

A Brief History of Bray Studios

Down Place was built alongside the Thames in the early 1740s. The unique mansion was built by the then MP for Windsor, Richard Tonson. After his death in 1772, the estate had a variety of owners until the Harford family moved there in 1835. Even though the mansion was on the small side, the family of four is recorded as having eleven live-in servants in 1901. The family moved out sometime after 1901 and the mansion was mostly left derelict. It was briefly revived during the Second World War as the Government needed some place to store duffle coats. Even years later, the locals referred to it as Duffle Coat Manor.

In 1951, William Hinds (better known as Will Hammer, half of the comedy double-act Hammer and Smith) brought his Hammer Film Productions to Down Place to film parts of *The Dark Light*. They couldn't afford expensive studios, so they filmed in large country houses instead. Even though Down Place had collapsed flooring and duffel coats still strewn about, it was perfect for their needs so they signed a one-year lease. After a year, they considered moving to a studio but there was an on-going movers strike, so they bought the freehold and created a studio on site. They named it "Bray Studios" after the nearby town.

After opening, they had 7 stages (A through G) for filming. But the truth is these were all just rooms in the mansion. The east wing off the mansion, which included the ballroom, was in much better shape than the rest of the house so these were primarily used. Being quite small and with low ceilings, these "stages" were difficult to light and film in. The sound crew frequently had to stand outside holding boom mics through the window as there was no room inside.

During this time, it would be best known for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *The Quatermass Xperiment*, *Quatermass II*, *Murder by Death* and of course, the Hammer Horror films including *The Curse of Frankenstein*, *The Abominable Snowman*, *Dracula (aka Horror of Dracula)*, *The Mummy*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, and *Rasputin: The Mad Monk*.

Hammer Films would eventually sell the studio in 1970. It had 4 stages, 2 were medium sized, but 2 were quite small so they were used for photo effects. Around 1972, the BBC started using the small stages for special effects for *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7* with the live action being filmed mostly at TV Centre. Gerry Anderson would join them with model work and special effects for both seasons of *Space: 1999* and *Terrahawks*. *Star Maidens* was also filmed here with special effects in the smaller stages and some of the live action shot in the larger stages. But it wasn't just TV shows. Ripley Scott's 1979 *Alien* had its special effects done at Bray.

A new large stage was built in 1985, and for the next 25 years, the studio was pretty busy. Film work continued along with considerable TV comedies and dramas being filmed. Additionally, many bands used Bray for rehearsing for their tours and filming music videos. This included Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, David Bowie for Live Aid, Pink Floyd, Duran Duran, Genesis, Amy Winehouse, Radiohead and many more.

During this time, it would be best known for *Inspector Morse*, *Poirot*, *Jeeves and Wooster*, *Pie in the Sky*, *Born and Bred*, *Invasion Earth*, *Ruth Rendell Mysteries*, *Sex Chips & Rock n' Roll*, *Soldier Soldier*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*.

In 2010, the owners closed the studio and tried to get permission to build housing on the land. There was a Save the Studios campaign on Facebook, but they ultimately got approval

to build 10 apartments and 15 houses on the land. The owners also owned the farm property next door and wanted to build 127 houses there.

While they were waiting for approval and financing, they accepted an offer to film BBC's *Bodyguard* there in 2017. This was followed by *Rocketman* (the Elton John biopic) and several others. It seemed that the closure of so many London area studios like TV Centre, The London Studios, Teddington, etc. that there was now a real shortage of usable filming space. The owners drew up new plans for 5-6 additional stages and support services (office, make-up, costume, workshops and tech facilities). These plans were approved and building started.

