

THE FILM

by

Matthew Robinson

**A day-by-day diary
of the making of the 1963 FSSW film**

7 June to 1 July 1963

(transcribed May 1996)



INTRODUCTION

At an FSSW Old Scholars' Reunion at the end of the eighties, I mentioned to Richard Wright (who had taught me maths as enthusiastically as he has kept the school's archives) that I'd written a day-by-day diary about the making of the school film during the 1963 summer term.

He asked me for a copy for the archives. Back home, I couldn't find the scribblings anywhere, but they turned up when I moved house in 1994. At the quite extraordinary OS Mass Reunion in 1996, Richard - never one to let things drop - reminded me about the diary and I had no excuse not to oblige.

What follows is a verbatim transcription of those few crazy weeks - warts and all. I've added some footnotes, mainly for my own interest.

Based on the knowledge gathered during my career in TV and film production since leaving university in 1966, I was fascinated to see how ubiquitous are the problems and frustrations - and, it must be said, joys - of film-making.

Even amateur film-making!

Matthew Robinson
24 May 1996

** For more details about the making of the film, see an article for 'The Avenue' (school magazine) published in January '64.*

PRE-PRODUCTION

Friday 7 June 1963

So far I've worked out an approximate filming script¹ - that is, I've written out thirty minutes worth of shots which follow a roughly chronological order of school events during a typical day. I'm intending to stick to this script as far as possible.

Ideas will probably present themselves at the time of shooting, just as some of my original plans will probably seem useless. But it's no use filming without some sort of initial guide.



I've been very fortunate to borrow a new modern projector² which runs backwards as well as forwards, and will stop on individual frames. This will be invaluable and will probably make it unnecessary to buy an editor (which I can't afford). Also, it's got 'tape synchronisation', a feature which we really can't really do without if the sound's going to be any good.

Also, I've arranged to borrow a tripod and an exposure meter from a couple of fifth formers³. Kodak have promised to sell me film at wholesale prices: Cyril Mummery⁴ has therefore written an official school order for seven reels of daylight film and one reel of photoflood film. I have the money ready to pay. *Das Fenster*⁵ contributed £4 and the rest I've raised as shares from my friends at school⁶.

Filming starts as soon as the film comes from the factory. My luck is certainly in at the moment⁷.

¹ The idea of an FSSW film came to me in March '63. Even though I'd obtained my university place in February ('A' levels '62), I was still hanging around the school. I should, I suppose, have ventured abroad like everyone else. But the fact I'd 'made a film' inadvertently helped land that all-important first TV job (in '66).

² Arnold Jones, father of Richard (YG 1964), a day scholar, kindly lent it to me for the duration of the project. The sound track was compiled and synchronised with the film in his house - though the 'sync' was always at best idiosyncratic and at worst a nightmare. That is, until the film was transferred to video in '91.

³ John Pilgrim (YG 1964) and Jon North (YG 1964).

⁴ Cyril Mummery, acting headmaster as Kenneth Nicholson was away on a sabbatical, had given his permission for the film to be made. He did *not* ask to see a script beforehand.

⁵ The school newspaper I started in January '63. There were four issues, each one selling between two and three hundred copies - at sixpence a time.

⁶ I originally estimated the film would cost about £20. So I must have raised about £16 from these 'friends'. Whether we remained friends after they didn't get their money back, I can't recall.

⁷ The First Commandment of the film business: *Optimism is Essential*.

PRODUCTION

Monday 10 June 1963

Nothing in the post from Kodak so I rang their HQ to ask how long until the film arrived. To my horror, I was told that the order must go through the Essex Education Authority before we can get those wholesale prices. I envisaged having to wait another week or two before starting. This I couldn't face. Anyway, the glorious sunny weather might have changed by then. So I cycled downtown to Saffron Walden and bought two reels straight from a photo shop (losing seventeen shillings in the process). Thus shooting could begin.

During the first shot (a continuation of a test shot last week), lots of people crowded round, asking all manner of questions about the film and camera⁸. I found it hard to be civil, especially when they got in the way of various experimental shots. But I suppose I must expect them to be curious. *I* would be if someone else was filming. I took John Cadman⁹ walking to the changing rooms and showing first-form boys where to go for games. Next was the domestic science rooms for needlework shots. The temptation is to take everything I see but I *must* stick to the script.

