

# Robin of Sherwood: In production...

One of the more imaginative series of the Eighties was *Robin of Sherwood*. In this Special we take a look at the making of the series, on location and in production...



Getting the right camera angle for a fight sequence Photos © HTV

## On Location

Imagine a picture of green and grey. Of Clannad's haunting theme tune over a soft, pale pool at dawn, with gently swaying branches reflected in its glassy surface. Then imagine a faint growl, growing and growing until a bright red six-wheeled jeep bearing a 22-foot camera crane on its back bursts through the undergrowth followed closely by a two ton truck — and another, and another... Finally, a pantech-nicon far too large for the gap, it's nicotine-stained, beer-bellied driver renting the clear air blue. **Robin of Sherwood** has come to town.

Robin Hood himself would arrive with a screech of tyres and a cloud of smoke in

his brand new bright red Porsche 911, by which time Sherwood Forest would have practically disappeared under a welter of discarded napkins and paper cups.

Things are never as they seem. It never ceased to amaze me that the episodes could feel so hazy, so mysterious, and so other-worldly, considering the farting and swearing that always punctuated every swordfight and arrow-hit from day one. 'Fog 2' was the culprit. Fog 2 is a gentle diffusion filter, favoured by ageing actresses the world over, as it lends a slight edge of softness to the image to make everything look just that little bit distant. It also makes knives and swords glow (provided the prop men have cleaned them), lending even more awe to Nasir's tendency to use both hands.

And it did wonders for Jason Connery's hair.

## Alternative Robin

Rehearsals were probably the best things about **Robin of Sherwood**, second only to the bacon and sausage butties at the first light of dawn. Rehearsals are a private treat, sadly denied to Joe Public, of course, because by their very nature the cameras are never running.

Flush with the sort of confidence only available to consummate professionals, for some, rehearsals were often regarded as purely technical — camera line-ups, blocking-out and so on. The dialogue itself would be delivered, and with word-perfect accuracy (most of the time), later



Clean swords will glow under Fog 2 diffusion filter...

while expensive film was being committed. For the rest of the time, we would watch, sides aching, as our own alternative **Robin of Sherwood** show would be enacted before us.

Once, I stood, tears streaming down my face, as Anthony Valentine's freshly arisen from the dead Baron De Belleme was confronted by Nickolas Grace's terror-stricken Sheriff of Nottingham.

"I am the power," bellowed Belleme, sounding very much the proud owner of forces dark and plentiful. The Sheriff quaked, paused, and contrary to the script decided to assert himself.

He stood up straight. "No you're not," he said flatly.

"I *am* the power," reiterated Belleme with the conviction of a roaring lion.

But unlike the cowardly Sheriff we were all familiar with, this one wasn't having any of it. He stood unmoved. "No you're not," he asserted.



Right: Keeping hair tidy between shots



A sense of fun pervaded the filming

During filming of *The Swords of Wayland* a horseman made an unexpected entrance through the roof of a cottage



“Am!” sniffed Belleme, his confidence wavering visibly.

“Not!” claimed the Sheriff.

“Am!” squeaked Belleme.

“Not!” snapped the Sheriff, at which point the all-powerful Belleme grudgingly sat down in the corner of the crypt with a curt “OK” and the suggestion that the Sheriff get the beers in while they awaited Robin Hood’s inevitable good-always-wins-out-in-the-end arrival.

### The Train Spotter

Another curiosity was the British Rail timetable. Never has one exerted so much influence over so many people — or rats, for that matter.

All films run to a timetable, but a dungeon set for *Robin of Sherwood* series two had been built, in infinite wisdom, in an industrial unit right beside the main Cardiff-Paddington high speed railway line. The sound recordist was forced to keep a timetable adjacent to his mixer, and would have to be consulted as to whether a particular take could be fitted in between the thunder of post-medieval passing trains. Normally the one of the most passed-over technicians on a film set, the recordists always quietly enjoyed the unusual distinction of being practically the most powerful person on the set.

However, amusing though it appears, the dungeon was a trying and wearing



Keeping the camera protected, while surrounded by moody mist...

stage to work on, and the moment 'wrap' was called, with a crash and a bang the entire population would hastily retire to the studio, and in particular the bar, where the Merry Men would begin setting about building on reputations already in need of temperance.

## Reckless Driving

Knitted together in the adversity of filming a show better known within its inner sanctums as 'all mud and arrows', the male bonding carefully woven into their characters by Richard Carpenter had leaked off the screen and into reality. And if you consider that the 'Merries' played out characters well known for quasi-terrorist tactics, this had pretty serious implications. They were, for example, the first in living memory to get themselves banned from the bar, which was a shame, as the spectacular show they usually put on was an ideal antidote to the stresses and strains of a long hard day in Sherwood Forest.

After one such long, hot summer's day filming *The Enchantment*, the 'Merries' made a short but nonetheless enthusiastic venture into motor sport. Having availed themselves of a number of expensive high-powered radio-controlled cars, they displayed an impressive ineptness at basic driving skills around the studio's car park.

The sun was setting in a warm orange glow as weary homeward-bound newscasters made their way tripping and stumbling across the car park as tiny cars whizzed out from underneath Range Rovers and XR3s in hot pursuit of each other, while Will Scarlet looked on with rising impatience. Friar Tuck's otherwise mild manner completely evaporated as he inexpertly manipulated the controls of his transmitter with no real idea of which car he was controlling.

