



The classic home movie?

The right 'location' can be the real star of a film – but what's it like to have your home on film? *Ruth Stokes* finds out

Location, location, location: For *Notting Hill*, starring Hugh Grant, most scenes were filmed in the west London district of the title. At the centre of the story was a house with a blue door. Its existence as a real location in the area created such a buzz that writer Richard Curtis (who owned it) later sold it for £1.2 million. Even the blue door got in on the act: it was auctioned for £5,750

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HEN FILM-MAKERS ON the first Harry Potter movie went in search of Hogwarts, they faced a serious challenge. They needed somewhere that resembled JK Rowling's physical description of

the school for wizards – the 'vast castle with many turrets and towers' – and they needed a location that resonated with the darker underbelly of the place; after all, Hogwarts contains many mysteries. In the end, they chose Alnwick Castle in Northumberland, a casting decision that proved to be every bit as magical as the child wizard himself.

Alnwick has *become* Hogwarts and now, for many, the castle has a dual identity: it's both the historic home of the Dukes of Northumberland, with its famous Percy lions and their pointed tails adorning the battlements, but also that enchanted school of adventure. The Duke not only saw his home immortalised on the big screen, but also benefited financially, with industry insiders estimating he may have earned as much as £200,000 for the first Potter shoot alone – and then there's the visitors and the sequels.

It's little wonder, then, that an increasing number of homeowners are keen to get in on the act. Renting out your property offers a unique opportunity to experience the filming process – and to make your assets pay for themselves. In recent years, the film industry has become a force to be reckoned with: last year it contributed £2.5 billion to the UK economy. And with pressure on budgets (and currency exchange rates as they are), location managers are increasingly keen to find options within these shores.

Helen Marsden, owner of the Lavish Locations agency, sums up the importance of finding the right venue: "As much care and attention goes into choosing the location as goes into casting the actors and designing the costumes – it provides the backdrop to the film and sets the whole tune of any scene." Indeed, in many cases, she believes "the location was the star of the show".

So what are film-makers looking for? Potentially, a location can be anything: a modest flat has just as much chance of being chosen as a stately home. Occasionally, something quite unexpected will be needed. The film *Finding Neverland*, about the life of Peter Pan creator JM Barrie, for example, had its location managers scouring the country in search of a ranch (which they eventually rented from a cowboy association in Kent). And, to date, Alnwick has featured in eight 'pictures' »

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(as people in the industry like to call them) and numerous television shows – but the Duke is particular that it's not just about the money.

"Apart from Harry Potter, Alnwick has been used in several famous films like *Elizabeth* and *Becket*," he says. "I really enjoy seeing it on the big screen, either transported to the Highlands or surrounded by dead and bloodied bodies after a battle. For Alnwick and the region, it has been a significant bonus. If people visit because Potter flew around the battlements on a broomstick, that's fine with me – it brings them to important places. Once they are here, then it's up to us to interest them in reality as well as fiction."

Not everyone wants strangers traipsing through their garden, of course. So it is fortunate that this type of attention is confined to more iconic locations – or those who seek it. For many, location work begins with the crew entering the house and ends the day that they leave. In this way, it can be a viable business opportunity.

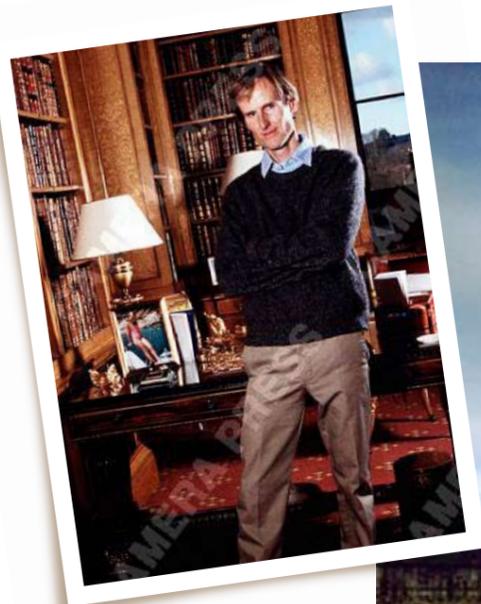
MARSDEN NOT ONLY owns a location agency but also rents out her own house for filming. It's soon to be seen in *London Boulevard*, starring Keira Knightley and Colin Farrell. The financial incentive means that during the summer she often receives crews into her home in Dulwich, south-east London. "For a lot of people, managing a property as a location is enjoyable and sociable," she explains. "It can be easily managed around their household needs and bring in a nice income."

