else. *Domino* froze before the dazzle of designer dress casual. He wasn't going any further along the towpath towards that lot. There was only one thing to do. Somehow his handler Jenny Thomas had to walk close by and be kept out of the picture. And somehow despite the narrowness of the towpath they made it work. So they started again, now towing the boat.

As they neared the lock bridge, the police, who stood in serried ranks above it - backed by their Hammeresque horse drawn Black Maria - ran down to the towpath and arrested the young lad. But the butty with no engine to stop it in reverse - just carried on. Jenny Thomas had the quick sense to unhitch the horse and free the line. There then followed a tremendous crash as the *Barbara Bray* went full pelt into the lock gate.

Tensions were beginning to mount. They were going to have to do it all another way. But how? And what about the authenticity? The old boatmen would never approach a lock like that! Experts were called and a sort of compromise worked out by which the horse would be unhitched and the police would help tie the boat to a bollard to stop it. Much rehearsal was required on this one, bow hauling the boat back along the pound each time to the Bottom Lock.

And then every small time actor's nightmare occurred. The senior policeman had a mental blank and could not get his half dozen lines right. Tempers were beginning to fray and it only made the problem worse. 'OK everybody,' bellowed the assistant director down his megaphone, 'We'll have a ten minute break and re-do it'. Soothing tea, a relax and a rethink, a pep talk from the director, and they did it again. And it all came right - just before the light went. ⚓