

The

SUMMER 1986

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Countryman

comes from the country



Clematis and thatch, Brettenham, Suffolk

*Fell-walking by night • Conservation's cock Robin
Massacre of the Tweed swans • Chiltern square mile*

The Countryman

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RICHARD BARR

Costume drama

Photographs by the author



*Film extras in full costume coloured the scene for weeks when *Revolution* came to King's Lynn.*

'RIGHT,' SAID FILM-DIRECTOR Hugh Hudson, 'Quiet everybody, please. Can we have the rain now. Action!' On that command there was a real cloudburst, making redundant the efforts of half a dozen fire-hoses. The crowd standing on the quayside was impressed but not surprised by this display of omnipotence.

The town of King's Lynn in Norfolk is one place where the local population turned out by the thousand to see the much-criticised film *Revolution*. It started in a small way more than a year ago. Flamboyant young men with clipboards were seen eyeing up old buildings and pointing menacingly at new ones.

Rumours flashed around the town: it was a television commercial; it was an episode of *Upstairs Downstairs*; it was a low-budget romance. Nobody guessed that the most expensive film of 1985 was to be filmed in our gently decaying market town.

In February 1985, when the mart left town, the full scale of the film began to become clear. (The mart is a travelling fun-fair which comes to King's Lynn each year on the start of its journey around the country.) While the mart's world of lights and noise was being dismantled in



The King's Lynn waterfront was transformed into New York harbour at the time of the American War of Independence. Some felt the scenery improved the town.

one part of the town, eighteenth-century New York was being created in another. Our town had been selected because many of its buildings were similar to those of New York at the time of the American War of Independence.

Old buildings, complete with mossed slates and sagging roofs appeared overnight. Houses suddenly changed colour. Shop-fronts and taverns sprouted from abandoned buildings. If the producer wanted brickwork to show on colour-washed buildings, teams of artists would carefully paint in each individual brick.

Walls would arrive in ten-foot sections and, once installed, were so realistic that you could only tell that they were artificial by tapping them. One of the town's eyesores, a hundred-foot-high pale-green grain silo, was turned into a huge sugar warehouse. The green towers stuck out of the top like three sore fingers, but camera angles were kept



low to exclude them. A long-neglected tributary of the River Ouse was cleared of its mud and abandoned supermarket trolleys, and turned (if you faced east) into a sordid Hogarthian underworld and (if you faced west) into New York harbour.

Modern streets were quickly aged by the laying of instant cobblestones. Those street-lights which could not be removed were clad in old tree-trunks and fresh foliage (which as often as not was then pruned to give the cameras a clear view). Great ingenuity was used to disguise other features of the twentieth century. A pay-and-display parking meter was hidden by a portable shop front. A bird-box, complete with guano, covered up an extractor fan.

Everywhere, television aerials came down and hanging shop signs went up. Even distant roof-lines were changed. The top of Tesco's supermarket developed a fine colonial



façade. Spires concealed modern chimneys. Behind the Queensway warehouse a fully rigged ship's mast loomed up from a make-shift frame.

For the town it was a bonanza, not experienced since the bottom fell out of the wool market and King's Lynn fell from being one of the largest provincial towns

in the country to just another East Anglian port. Unemployment in the town briefly nose-dived when 2,000 extras were signed on to fight wars or join in riots for £20 a day (£30 if they were to be rained on).

We became used to passing the great and the famous in the street, to the sounds of gunfire and to palls of smoke hanging over the town. Smoke featured in many of the scenes. If buildings were not being burned, it was still

Huge modern grain-silos were covered up with simulated ancient masonry (left). Careful camera angles excluded the protruding parts. The streets of King's Lynn were thronged with costumed extras (right) and gun-carriages were stored on the town quay.



needed to obliterate parts of the twentieth century which could not be disguised by other means.

The production ran behind schedule. For days the extras would sit around and wait for suitable conditions. Then all of a sudden everything would spring to life and Hugh Hudson would be there with his megaphone demanding — and getting — rain.

But it had to end. Eventually the filming was completed and the entourage of producers, directors, administrators, technicians and stars moved on. Immediately there was a strong lobby to keep the scenery; many felt it improved the town beyond measure. But it would not have lasted and it had to be taken down. Everyone was sad to see it go. □

Bulldozers

The foreman at his peg
Must start. He unhooks mac and scarf.
Huge, yellow, jointed legs
Are raised. The grimy engines laugh.

Forlorn the glazed skies weep
Above the frozen, waltzing trees,
As the bulldozers creep
To the verge. In a petrol breeze.

David Wilson