After lunch, I took the Brighton Beach¹⁰ loafers with rolled-up trouser legs: quite successful. But when I tried to shoot other boys loafing about on the field, they all fooled around and made 'V' signs at the camera, ruining precious seconds of film. I felt like kicking their stupid heads in, not to mention sending them the bill.



I took a few exterior shots during the afternoon before 'The Two-Mile Race' on the athletics track late afternoon. I used up most of my 'games allocation footage' on this, but shots were excellent - providing they come out.

Completed the first reel and posted it off for processing. With the second, I tried to shoot Mopsa¹¹ hurdling. She wouldn't have it and chased me off with a pair of spikes. "If we don't want to be in your film," some people have already said, "we don't have to".

Quite! But what a ridiculous attitude. I only hope they'll have got used to the camera by Friday when we attempt the biggest set-up of the film: Assembly. We'll be on a trolley, tracking up and down the aisles.

⁸ I'd already used up most of my savings on buying a much coveted second-hand 8 mm cine-camera. Apart from trying one experimental reel of film in the Easter holidays, and one test reel a week before the main 'shoot' began, I'd had no experience of filming.

⁹ Games master. Played hockey for Britain.

¹⁰ The bench seating fixed to the exterior of the swimming pool.

¹¹ Mary Evans (YG 1963, m. Gerson), my contemporary, not particularly noted for athletic prowess.

Tuesday 11 June 1963

The time allotted in the script to the classroom scenes isn't nearly long enough. Initially, I wanted quick shots of pupils and teaching staff, followed by shots of clocks at increasing times during the morning. This should give the impression of time passing, but the film could seem too jumpy and quick, as indeed most of it is already appearing to be.

But I don't think I captured anything particularly brilliant in the classrooms anyway. Professional film makers achieve their results by shooting miles of film and then only using a few inches of it¹². Obviously I can't do this. Each time I press the button, scant money is being used up. I *have* to use what I shoot. Therefore I must shoot correctly each time. And that just isn't possible.

What's more, I can't even get cheap film now. I rang Kodak to explain our position with Essex. They said that photography is *not* a taught subject at the school, so they won't supply film at wholesale prices. Cyril Mummery said "The old baskets!" when I told him. Somehow I've got to find some more cash from somewhere¹³.

Gradually, all the outside shots are being covered. I ring the numbers in the scripts with satisfaction each time a scene is shot. Just how many will be failures, I can't tell. Results will show when the first two reels I've sent off come back from the processing factory. Another snag is that the projector slightly jumps at each splice. This may prove most annoying.

But so far, things are fine in general. It's really quite emotional recording people's actions that will never be repeated. What will they all think in years to come when they look back on the film? Will they wonder at the changes that have taken place, both in the school - and themselves¹⁴?



¹² A slight exaggeration. The ratio of shot-film to used-film footage in TV is about 10 to 1. The ratio on the school film was about 1.25 to 1. It had to be! But with the bulk of programmes these days (1996) being made on video tape, no one much cares about shooting ratios because tape is so cheap - at least it is compared with film.

¹³ The bursar, Eric Brown, was eventually persuaded (by Cyril Mummery) to cough up £20 as a contribution from school funds. The final cost of the film was just over £40.

¹⁴ In fact, the film was in great demand for the next three years at Old Scholars occasions. Then people got a bit sick of it and - apart from a few showings in the seventies and eighties - it lay deteriorating in the archives. In '91, deputy head Martin Hugall asked me if it could be saved by a permanent transfer to video. The job was done at the Byker Grove studios in Newcastle - the cost (£500) partly covered by sales of VHS copies to old scholars. The visual quality and the sound track were both enhanced in the process, but not at the expense of the 'original spirit' of the film.

Wednesday 12 June 1963

Got up early to film 'rising shots'. But when I arrived at school, the prefect I'd enlisted to ring the early morning bell was out of his pyjamas and had already rung it. Everyone was up. All he said was "I thought you weren't coming." This didn't make a very good start. I had to send everyone back to bed. Because of the lost time, I was only able to take a few shots, three in fact.

The rest of the day I was away at Chelmsford¹⁵ so no more shooting. Friday is the big day though - Assembly! That is if this glorious weather holds. I just have a feeling it won't.

