

it was a long day, with much progress backwards, as the canal at Braunston returned to the mid-Victorian era. From early morning the travelling circus had begun to arrive at its temporary base camp on a field nearby. First and perhaps most importantly it was the tea wagon, which soon proffered the welcoming smell of bacon butties. Then there arrived a multitude of vans, converted old buses, new smart buses, carts, carriages, and horse boxes emptying their contents to munch the grass and sniff the clean June air. Then old cars for grips and the extras, and all those who did filming for love. Then, later, the new smart cars of the men who held the strings. The field began to take on the air of a fairground that it would resemble for the two days of filming to make at best five minutes of prime time television. Only the previous weekend the field had been rented for parking for the 1998 Braunston Boat Show, and the farmer must have been wondering at his luck. That show had been opened by Inspector Morse author Colin Dexter on the main prop for the forthcoming filming, the converted historic butty, the *Barbara Bray*.

Setting the scene

The first team to set off up the canal was the platoon of scene-setters to a carefully choreographed routine, planned to the last detail. Their destination was the Number Two Lock where the day's shooting would take place. In no time at all they had the place taped - literally. Victorian scene-setting is now stock-in-trade to 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 yellow in the sunlight so, it was any colour as long as it was black. So all the windows of that famous little lock keeper's cottage that might be caught by the cameras, were taped black. 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 was produced and panel-pinned over the existing one.

Finally, the whole lock scene was given a quick rough-up authentic look - hurdles to hide the modern fencing; sand, straw and dirt, to finish off the months of neglect BW had deliberately allowed for this chosen place, on strict instructions from the location manager - no winter painting, grass cutting



Over whose dead body? Inspector Morse (John Thaw) reads with American Dr Millicent Van Buren's (Lisa Eichhorn) book on *Criminal Detection in the Victorian Period*, which she has given him to read whilst he is in hospital recovering from a burst peptic ulcer, caused by too much alcohol. He disagrees with her conclusions on the famous murder by the boatmen of Joanna Franks on the Oxford Canal and begins to investigate from his sickbed. (*Carlton TV*)

Bringing the dead wench to life Part II

Tim Coghlan recalls the two days location on the canals at Braunston for the filming, in June 1998, of the *Inspector Morse* episode, *The Wench is Dead*



Every vandal-attacked lock keeper's dream This sign was made especially for the filming, a copy of the famous one in the Canal Museum. The author tried to save it as a souvenir for Braunston afterwards, but despite producer Chris Burt's best efforts, in his own words, 'It went the way of all flesh.' (Tim Coghlan)

or anything. The lock furniture was spayed a yucky yellow over BW's previous year's fine white paintwork. 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 now arrived on a trolley pushed up the towpath from the Bottom Lock. With the work complete, we all sat back on the steep grassy bank below the bridge, drinking the welcoming tea. I 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 in as many minutes - the extent of preparation was quite extraordinary.

Diva on set!

Towards late morning new faces began to arrive. Amongst the first was a canal version of the RNLI, a man in an inflated rescue launch, complete with everything including a stand-by frogman's kit but, I cynically observed, 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 Fellows Morton & Clayton *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 departure 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 and find their way barred by a squad of the boys in black - complete with a Dracula-esque black horse-