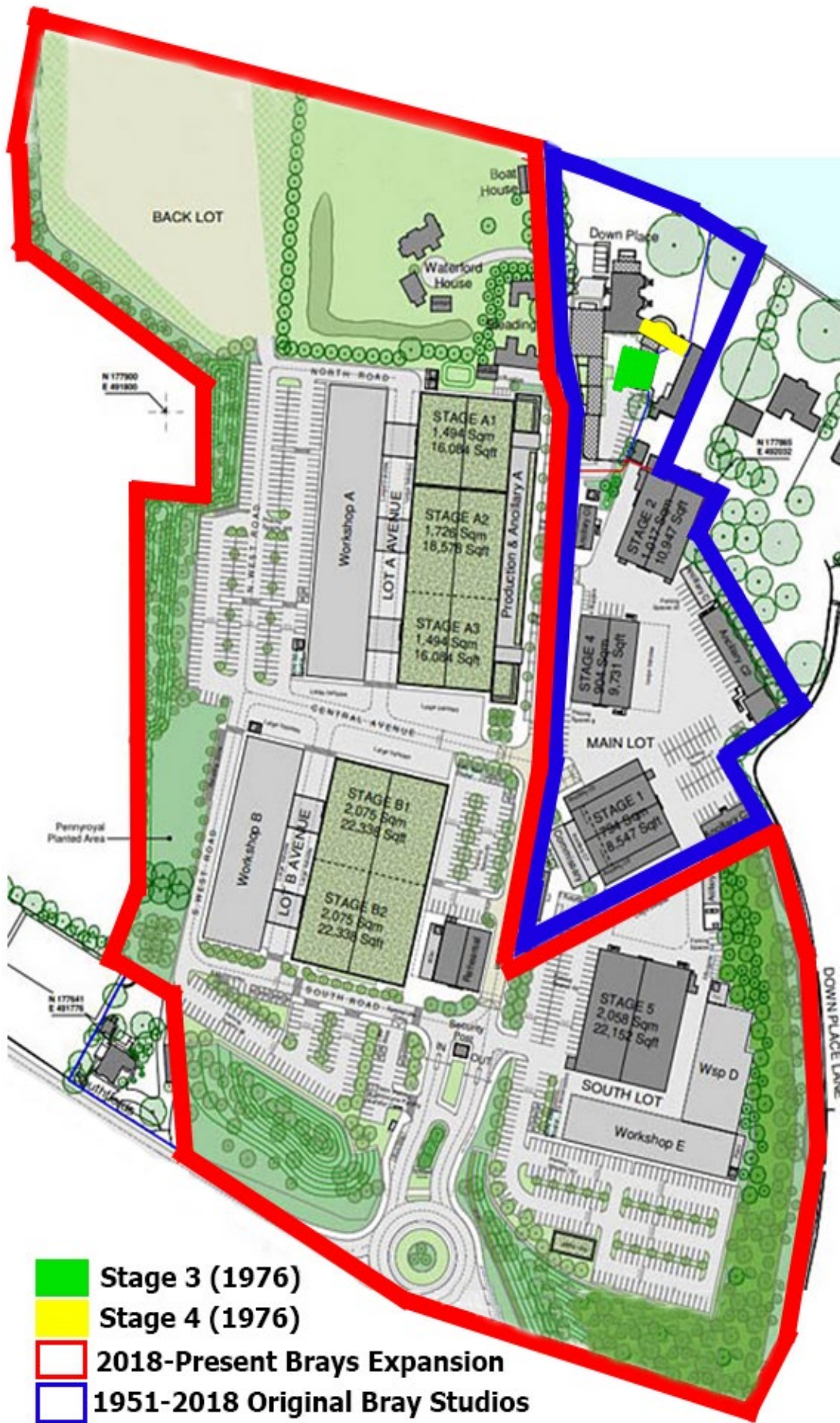
In 2021, Amazon filmed *Citadel* and in the following year, series 2 of *The Rings of Power - the Lord of the Rings* at Bray. Amazon was having difficulty finding filming space, especially with Disney signing a 10-year contract with Pinewood and Netflix doing the same at Shepperton. We end on a happy note with Amazon-MGM purchasing Bray in July 2024 so its future as a film studio is safe.

Gerry Anderson at Bray

As the Supermarionation puppet films had finished, Gerry Anderson had closed his studios by 1970. When *Space: 1999* needed space for model work and special effects shots, they went to Bray. They used Stage 4 (the ballroom stage – shown as yellow on the map) and Stage 3 (green on the map). The thin Prop Store between these two stages served as their main workshop. The live action scenes were filmed at Stages L and M at Pinewood.

In 1983-84, *Terrahawks* was also filmed at Bray. Special effects were shot at Stage 3 (green on the map) and the puppets were shot on Stage 2 (an old corrugated iron stage – on the map it would be approximately the grey building labelled Stage 4). The old stage 4 (yellow on the map), which had been used for so many shows was no longer available as it had been converted to a viewing theatre in 1979.

-Adina Smart, 2024



- Stage 3 (1976)
- Stage 4 (1976)
- 2018-Present Brays Expansion
- 1951-2018 Original Bray Studios