Thursday 13 June 1963

No filming today because I was at the Essex Sports. But in the evening Pege¹⁶, Keir¹⁷ and I went to the hall to set up for tomorrow's Assembly. We took over an hour, working out the shots - including a long pan down the hall and a pan round the back. The floor was marked out with chalk marks which Keir and I followed, pushing Pege and the camera on a trolley. It should be successful *if* the weather is fine¹⁸.

But today was cloudy - and it rained.

Friday 14 June 1963

It's six in the morning - I've woken early through the excitement ... I've just looked out of the window. It's miserable, cold, cloudy with no sun at all. Will it clear up in two hours? Why are things always so awkward? Surely, there can't be a reason.

Sure enough, it wasn't nearly light enough to take any film in the assembly hall. But we recorded the sound track¹⁹ instead.

Richard Sturge²⁰, of course, *had* to have a hymn practice with the whole school before letting it be recorded. When nobody cooperated very well, he lost his temper. "Shut up!" he shouted. "Either this film is worth making or it is not. And if the school authorities have decided it is worth it, then it is up to you to make sure it is a success."

When he heard the recording played back, he said it was "too ragged" and suggested Small Choir²¹ sing the hymn instead. To humour him, I suppose I'll have to agree to at least record Small Choir. But I'm not having any marvellously perfect singing in my film - which is supposed to depict a normal school. As the weather was awful all day, there was no further filming. I can tell in my bones that tomorrow will be sunny - just right for Assembly. Naturally, I can't be there. I have to leave for the Essex Sports at eight o'clock.

Saturday 15 June 1963

The morning was, of course, beautifully sunny, the very day I had to be away.

¹⁵ A three-day all-Essex schools athletics meeting. I was hurdling and relaying.

¹⁶ Peter Bradley (YG 1963), my contemporary, noted for his sports jackets with patched elbows.

¹⁷ Keir Watkin (YG 1963), my contemporary, roped in somewhat unwillingly as a 'gofer' (Gofers go for things!)

¹⁸ With only two available lamps - and those usually locked away in the physics lab - I was dependent on the weather being sunny for the interior shots.

¹⁹ Apart from bells being rung, this was the only part of the sound track that needed accurate synchronisation. At the time, I didn't appreciate this was utterly impossible with our available equipment. Even with the technical control of the '91 video transfer, the hymn is miles 'out of sync'. Somehow, though, it doesn't seem to matter.

²⁰ Head of Music.

²¹ A select band of the twenty or so best singers chosen by Richard Sturge from the school's main choir. Small Choir performed at special occasions. For many years it represented FSSW by singing carols in Trafalgar Square when the Christmas tree lights were illuminated. In the end, I used the 'ragged' version sung by the whole school.



Sunday 16 June 1963

Light very bad. In the afternoon, we set up the school rock group, *The Nomads*, in an assembly hall window, turning the stage spotlights to shine on them. Probably there still wasn't enough light which is a pity as there were some interesting angles²². To my annoyance, I wasted about thirty seconds of film by not turning the focus back after a close-up²³. It looks like being miserable weather again tomorrow.

Monday 17 June 1963

Horrible sky with not a scrap of sunlight so no Assembly today. It cleared up about an hour later and the sun shone brightly. I HATE FATE. Why can't I do Assembly²⁴?

I asked a group of boys to look annoyed when the end-of-recess bell rang. How they overacted! It was terrible but I'll probably use it. Then I arranged to shoot lunch. Miss Ellinor²⁵ agreed, providing the girls looked "neat and tidy". Then she lapsed into a long harangue about the horrors of photographing schools "naturally" and her hatred of "true-to-life" shots which don't always show schools at their best. She said I must avoid taking them. But this film is going to be about what really happens here²⁶, not what Jenny would like to happen.

Lunch wasn't an unqualified success. I felt self-conscious, walking round the tables with a camera. My plan was to have a quick succession of different people stuffing food into their mouths. Whether this will work or not, I can't tell. But I stupidly took the back the camera off without winding on the necessary amount of film. So quite a bit of lunch may be spoilt.

The first film came back from processing today. Most of it is good: only one or two shots are underexposed. However, there are some startling lighting differences between the previous reel and follow-up shots on this reel. The audience, if there is one, will just have to stomach that. I'm no professional. How I long for more film!

²² Plus the sound of a mocked-up row used over the group singing. A bit avant-garde, even for the Sixties!

²³ Even in a professional's schedule, it's a rare day when technical problems are avoided.

²⁴ In the business, it's known as 'Sod's Law'.