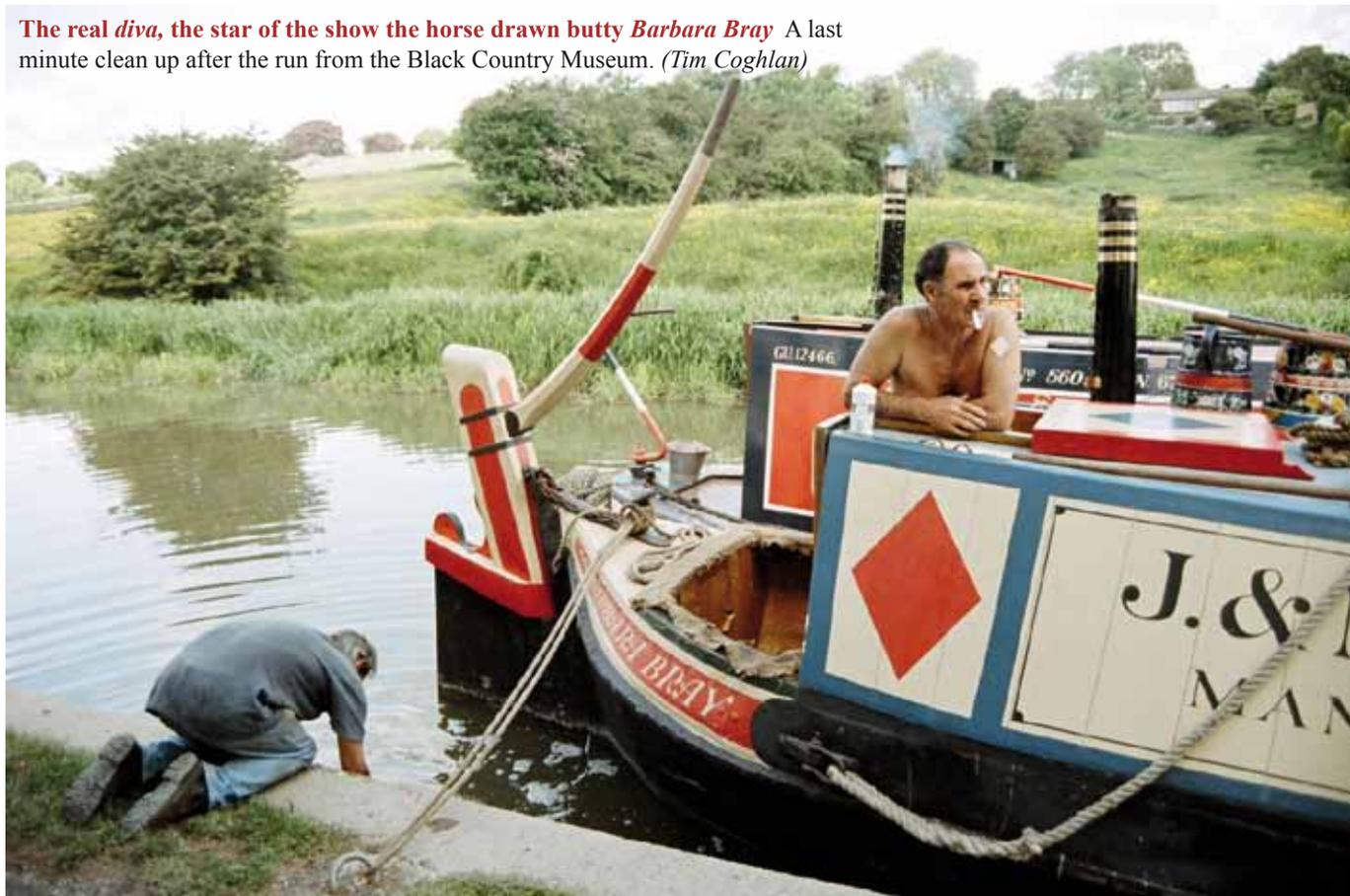


Taped up and paned down The well known lock cottage at Lock Two after being given the instant Victorian makeover by use of black tape for windows and the panel-pinning of a paper thin shed-like door. (The TV aerial - just visible survived to the filming.) Except when actually rehearsing and filming, canal-boating went on much to the amazement of visiting boaters, who found themselves on a *Morse* film set. (Tim Coghlan)

Braunston had gone back 140 years in as many minutes An extra dressed as a country lass by the bridge hole. Note the cow parsley which had been deliberately left uncut for the filming and the authentic-looking Oxford Canal Notice - as near to the Oxford Canal as the filming ever got. (Tim Coghlan)



The real *diva*, the star of the show the horse drawn butty *Barbara Bray* A last minute clean up after the run from the Black Country Museum. (Tim Coghlan)



We sat in a line of those classic Directors folding chairs Producer Chris Burt (centre) discusses filming with his assistant. The Braunston Bottom Lock beyond with the gathering gongoozlers. (Tim Coghlan)

drawn travelling police cell. The boatmen are charged with the murder of Joanna Franks whom the boatmen thought had jumped ship the day before, after behaving in the most strange way. Her alleged body had been found lying in the canal.

