
It's a Wrap! Protecting Hampton Court Palace during Filming

Historic Royal Palaces is an independent charity which looks after the Tower of London, Hampton Court, the Banqueting House, Kensington, and Kew Palace (or five palaces in and around London). HRP has been a charity for the last ten years, and as we do not get any funds from either the government or the Crown, we need to earn a living. Income generated from events helps us to care for our palaces.

Ten years ago 85% of our income came from our visitors who were mostly Northern Americans. Since September 11th, we have had to diversify in order to survive. In 2008 our visitors still bring in 65% of our yearly revenue, but events and filming brought in 8.5%. Or in hard currency: £4 million through functions and events in all our palaces, and £50k is our annual filming and photography income target. So it is not surprising that the directive from our directors and trustees is to "make it happen."

This article is meant to describe the policies and practices we have developed to protect the properties, or, you could say, what to do when a film crew wants to convert Hampton Court into a debtor's prison.

The Conservation and Collection Care Department is responsible for preserving and monitoring the historic interiors. The department is made up of a textile section, set up over one hundred years ago to stop the deterioration of the tapestries, and a preventive section only twelve years old. We have eleven preventive conservators to look after five palaces, which is quite a large team. It is the preventive section's job to make sure the palaces are not at risk during events and filming. All our conservators are trained to supervise events.

Functions and Filming

Functions cover everything from private dinners, weddings, citizenship ceremonies, and corporate dining which could be just dinner in the Great Hall, all the way to the music festival in June which uses pretty much the whole palace and lasts fourteen nights. We call events anything which doesn't involve catering such as ghost tours, theatre plays, "Kids go Free," ice skating, and educational events. Florimania is held in the Queen's Apartments in time for Mother's Day.

Our largest event to date was in 2005 when thirty two heads of state came together for a European Union meeting. That was the only time that we have ever closed Hampton Court Palace. We had to in order to provide the very high level of security that they needed, and also to accommodate the press and secretarial support. As you might imagine, the problems of functions and events are complex and interesting, but for this article I will address only those related to filming.

Filming includes: still photography, documentaries, live broadcasts, the Antique's Road Show, BBC series such as *Lorna Doone* and *Little Dorrit*, Hollywood blockbusters like *To Kill a King*, *The Libertine*, and *Vanity Fair*.

What conservators worry about: damage

All the different events at Hampton Court have a large potential for impact. Protection is about limiting damage, and the best protection is tailor-made to each specific type.

The risk of fire is something that we always consider, not just because at Hampton Court we did have one in 1986 which destroyed the King's Apartments, and it is still in the backs of our minds, but because we are often asked about using real candles and flambeaux. We tend to try and ask the technical crew to use some of the wonderful new electric tea lights, virtually undetectable from real ones. Every request is carefully assessed for risk, but if we can, we prefer to stay away from naked flames.

Damage to objects is also rare, but we have had instances of film crew members concentrating hard on what they have to do and forgetting their surroundings, and that's the reason why we always supervise.

Damage to what we call the "fabric of the palace," doors, floors, walls, panelling etc..., is much more common and usually happens during set up and take down. Damage to doorways is due to people carrying overly large equipment, too much at once, or simply lack of care. Damage to panelling happens when equipment is leant against walls. Damage to floors results from cloth tape and moving equipment. These are the areas that our protection addresses.

But we also count up the more discreet damages, the ones more difficult to quantify such as light, pests, dust, and vibration. These tend to show up in our quarterly reports. This year we started to use KPI's or key performance indicators for light and dust, and it will be interesting when at the end of the year we calculate how many extra lux hours are due to events and filming. Even more difficult to calculate is how these events impact the cycle of cleaning for delicate objects such as textiles. Protection for these is much more difficult.

What locations managers want

As I said before, our remit is to make events happen and to come up with a positive attitude and some creative solutions. So before we go into protection overdrive, what we need to do is have a look at what the organisers want.