The nature of shoots varies widely and so, too, does the payment. James Grant, location manager on the latest Bond movie *Quantum of Solace*, and the upcoming *Gulliver's Travels*, explains: "Basically, for a 'typical' house you'd be looking at a minimum of £500 a day for filming. Between £800 and £1,200 would be quite normal, although it can be more depending on how special the property is. Pay for a preparation day is usually 50 per cent of a shoot day." So, say they hire your home for a month, you'd be looking at up to £30,000. Not bad.

Registering your property with a location agency will cost you nothing and your home is added to a photo library used by location managers for television and film. Marsden advises that you need to submit photos, but a good enough quality can be achieved with a standard digital camera. If your property is chosen, it's typical for an agency to take 20 per cent commission.

The thought of throwing open the doors to a film crew may not appeal to everyone, however. It's certainly not all glitz and glamour. "In the run up, there can be quite a lot of visits you have to make yourself available for," warns Grant. "If it's a big crew, it can feel like the circus has turned up, and – while preferably avoided – there can be some wear and tear. But then you are being paid a lot of money for them to be there."

For David Pinnegar, who has rented out his stately home, Hammerwood Park, for shoots since 1982, the hustle and bustle of the 'circus' is what he loves. The building is only partly restored, lending itself to both period pieces and more modern



Ducal presence: The 10th Duke of Northumberland (above) at his London residence, Syon House. Right: The wizards-in-training line up for a broomstick class from Zoë Wanamaker, in her role as Madam Hooch, in the first Hogwarts outing, the 2001 *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*



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“IF YOUR PROPERTY IS CHOSEN, it's typical for an agency to take 20 per cent commission”

productions, and its portfolio includes *The Knife Edge* and *The Life Story of Marcel Proust*. Like Marsden, Pinnegar is involved in the filming for *London Boulevard* and, at the time of writing, two of his bedrooms were being painted for the purpose. "The important thing about the filming is that it really brings the house to life," he says. "I enjoy the creative process and the transformations that are achieved. When they first suggested painting the bedrooms I shouted and screamed, and I tore my hair out, but the reality is that going through this process can actually be very invigorating."

While redecorating isn't always necessary, Pinnegar would certainly recommend going into the process with your eyes wide open – things can get damaged. A feature-length movie is likely to involve considerable furniture rearrangements, at the very least, and occasionally a homeowner may be put up in a hotel. For those with concerns, the location manager will act as a mediator. Emma Pill – whose CV includes *Mamma Mia!*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Finding Neverland* and upcoming *The Wolf Man*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Emily Blunt – explains: "I'm not just there for the production company, I'm there for the location owner as well. I'm the first person they will meet, the person who will say 'we want to paint your chimney pink,' or whatever, and I'll be the one that negotiates and tells the film crew what's possible and what isn't. We also do the legal side: we have standard contracts that production companies use."

While it may need careful management, the benefits of location work tend to outweigh any negatives. And, if nothing else, it offers the chance to contribute to a work of art. You only need to look at *Notting Hill* – a film led by its location – to see what the right atmosphere can do. "For film-makers," says Grant, "finding the right location can be challenging, but when you do get the right one it's like fitting the last piece into a jigsaw puzzle. A great film is impossible without a great location."

Swift action: *Gulliver's Travels* star Jack Black (fourth from right) on location at the home of the Duke of Malborough, Blenheim Palace, in Oxfordshire, over the summer. Also in shot are Billy Connolly, Catherine Tate, Emily Blunt and Jason Segel