Time had moved on and it was now mid-afternoon. I joined *Inspector Morse* producer Chris Burt, who had originally called at Braunston the previous September (see *C&R March 09*). We sat in the line of those classic Directors folding chairs - although none carried any title as such - and looked down on the unfolding scene from the adjacent field, which rose steeply from the canal. I expressed my amazement to him that, after all the trials and tribulations, filming at Braunston really was about to happen and my gratitude for allowing me to join him on the set. 'It was the least I could do after the help you have given. Sorry we can't put you in the credits, but then we would have to pay you!' My mind flashed to all those *Children in Need* appeals with people paying thousands for a day on the set of their favourite TV programme. As a passionate *Morse* follower, just being here was reward indeed.

Action!

All now seemed nearly ready - boatmen, police and peasants abiding in the fields were all in place, with last minute touching-up from the make-up artists and dressers. I went over and chatted to some of them. One dressed as a yokel farmer transpired to have a day job as an accountant with a manufacturing business in Leicester, and working as a film extra was how he liked to take his holidays. He didn't mind the hours of hanging around at all, and today it was very unlikely he and the two country lasses with him would even be called. They were just there in case the director decided they were needed - and in the end they weren't.

But still, after hours of comings and goings, there was no

'Action'. Then at about four, it all started. The young athletic assistant director - who would equally have been at home managing a football training squad - and had nothing of the stereotype showbiz luvvie about him - lifted his megaphone and bellowed 'Quiet please!' This was 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. It made me realize how privileged I was to be on the set and again sitting next to the producer.

The assistant director now aimed his megaphone in the opposite direction towards the cast of bit parts and extras, for Morse and his new side-kick were of course not involved in any of the Victorian scenes. The young man announced a rehearsal, and this was how it was going to be done...

The *Barbara Bray* was hitched to the good horse *Domino*, whose day-job was pulling trip boats on the River Wey near Godalming. The boy-boatman, dressed like the Artful Dodger, now took *Domino* in hand and the pair moved off, towing the



Costumed up and ready for some hard, manual labour!
(Tim Coghlan)

boat from the Bottom Lock towards the waiting police above the bridge, and the cameras, grips and everyone else. *Domino* froze before this 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 horse-drawn police cell, 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 only some twenty yards further on.

Mounting tension

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



Last minute touching up from the makeup artists and dressers (Tim Coghlan)

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, hauling the boat back along the pound each time to the Bottom Lock for each practice run.

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

I suggested to producer Chris Burt that we called at the *Admiral Nelson*, a hundred yards up the canal above the next lock for what Morse called 'a drink to think', but he, like everyone else, now simply wanted to be gone. The film was in the can, and that was relief enough.

Night shoot

The following day's filming could have been titled *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* as both small scenes, one little more than



Relaxing before going into 'Action' Extras awaiting the call.
(Tim Coghlan)

a sequence, were to be filmed at night. And this being June, not until late, with the second scheduled for two o'clock the following morning. The first brief scene consisted of Joanna Franks simply slipping away from her forward cabin late at night, when the *Barbara Bray* is moored up and the boatmen are asleep. She then crosses the canal by the upside lock gate and heads off into the woodland, where in the next scene she meets her co-conspirator in crime, her husband who has the body of a murdered young female in a cart ready to dump into the canal. That second meeting scene was to be filmed on the track beside the entrance to the other side of the Braunston Tunnel.

I had no desire to stay up all night to watch these two scenes being made. Instead I went and had that pint at the *Admiral Nelson* which I missed the evening before. This I enjoyed sitting out in the evening sunshine by Nelson Lock, watching the *Morse* pageant processing past. I said hello to the assistant director, who was again running round with great gusto. I offered him a pint, which in true policemen tradition he told me he never imbibed on duty. We then discussed the later filming at the entrance to the Braunston Tunnel, and I expressed my disappointment that the erotic tunnel legging scene had been cut. He replied, 'Morse comes on before the nine o'clock watershed. We can do alcohol and murder, but not sex and cigarettes!'