²⁵ Jennie Ellinor, headmistress, who'd had to be persuaded by Cyril Mummery to agree to the film being made.

²⁶ A lofty yet earthy aspiration, not exactly achieved.

Tuesday 18 June 1963

Clouds prevented the long-awaited Assembly shots today but, in the middle of Assembly itself, the sun came out. I really am hopping mad. What's more, the forecast said it's going to be fine tomorrow, the very day we don't have Assembly.

In recess, I'd planned a scene with the lower forms rushing out of the New Wing, across the asphalt and fighting to get in the bread queues²⁷. Weatherhead²⁸ held them back until (a) the sun came out (it had been shining gloriously for an hour beforehand) and (b) the bread queues got bigger. But after holding up the hungry hordes for several minutes, neither had happened so I had to shoot it anyway, unsunny and unprepared. Sure enough, the sun came out seconds afterwards²⁹.

Two more lunch shots followed (which I forgot yesterday) including Jenny pinging the small bell but she

was wearing different clothes³⁰. Hope it won't matter (i.e. no one will notice).

I shot David Gray's English lesson but the class just messed about and he did nothing to stop them. In fact, he rather messed about himself³¹.

The film's now at the stage when people say "Oh no!" and groan when they see me plus camera. They just

don't realise how hard it is to put a film together. Sent the fourth reel off and loaded the fifth. The second reel should be back tomorrow. Persuaded two sixth-form girls³² to start tracing out letters for the opening titles.



Wednesday 19 June 1963

Naturally, the very day when there's no Assembly, the sun shone marvellously! I took some shots at recess and was infuriated yet again by the changing weather. One moment it was fine, the next cloudy. What's most exasperating is waiting for a shot until the sun comes out and then, because it doesn't, deciding to shoot the scene anyway - with a wider aperture (which means the definition is much less sharp). On such occasions, the sun can always be relied on to come out immediately afterwards.

I tried to film in the staffroom later but, because no one seemed much interested in helping to set up anything special, I took general scenes. In the afternoon, I made and shot the letters for the titles 'Mount Pleasant Studios Present'. I can't wait to see this effect³³.

²⁷ The lower forms queued at the prefects' windows for this mid-morning dispersal of the staff of life.

²⁸ Martin Weatherhead (YG 1964), enlisted as an additional 'gofer' after Pege and Keir began to flag a little.

²⁹ Another bugbear which has continued to haunt me during my professional life.

³⁰ The most obvious 'continuity' error of the whole film.

³¹ Actually, David Gray was one of the more cooperative masters during the shooting. He was always a bit of a thespian: watch the way he pops bread into his mouth in the staffroom scene - dead on cue.

³² I can't remember who they were. But I soon discovered that professional filming often involves persuading a lot of people to do things they don't necessarily want to do.

³³ A crude attempt at animation with the phrase forming out of a jumble of letters, shot one frame at a time.

Thursday 20 June 1963

Lousy weather so no Assembly today. In the morning, I tried something different with the opening titles, defocusing then focusing on the letters. Nothing else today except for one or two evening shots with the school against a dying red sky.



Friday 21 June 1963

The morning seemed fine. So, after breakfast, Pege and I went to the hall to set out the chairs and chalk in the guide marks. Then Keir said he didn't want to do it because he was working for an exam. So once again filming was cancelled - this time because of a strike. In fact, no shooting at all today because the sky clouded over very quickly. Besides, there are only a few more daylight shots to take. The rest are photoflood shots which we've earmarked for Sunday.

Tomorrow promises to be fine. We have set out the hall ready for filming.

Saturday 22 June 1963

Although the light was not perfect, we decided to go ahead with Assembly only to find that Cyril Mummery had banned us from the hall. He said the other school activities arranged for today were already going to cut into classes. At recess, I took one or two extra shots on the field to make up the 'after-lunch' sequence.

