

Elstree & Borehamwood Museum

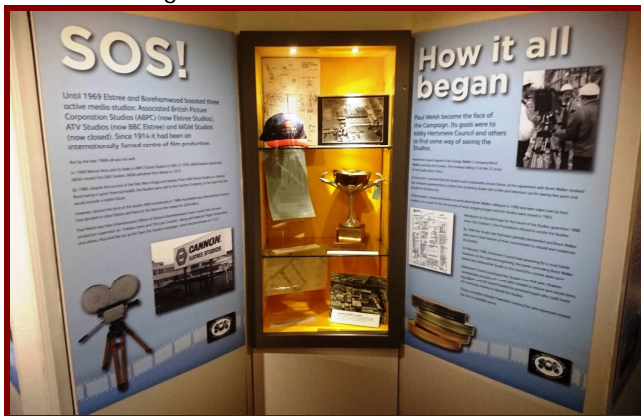
Friends Newsletter

January 2019 : Issue Number 19



SAVE OUR STUDIOS

Our new Exhibition commenced in October, and features the epic struggle to save the main film studios in Borehamwood from the demolition crews. The idea that the studios, which were first built in 1925, could fall into the hands of developers as the owners, Brent Walker, were heading into administration, was an anathema to many locals. Led by Paul Welsh and Andrew Mitchell, the MD of Elstree Studios, the campaign became Save Our Studios, and took quite a few years from 1988 to 1996 and many twists and turns to bring to fruition.



The Exhibition runs through all the stages involved. Display boards explain how the campaign developed and grew, how it became more difficult as the financial situation with Brent Walker shifted, and how the use of planning agreements by Hertsmere Borough Council finally stopped the sale of the studios to developers. We then progress right up to the present day and the thriving studio complex which contributes significantly to the local economy.

With all our Exhibitions we love to involve our younger visitors, and this time we have a stage with back-projection, Star Wars costumes and light sabres. They can now dress up and see themselves in the original film!

As part of the work on the Exhibition we installed a new full height display cabinet at the end of the Museum to hold items from Paul Welsh's collection. Currently it holds a mixture of posters and campaign literature from the SOS campaign as well as some intriguing Elstree film memorabilia.

And even more memories can be found in the display cabinet near the desk: Dracula's hand, Dean Martin's jacket and Tom Cruise's shoes!



The recent Friends Evening in December was spent in the company of Paul Welsh himself who explained first hand the way the SOS campaign unfolded. How he undertook this enterprise with no financial backing and against heavyweight business interests, and then succeeded against the odds has become a key event in our local history. Introduced by Dave Armitage, Paul spent some time explaining how the campaign worked out and what was involved. Then Maureen Corman, our Friends Organiser, spent the rest of the time asking Paul about the films and stars he had met and interviewed over the years. Many a fascinating story was heard before the tea and biscuits. One of our best Friends evenings in a while, thanks to Paul's ready wit and raconteuring skills.

SAVE ELSTREE!

A few years before the SOS campaign began in 1988, there was another local effort to save an internationally renowned studio from closure and demolition. When the IBA decided to rearrange the ITV regions, ownership, and output in 1980, it looked as if the ATV studios in Eldon Avenue might be in trouble. By making the decision to re-award the Midlands franchise to ATV, the IBA stipulated that its holding company, ACC, had to be reduced, and that the creation of its output had to move to the area it serviced. This meant that ATV would no longer need the Elstree studio centre in spite of building it up for 20 years. The ATV centre had to move to Birmingham, and new production facilities be created in the East Midlands in Nottingham.

