

Hooray for Cricklewood

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To all but those who live there, the north London suburb of Cricklewood is one of those grey, uninspiring areas of the metropolis where you stop only long enough to fill up your petrol tank before getting the hell out. Its very name provokes the same kind of disdainful guffaws as are levelled at neighbouring Neasden, immortalised in *Private Eye* as the archetypal cultural wasteland.

So it comes as a very pleasant surprise to discover an oasis of creativity, a piece of pure Hollywood in fact, with all its attendant glamour and romance, nestling in the heart of downtown Cricklewood Lane.

Walk through the main gates from the drab highroad and you enter a wonderland of old coach houses and stables which, together with a number of adjacent factory buildings, comprise Samuelson's Production Village — an entirely self-contained film studio which has just been completed at a cost of a cool £1½ million. As well as giving the neighbourhood a shot in the arm, the four Samuelson brothers who run Samuelson Film Service Ltd aim to show that the precarious British film industry is still worthy of a massive investment.

The production village has immense period charm. Built in 1900, the handsome outbuildings which surround a cobbled courtyard have been lovingly restored on the outside and converted into studios within. There are still rings in the walls where the horses were once tethered. Tony Samuelson, one of the four who head the Samuelson film empire, muses that the stables are 'a living testimony to the fact that at the turn of the century horses lived better than people'.

There is more than a touch of whimsicality about Tony Samuelson, a lawyer and former stockbroker turned financial director of the company, who races horses and planes in his spare time. He decided that if the production 'village' was to live up to its name it had better have a duckpond. They put one in the courtyard complete with duckweed and a dozen-odd ducks who waddle amiably around, occasionally quacking at passers-by. A standing joke in the village 'pub' just before Christmas was the suggestion that a daily head count be taken of the ducks in view of the mouthwatering looks they were getting from some of the technicians. It wouldn't do for the ducks to end up in the Christmas pot.

Lunchtime sees all the village gossips in the pub, *The Magic Hour*, which is exclusively for the use of villagers and their friends. No expense spared here on lush interior decorations, mahogany bars, brass fittings, carpets you disappear into and even a piano player tinkling away on the ivories. The only real difference between this and any other English pub is that the

locals tend to be earnestly discussing the next take rather than the merits of cattle cake or how many mangelwurzels you get to the pound.

'This is Bilbow Baggins the general manager,' said Samuelson, introducing an inscrutable parrot who icily surveyed a number of the administrative staff from his manager's cage. Bilbow, it was explained, had earlier been interviewed by a BBC radio journalist without much success. He was not naturally a talkative parrot and the most he would agree to say into the microphone was something like 'ughkk'. He remained his usual silent self until the micky-taking interview was broadcast on the 'PM Programme'. Hearing the sound of his own vocal chords he amazed everyone round him by launching into eloquent threats of 'I shall sue, I shall sue'.

As we talked, Samuelson buttonholed one of his colleagues — 'I've thought of a name for your office,' he said in a matter of fact manner. 'How about the Wolery?' The man looked blank. 'You know, Owl's home in Winnie the Pooh.'

Ducks, parrots, owls... a positive aviary.

John Baker, who deals with the day to day running of the studios, said later: 'I told Tony he was truly the squire of the village the other day. He looked at me dubiously and said "Yes, but every village has its idiot too".'

There is no doubt that behind the eccentric exterior is a hard-headed businessman who, together with brothers Sydney, David and Michael, runs one of the largest suppliers of film equipment in the world with an annual turnover of £10 million. Samuelson is a household name in the film business and the firm prides itself on its ability to supply cameras, lighting and sound recording equipment to any location within a matter of hours.

It all began 20 years ago when Sydney, a freelance cameraman, bought his own Newman Sinclair camera with the £300 he and his wife Doris had saved as a deposit on a house. He leased the camera to friends when he was out of work and soon realised there was a market for hiring cameras both to individuals and to film companies. His brothers David and Michael were themselves cameramen with British Movietone News. Persuaded there were possibilities, they each chipped in £100 to buy a second camera and the Samuelson company was born. Tony later joined them. The firm's headquarters is in Cricklewood Broadway and employs over 400 staff.

Up the road, the village is rapidly adding a further dimension to the company's field of operations. Its ten film studio stages, which range in floorsize from 1000 to 10,000 square feet, can cater for the making of television commercials, television drama



and even small feature films where only limited studio space is needed. According to Tony Samuelson, the largest stage was once a factory where Handley Page first designed and built the bomber which bore his name and which proved so successful in the First World War.

Some film companies began taking advantage of the village even before work on it was completed. One company specialising in home movies recorded a learn to dance film. 'Breaking Glass', a new wave rock musical follow-up to television's 'Rock Follies' is also being filmed at the village. Black Lion Films have been planning a television epic called 'Very Like a Whale' at the village. And the scope for the making of tv commercials has already been acknowledged by a number of companies.

As well as the stages and make-up rooms, there are production offices, prop, wardrobe and storage accommodation, rehearsal, crowd, green and cutting rooms, art departments, film vaults, a scene dock, a viewing theatre, a post sync and effects theatre, a stills studio, music and sound effects libraries, transport, a telex machine, a paging system, private dining rooms, a restaurant called 'Le Kaif', the pub, a set construction department, office equipment, camera cars, vans, a freight service, a fully furnished cottage, not to mention Samuelson's camera and lighting equipment. Oh and there's another bar too... and toilets. Once inside the village, you need never leave.

Samuelsons see their ambitious project as unique and yet comparable to other urban