Sunday 23 June 1963

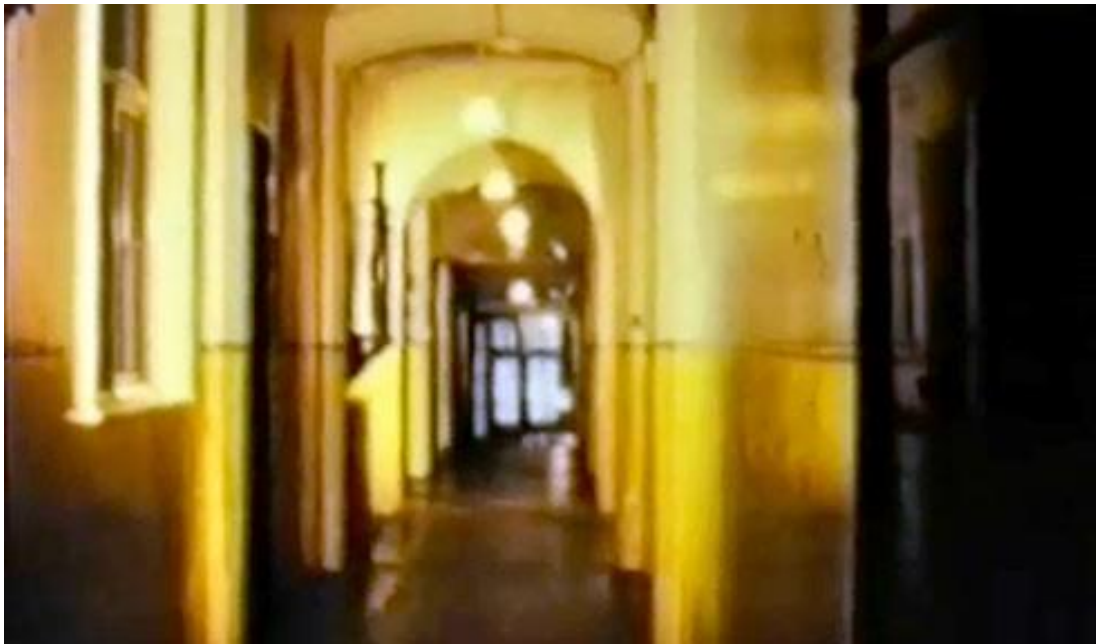
No Assembly on Sundays and naturally the weather is absolutely beautiful. However, today was the day I'd arranged to start shooting the inside scenes using photofloods. But it was the worst day for tragedies, confounded nuisances and general disillusionment.

Weatherhead and I unlocked the physics lab and borrowed the two lamps which last week Donald Benson³⁴ had promised to lend me. We'd hardly started filming before Dobbins stormed down the corridor and blew us to high heaven. Apparently, he'd left tomorrow's 'O' level exam papers in the lab.

³⁴ Physics master - nicknamed 'Dobbins' for obvious reasons.

He threatened expulsion and all sorts of things. Ridiculous. School teachers can be so small-minded. As if we wanted to crib questions for an exam we weren't even going to take!

First tragedy? After humping the lamps up onto the dining room gallery to shoot the big clock, we immediately blew two fuses. And we couldn't find the fuse box anywhere. So we connected up elsewhere only to burn out the complete circuit³⁵.



In the afternoon, we moved to the centre corridor but filming there was very tiring and extremely boring. I could feel people in the library hating us for making so much noise³⁶.

Second tragedy? In the evening, we moved up into the bedrooms for one of the last shots in the film. But, just before we completed it, we blew yet another fuse, wasting a lot of film of course. It was then too late to find the box, mend the fuse and film again. Ivan Cane³⁷, tonight's Mod³⁸, put on his officious face and started making comments about why hadn't we let him know we were up there etc.

I feel tired out, miserable, let down and generally awful. Thank God Weatherhead was extremely helpful.

Monday 24 June 1963

Cloudy and rainy therefore no Assembly filming. Things are becoming desperate now as the hall will soon be turned over for fulltime exam use. It must be fine tomorrow. It must! I took the projector to Cambridge for an overhaul and they said they'll try to clear up the jumping problem.

Back at school, we set up a complicated shot of people rushing to the dining room. The lamps were strategically positioned. Hundreds of people were lined up, waiting. The gong went. Everybody rushed. I pressed the button. There was one click. Someone had turned the camera to 'single frame mode'³⁹ and all I took was one picture. I could have sworn. (In fact I did.) But I managed some good scenes in the radio club later. I only hope I haven't overexposed this part with the artificial lighting.

³⁵ I can find no record of what the school authorities had to say about that.

³⁶ And I don't blame them at all - now. At the time, they seemed beyond the pale. I was clearly suffering from Mad Film Disease, which always descends and grips its subject on every project. It sweeps away all concerns other than that of getting the project finished.

³⁷ Music master specialising in the cello.