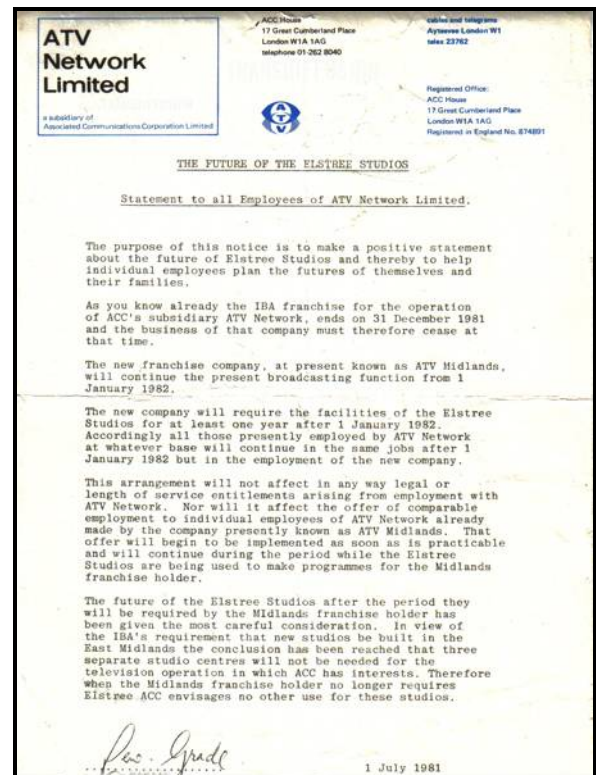


At first Lew Grade and his board hoped to keep Elstree open and running. Channel 4 and Breakfast Time TV were on the horizon, and international productions, the BBC and other ITV companies all needed studio facilities. In fact ACC formed Daybreak Television Ltd and bid for the franchise themselves. But that went to TV-AM who opened their own studios in Camden Lock, and Channel 4 decided to use local facilities and a small studio base. So ACC announced they would close Elstree and the staff could move to their new Midlands studios or accept redundancy.

But the staff decided they didn't want either option and so started the *Save Elstree* campaign in Spring 1981 to persuade the IBA to change its mind, reverse a decision that many at the time found bizarre, and keep Elstree TV open. The first action was to create a daily (later weekly) newsletter,

Elstree Action Report (EAR). It was available to all staff and covered events in relation to the campaign as well as local and national press coverage. The campaign started with a petition and stalls collecting signatures were a regular sight in Shenley Road every Saturday, catching the local shoppers. Over the first two weeks of campaigning the petition had acquired 2000 names.

But *Save Elstree* soon spread out – ATV staff wrote to their local MPs, demonstrations were staged, and staff at other studios from Granada and Yorkshire TV would travel down to join in. Also BBC staff from various London studios would campaign alongside the Elstree ATV staff. The first MP to write to the new IBA chairman, Lord Thomson, was Sir Victor Goodhew of St Albans.



Letter to all staff from Lew Grade on 1 July 1981

In July 1981 the staff held a rally at the TUC headquarters and marched to Downing Street to hand in the petition, and then marched on to Westminster to talk to MPs. Another march a week later handed in a 14,000-strong petition. Margaret Thatcher declined to help in any way. But local MPs arranged a meeting with the IBA to discuss proposals. Unfortunately this lasted 30 minutes, as their decision had by now been set in concrete. Although the IBA were denying they had required ATV to move all their production to the Midlands, it seemed

to the campaign that a climb-down at this point would both be embarrassing for the IBA and upset the new Conservative government's anti-union mantras.

So by the end of July 1981, the *Save Elstree* movement was in full swing – there had been many newspaper inches devoted to the subject, BBC coverage in local and national programmes (even a question on *Question Time*), and LWT's *Weekend World* made it a major issue. The petition had collected 23,336 signatures, and was handed into Downing Street by actors John Barron, William Franklyn, Megs Jenkins and Madge Wicke and presenter Bob Monkhouse.

On 31 July the campaign received a letter from junior Trade Minister and Thatcher confidant Cecil Parkinson, a long standing supporter of the fight to save the Elstree site, and of course, the local MP for South Herts. He had gathered together 14 MPs who wanted to save the site. This quote sums up his letter : "There was a unanimous agreement amongst all Members present that we should do our utmost to persuade the IBA and Lord Grade to reverse what all agreed was a bad decision and to press in every way open to us for the retention of Elstree as a major studio."

The 6 August meeting between the MPs and the IBA was distinctly unfruitful. The IBA refusing to change their position, and the MPs issuing a strong statement including "It was now clear that the move to Nottingham would involve the closure of Elstree and destruction of one of Britain's best known studios to no apparent purpose other than having the work done in Nottingham instead of Elstree by people who had been forced from Elstree to do it."