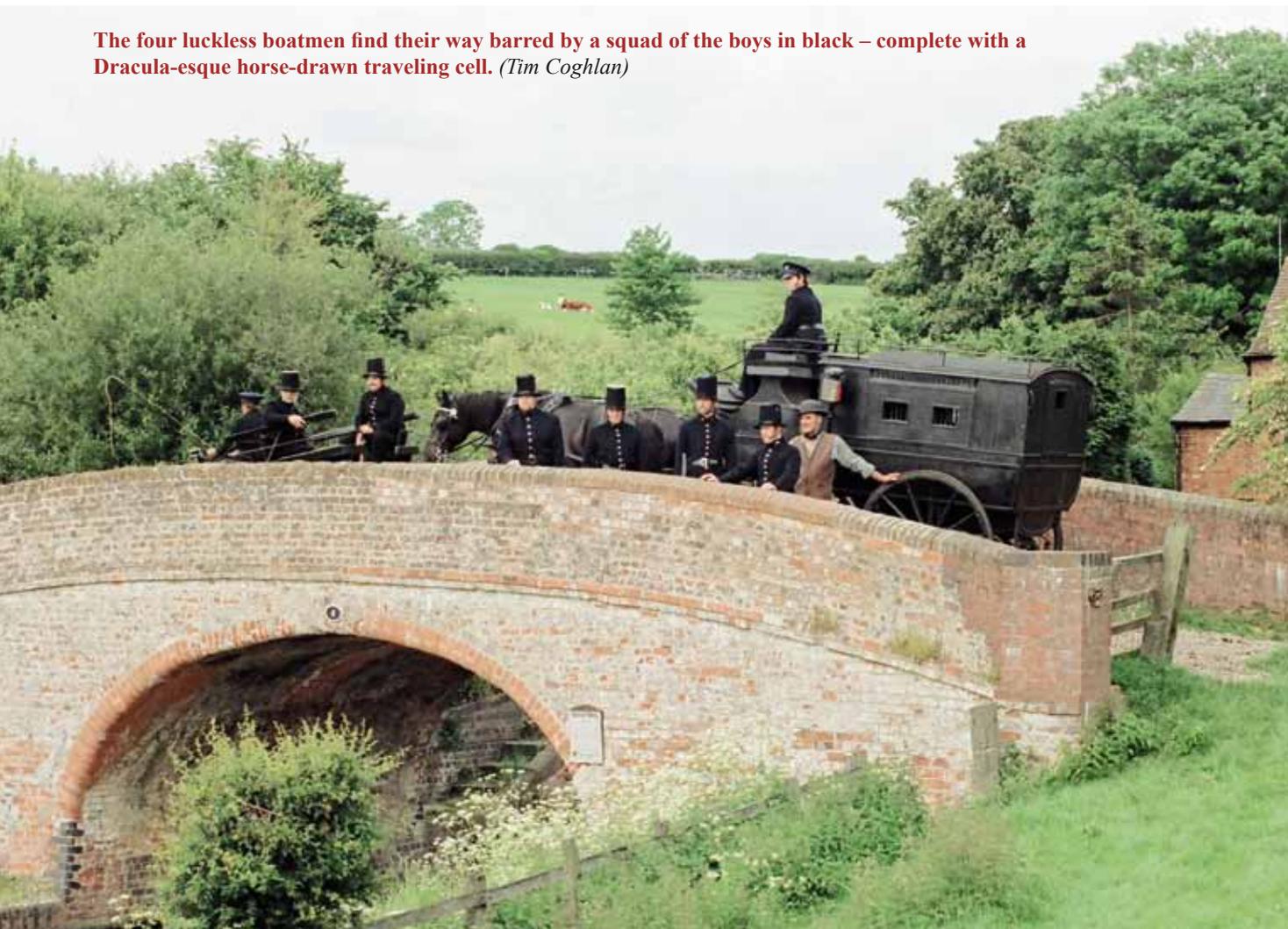
As I suspected would happen, I later heard that the filming went on all night and was just in the can before dawn. The problem was something that Inspector Morse would have enjoyed – that filming at night by the gloomy eastern entrance