For filming and photography they want a historical setting, exteriors and interiors, because it is difficult and expensive to recreate rooms with two hundred years worth of ancestral portraits and artefacts collected on Grand Tours. Being surrounded by a sense of history is also loved by actors as it helps them get into the part. So we can forget about removing furniture and paintings, because that's what event and location managers and their customers want.

As part of the negotiations, many of their questions will have to be answered such as:

How early/late can we start setting up?

Will the visiting public be in our way?

How much space can we have for kitchens, for staff changing rooms, for make-up, for VIP's?

How many trucks, cars, generators can we park?

What are the restrictions for lighting?

Can we bring in flowers, extra furniture?

How much power can we have, where will it come from?

Can we have phone and fax lines?

Running events and filming in a historic house can put a lot of strain on a building, especially as the set up has to be done in a very short time after our day visitors are gone. The way I see it, protection comes in three phases: 1) planning and negotiation; 2) supervision; and 3) physical barriers.

Be prepared, planning and negotiations

For both filming and photography prospective clients will be sent our conservation guidelines, and we are in the fortunate position to have helped write those guidelines. (*For more about guidelines, see p. 20 Ed.*)

Upon receiving a request for any type of filming or photography, one of the very first documents that companies have to read and sign is the "interior filming and photography conservation rules and regulations." This document addresses all the main issues such as always having a protective barrier between any equipment or prop and the fabric of the building, not touching objects or furniture, and light levels. Very importantly it also states that a conservator will be supervising at all times and can stop work if they think that damage is likely.

Following that there are two other application forms, one for small scale photography or filming, and the other for large scale. They ask questions like how much equipment do you have, what type, will you need lighting, sets etc. This paperwork trail help us form a clear idea of what the clients want and if we will be able to accommodate them. For conservators guidelines are something to lean on and help with planning and negotiations. When things go wrong during any type of event, it is usually due to the guidelines not being adhered to or enforced.

After the guidelines, the next part of the negotiations is the recce (a pre-shoot reconnaissance of a film location, there may be more than one for large events) and the follow up discussions. The recce is the first point of contact for the conservator, but will usually also involve other members of staff (such as maintenance, security, warders, and operations) so that the client has all the information he needs to plan.

Bearing in mind that we are there to facilitate as well as minimizing risk to our interiors, a recce is the time to listen to what the client wants and take notes. Some requests are routine and will be covered by the guidelines, others may throw you. Our policy is: don't say no, do some research and get back to them. If we have to say no to a request, we try to find an alternative which is acceptable. This is when a bit of lateral thinking is useful.

For filming involving interiors there will be more than one recce. For large film shoots we like to have about three months of planning time.

The follow-up planning is the stage that our PR manager finds the most time consuming: forms have been sent, signed, and sent back to us but there are still a huge number of details to go through. At this stage we expect to receive lighting proposals and drawings from the set designers for any additional pieces of scenery which will have to be brought in.

Supervision at all times

Trained conservators attend every function, event, filming, and photography (for big events, several conservators may be needed).

Preventive conservators are specifically trained to safeguard the palace, which they learn by having the guidelines explained to them and working with an experienced colleague for as many events as it takes for them to feel comfortable. The conservator on duty will have been briefed, so will know what was agreed during the planning stage, and will introduce themselves to the person in charge of the production, so they know who we are, and what our role is. We have a right of veto in case we think that immediate action is crucial to prevent damage, but it is generally better to anticipate problems and have a word with the location or PR manager who is also on duty during every event.

For simple photography, we may be needed just to make sure that no one gets too close to objects, that the lighting does not give out UV radiations and is turned off when not needed, and that protection goes under all the equipment brought into the palace.

We may also have to move furniture at the request of the director, monitor the amount of crew in smaller rooms, and generally anticipate when technical staff is in danger of forgetting their environment. We start work when the crew starts setting up, while they shoot (behind the camera is a good place to be), and until everything has been removed from the room. After large film shoots, we meet to identify and discuss what worked well and what did not.