Meanwhile, a growing number of outlaws sitting at nearby tables swigging drinks began to regard the proceedings as far too tame. Soon, any car that ventured too close was subject to an aerial bombardment of beer cans, daggers and ultimately big glass ashtrays. Eventually, even this process was deemed too inaccurate and time consuming, and it was Will Scarlet, terrorist extraordinaire, who developed a far more effective and efficient method to bring about close of play — jump on the car, punch the controller, and throw the transmitter into the hedge.

## It'll Be All Right...

Then there are the bits that go wrong. Some of these have been revealed thanks to Dennis Norden's *It'll Be All right on the Night* 'bloopers' programme, but again the really funny ones tend to slip by

unrecorded.

While filming *The Swords of Wayland* it was necessary to establish the horsemen bad guys invading the village of Ravenscar employing their somewhat annoying habit of flying off the cliffs, their red capes flowing magnificently as they crashed through the roofs of the thatched cottages, before setting about rape and pillage. One sunny April morning in a gully off the main gorge in Cheddar, Somerset, a particular homestead was specially prepared with a 'breakaway' roof as two cameras were placed inside to film a horseman in a red flowing cape (or as in this case, a mannequin called Erik dressed in a flowing red cape) making his grand entrance into the household.

The First Assistant Director issued instructions for the cueing arrangement he had devised. Beaming with pride, he'd developed a simple yet fool-proof system of "One-Two-Three-Throw!", and climbed the adjacent scaffold tower to divulge this information to the rigger entrusted with the enviable task of hurling Erik through the roof. Satisfied, he climbed back down the tower and came into the cottage to share his plan with the eager camera crew.

"I'm gonna call, 'Run cameras', you'll confirm, and then I'm gonna call, 'One-Two-Three-Throw!'"

It was of course at this point that the roof

crashed in around us as Erik made his premature, though nonetheless spectacular, entrance in an explosion of dust, wood, straw and Fuller's earth.

It was time for lunch.

Sadly the leafy copses and woods of Somerset no longer ring to the clash of swordplay, the thunder of hooves, or the rustle of timesheets, and when Robin Hood ('Prince of Thieves') became an American, it was Berkshire that was buried beneath paper cups, not Nempbnett Thrubwell. Maid Marian got herself a day job praising the virtues of soap powder, and one of the producers went off to burn London — but some way, somehow, I'll bet Will Scarlet still jumps on cars.

**Tony Shearn**

*Tony Shearn was hired periodically as focus-puller on the series.*

*Now to the other side of production with Patrick Dromgoole, the series' Executive Producer...*

## Robin of Sherwood

Anyone approaching the Robin Hood legend must have been conscious of the traditional image of Robin Hood created by the media, from Hollywood's Errol Flynn, to tv's Richard Green. "Get off — not Richard Green! Not in that terrible hat!... Yes Errol Flynn was the definitive one, he really was marvellous... Yes you think about it, but I mean we had something very firm and clear and definite to say, largely about correlating the legend

itself with the guy playing the character, and we had our own version of it. We wanted to go ahead with it."

But **Robin of Sherwood** was criticised for its 'frightening' sequences and its treatment of witchcraft. Patrick Dromgoole remembers the reaction to *The Seven Swords of Wayland* [see Issue 11] where Rula Lenska played a witch whose coven existed under the veil of a religious order. "I hadn't seen it coming, to be honest with you, quite as strongly as it came. I thought it was, you know, inappropriate and I feel it was much more a religious condemnation than a moral one, because Robin was enormously moral to put it mildly... And there was also one kerfuffle because some journalist — a cursed breed, I hope you never have anything to do with them! — printed a story that we had used the settings of Wells Cathedral to show a witches' sabbath. Now, that looked good in print, [but] it was not at all true, because I mean there was no witches' ceremony there, and the people involved weren't witches and we didn't do it in Well's Cathedral!

"Drama, as you know, comes out of conflict, nothing else at all. Well you don't get any conflict from people sitting around saying 'let's be nice to Grandma'... whereas Oliver Cotton drugging poor Maid Marian into loving him, you know, making her go through some dreadful murderous ritual of marriage facing warriors fighting to the death, that's evil all right."

Michael Praed was very successful as the legendary hero chosen by Herne, God

of the forest, to be the people's champion. But after two series, Michael Praed announced he was going to go to America and leave **Robin of Sherwood**. "Coffee was drunk quite late one night in the Producer's room! But Paul Knight, the Producer, was convinced that Jason [Connery] could hold it, pull it together for us. And we certainly had the possibility in our story — killing Robin and someone else assuming the mantle, simply because he was a semi-mystic, half-priest, half-warrior figure. And I think it worked out. Jason made a change."

But some people thought the third series lost its edge. "I don't think I would agree with it and if I did, it wouldn't be because of the change in actor, I think it would be attributable to all sorts of things. You know, getting used to the story, no longer being quite as impressed with it as you were, maybe a bit of tiredness of the story lines, maybe one or two weaker episodes or something."

Yet, audience ratings seemed enough to ensure a fourth series of **Robin of Sherwood**, but this was not to be. Goldcrest, who made the series jointly with HTV encountered hard times and it was difficult for HTV to continue making it while distribution of the first three series relied on a company whose personnel were changing almost weekly.

"I would have preferred to go to at least one more series, and I think arguably far more. But for the demise or near-demise of Goldcrest, it would have continued further."

**Jane Killick**

The original line-up for the series