³⁸ Master-on-duty

³⁹ Paranoia was obviously setting in by this stage.



Donald Benson stormed down the corridor again and blew his top about our leaving his lighting equipment in the Boy's Well. He was so furious that he removed all the cable and one light (we were using the other) and banned us using any more of his equipment. I've still three photoflood shots to do. How *can* he be so small-minded?

In the evening we filmed (with the one lamp we still had) the prefect-on-duty locking up. I was the prefect and Weatherhead the cameraman. We created a terrific shadow effect on the wall.

But I discovered that I couldn't act in front of the camera at all. This came as a great shock. I found myself terribly self-conscious, even in those few seconds⁴⁰.

Tuesday 25 June 1963

Having cursed and sworn about Dobbin yesterday, I now feel quite ashamed⁴¹. This morning, I asked him nicely if we could borrow the lights and he said, yes - as long as we looked after them. He seemed so hurt that we hadn't asked before and really very willing to lend them to us.

I shot one scene today - using the lamps in a bedroom. Assembly of course was impossible. I spent much of today cutting and editing on the new machine I've just bought (had to raid my Post Office account). It's incredibly useful: in fact, I don't know how I managed before⁴².

One section is complete. This is pleasing but time is the all-important factor now. We shall only just finish it - if at all - for people to see it by the end of term⁴³.

Wednesday 26 June 1963

I rose early for the remaining morning shots from the church roof⁴⁴ and the road. During the day, I filmed clocks at various times to match the classroom scenes. I edited for the remaining part of day and have now almost reached a standstill until the two reels sent off yesterday are returned developed.

At dusk, there was the most glorious sky and I finished the evening sequence.

⁴⁰ I didn't abandon my ambitions to be a performer (not an actor, but a 'David Frost' type presenter) until the early seventies. But a secret yearning still persists.

⁴¹ Humility is a characteristic not normally associated with film-making.

⁴² And I can't begin to imagine today.

⁴³ Despite everyone's apparent cynicism during the shoot, most people wanted to see the result.

⁴⁴ This involved dragging Canon Roy Sinker from his bed to unlock various church doors.

Thursday 27 June 1963

Finished all editing possible with the available film. Some parts look quite professional. But, as I feared, some shots are far too short. I took one or two of the few remaining shots left and set Tony Paine⁴⁵ on to the graphics for the credits. Things are hotting up.

Friday 28 June 1963

I rang Kodak at Hemel Hempstead to see if I could have a film developed quickly if I took it to the factory myself. I had to talk my way into it - but in the end they said I could use their 'urgent service'. If I drop it over there on Monday, they'll send it back to me by Wednesday.

I'd like to have the whole film finished by General Meeting, a week tomorrow, but that's hoping. For example, Tony Paine, who promised the finished credits today, went home instead and left me high and dry.

Saturday 29 June 1963

Today was our last chance to do Assembly. But no go: the weather was foul. Nothing else added.

Sunday 30 June 1963

Nothing further done, apart from difficulty over the credits lettering. Paine, back from his trip, said he'd have a go before dinner. During dinner, I visited the art room and found a futile attempt which he'd ripped up and shoved in the bin.

So I asked Turtle⁴⁶ to do it instead. She started with good intentions but then said she wouldn't be able to complete it and handed it all back to Paine who produced another futile attempt and gave up again. Great!

Monday 1 July 1963

Filmed 'The End' in the art room, longing to see the result⁴⁷. Jim Samuel said that he would 'unofficially' print the credits for me⁴⁸. This evening he rang to say everything was done. I collected his sheets from his house and they looked fantastic. The final reel goes over to the Kodak factory tomorrow. The film is finished - with the exception of Assembly⁴⁹.



⁴⁵ A sixth-former (Anthony Paine, YG 1963) with artistic leanings.

⁴⁶ Mary Hartley (YG 1963), my contemporary and a talented painter.

⁴⁷ Whether from an artistic point of view or merely a sense of triumph, I cannot recall.

⁴⁸ A professional print setter. I met him in '61 when working at Harts, the Saffron Walden printing firm, during a holiday job. I'd obviously soon learned another of filming's Ten Commandments: *Make use of all your Contacts*.

⁴⁹ This sequence was finally achieved - on a gloriously fine morning with sun streaming through the windows - about two weeks later and dropped into the otherwise completed film. It took about an hour to shoot.