Peasants abiding in the fields Extras, who were never called, watch the policeman rehearsing the arrest. (Tim Coghlan)

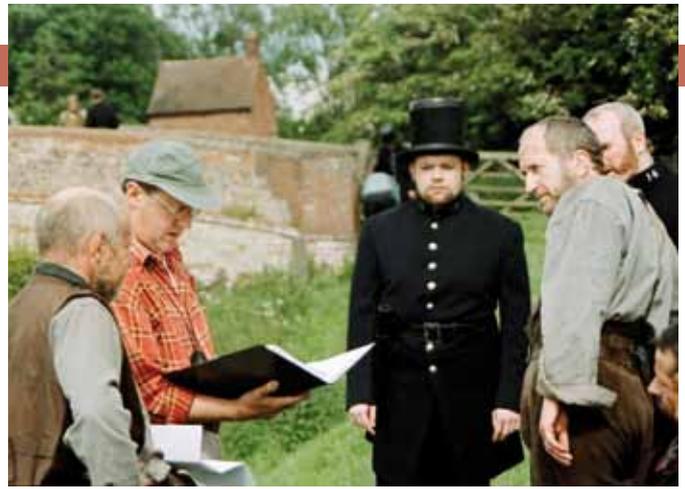
to the Braunston Tunnel. The old working boatmen would never tie up there for the night, because they believed the place to be haunted for reasons now lost in the mists of time. When the horse handler tried to bring the horse and the cart down to the tunnel entrance, the horse simply froze at the top of the bank and would not move. Instead recourse was made to a track in the woods parallel to the canal, and that was where the scene was successfully made.

The four luckless boatmen find their way barred by a squad of the boys in black – complete with a Dracula-esque horse-drawn traveling cell. (Tim Coghlan)





Aftermath of the first disastrous arrest rehearsal in which the *Barbara Bray* went pull pelt into the lock gate. The horse *Domino* who narrowly escaped injury when his handler unhitched him, is just visible. (Tim Coghlan)



A pep talk from the director Robert Knights ‘We had a bunch of actors who couldn’t steer a boat. The whole thing was like an amateur Canaveral launch: you didn’t know if it was going to fall over or not!’ he said afterward. (Tim Coghlan)



‘Action!’ They did it again. And it all came right – just before the night. (Tim Coghlan)



Hauling the boat back along the pound for another practice run. (Tim Coghlan)

Down to the K&A

My involvement with the filming at Braunston was now over, and with little time before filming was due to start on the Kennet & Avon at Honeystreet, the *Barbara Bray* was off at dawn with David Blagrove in charge. The following day I walked round where in the two days before there had been so much activity, but all signs of it were now gone. The *Inspector Morse* pageant had well and truly passed. I was left with mixed feelings – canal accuracy may have been the original intention, but time and time again it had gone out of the window. The arrest scene was little short of farce, and whilst the story was set on the Oxford Canal, not one scene was actually filmed on it. When I next saw author Colin Dexter, I expressed these views. ‘Oh, you shouldn’t worry. I turned the Rugeley murder upside down – so why shouldn’t they do the same to my book. What makes a good read and what makes good television are two very different things.’ When I finally saw the result, I had to agree with him – but not until I’d had that ‘drink to think!’



The gloomy eastern end of Braunston Tunnel in 1950 The old working boatmen believed it haunted and would never tie up here there for the night. The experience with the horse in the Morse filming refusing to go down there seemed to prove the boatmen right. (Ian Wright)

*In Part III, David Blagrove takes up our Morse story relating the story of his journey with the *Barabra Bray* to the Kennet & Avon Canal, and the filming there of the remaining canal scenes around Honey Street.*