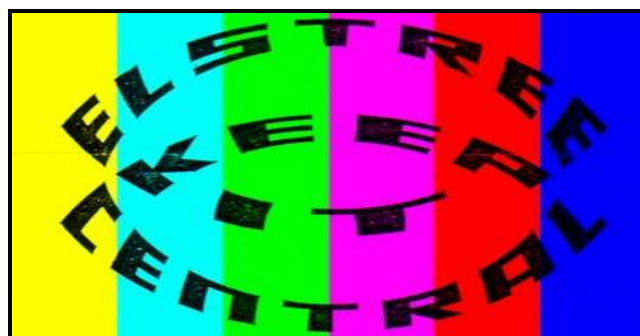
At this point the two sides were far apart. Sir Edward Heath proposed a compromise with ATV Midlands building a small studio in Nottingham while keeping Elstree as their production hub. After a few months Cecil Parkinson had to ask the IBA of their decision on this new proposal and it was, inevitably, that the original decision would stand. The campaign continued – more signatures were gathered, more column inches on the state of ATV and Elstree were printed, and the MPs kept channels of communication open.

But by the end of 1981 the campaign was losing heart, and the last EAR was published on the 8 December. It had lasted 9 months, had gathered over 35,000 names, and created a media blitz. Eventually this episode would lead to the end of the IBA in 1991. ATV became Central in January 1982 and stated that Elstree would be needed until that December. In fact the Dusseldorf building site for the classic *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was built in early 1983 on the backlot at Elstree, and the new East Midlands site in Nottingham wasn't ready until Autumn 1983.



The construction of the *Auf Wiedersehen* set with Stratfield Road behind

The unions EETPU, ACTT and NATKE became involved, their 800 members, most of the Elstree staff, were looked after in varying degrees, and the site closed officially on 31 July 1983. The site was then bought by the BBC for its new *Eastenders* soap, and Dusseldorf became Albert Square.



But the *Save Elstree* campaign had shown what could be achieved through efforts on many fronts – politically, financially, and socially. The buzz it created would help SOS in a few years time because Elstree had become a nationally known centre of TV and film production.

The visuals and text (highly condensed) come from articles by Roddy Buxton on the Transdiffusion.org website. Many thanks to him, and please visit the site if you are at all interested in TV and radio history.

It Was Five Years Ago Today

The Museum has been open at 96 Shenley Road for five years last November, and it was the excuse we needed for a party. And of course Christmas was coming in a few weeks so it was a good idea for a bit of a do. Norman and Ann Shuker graciously allowed us to gather at Schopwick House in Elstree to cut the magnificent '5'-shaped cake. Thanks to the Friends' input we have progressed a long way in those years, and Dave Armitage acknowledged the help we receive from you. Other congratulations came from Clive Butchins, Chairman of the Trustees, and Anne Mitchell, the Town Council Deputy Mayor.



Anne to the left, Dave speaking, and Clive looks on

New Website, New Exhibition

As well as opening the S.O.S. Exhibition in October, we launched a revamped website. It is now fully compatible with all devices, and is much more dynamic and pro-active. Recent blog posts and tweets appear on the front page, and we can now change the photos when we want. In addition we can advertise upcoming Events and Exhibitions with a click of a mouse.

We Made A Mistake!

Thanks to eagle-eyed Friend Colin Strange, it appears we mis-informed you in the last Newsletter that Princess Margaret opened St Michael and All Angels Church on Brook Road. She did lay the foundation stone in October 1954, but the Church was Dedicated late 1955 and the first confirmation was held on March 11th 1956. Your scribes' error, and good to set the record straight.

Trip Advisor

We are currently the Number One Attraction in Borehamwood on Trip Advisor! We only keep this position through visitors placing great reviews. So please add your review and keep us at the top at <https://goo.gl/RTbKQI>.

New Friends Event



Maureen has organised the first Friends Event of the New Year. On 27th February 2019, **John Schoonraad**, will present *Is It Real?* Please ring the Museum to book a place.

NOW ON SALE - Museum Merchandise

A range of Museum items - pens, keyrings, local magnets and tote shopping bags. Make sure that as a Friend you remind all **your** friends to purchase these items to boost the Museum's funds! On sale in the Museum or on our website.

Elstree & Borehamwood Museum

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Twitter : @EBWMuseumHerts

Instagram :

<https://www.instagram.com/ebwm2007/>

Trip Advisor : <https://goo.gl/RTbKQI>

Open : Tues, Wed & Thurs : 12pm - 6pm

Sat : 10am-3pm

Supported by : Hertsmere Borough Council

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