Physical barriers, and more

Our first rule for protection when filming occurs is that there needs to be a protective layer between any equipment which is brought in and what we call the fabric of the building which is walls, floors etc. It is the same rule for inside and outside the palace. The following are some examples.

Doorways receive the heaviest protection, usually plywood with cushioning behind.

We use drip trays under the many trucks brought in for a shoot as the oil drips look unsightly.

A variety of material is used to protect floors from equipment as long as it is cushioning and stops scratches, such as woven blankets /Correx/hardboard/ rubber sheeting. Tennis balls are inserted under tripods (easy to see from a distance).

All sets must be pre-cut, pre-drilled, pre-painted, and be ready for assembly before being brought on site. Self adhesive foam is good as an isolation layer at the back surface of sets. Any on site retouching will be at the discretion of the conservator on duty.

The second major rule is that all lighting is to be UV friendly. It needs to be cool if close to objects, and we ask directors to switch off lights between takes.

It's a Wrap! continued



If we do remove objects from rooms for filming, it is usually at the request of the director. Either because it doesn't look right for what they want, or because they want a piece of furniture they can actually use.

Real food and drink are strictly regulated. If food is needed as a prop it is removed overnight. Actors eat and drink in regulated areas away from the Royal Apartments.

We have, at times, had animals for shots. For *To Kill A King*, they wanted a long shot of King Charles I walking along a gallery accompanied by half a dozen spaniels. We did worry about dogs jumping on furniture and accidents, but the trainer was very efficient. The dogs were kept in a compound until needed, used for the shot, and then whisked straight out. We had no problems at all. They were very well-behaved.

For *Lorna Doon* we had every animal in creation for shots in our courtyard. We were assured by the animal handler that horses never pee on a hard surface because they don't like splashes against their legs, which is rubbish. Fortunately the deal was that one person from the BBC was solely responsible for clearing up mishaps, and he was kept very busy!

We have allowed some of the doors in our courtyards (which are painted green) to be repainted and faked as old wood as long as a layer of latex is used first. This technique allows for the extra layer to be simply peeled off. (It's actually quite fun to remove afterwards.)

We allow our courtyards to be covered in earth or leaves as long as there is a protective membrane underneath (easier for clean up and no seepage into our walls). And we allow water based fog outside, but not inside.

The cost of earning a living: staff time

For our last film shoot, *Little Dorrit*, the total planning time was sixty five hours and one hundred and fifty five hours of supervision spread over ten days of filming. (For comparison, for the music festival last year we did one hundred and seventy hours of supervision and seventy hours of protection for an event which lasted fourteen days.)

It's a Wrap! continued



These are considerable figures, which have a large impact on our core work. People get very tired. We have tried to fall within EU regulations which state that workers should have 12 hours rest between shifts. So if you work until 2am you should not be at work until 2pm the next day, which means that you then have to work until 9pm or lose your overtime. We have not managed to work that one out yet.

Conclusion

If I had presented this material just a few years ago, the actual “hands-on” side of the work, would have made up about half of my talk. But not anymore. Now my daily life is all about protection and risk management. The reason for this is we have become much more sophisticated in our approach. We now follow Churchill’s dictum “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” We spend much longer on negotiations and reaching compromises.

We have to be aware that in times of recession there is more pressure than ever on our PR team to earn money. This in turn puts pressure on the conservation department to flex guidelines in order to secure a contract, which can confuse staff and increase risk to the building.

Some final advice if you are faced with the prospect of having to supervise a film crew at work: don’t panic. Insist on being involved from the beginning, be very prepared, ask lots of questions during the recce and take notes. Make friends with the location manager and later with the director. Explain what your role is and what your concerns are. Talk to the crew about the history of your building, so they understand how special it is. Be vigilant and always supervise. At the end of a shoot discuss what went well and what didn’t. Finally update your guidelines, as they are a living document.

And if at 2AM things start to go wrong, remember why you are doing this, you need the money for your conservation projects!

