

Filming in historic houses

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Filming can provide significant income for historic properties. In addition to the fees paid to hire the property, evidence indicates that being associated with a film or television drama can be a powerful inducement for international and domestic visitors to visit as a tourist and contribute to day spend

However, filming can also introduce risks to historic buildings, interiors and collections due to the high number of people with a large amount of equipment working under time pressures, as well as potential hazards such as candles, fires, animals, food and drink.

Conservators can help you prepare for filming in historic houses and support you throughout filming.

Filming conservators

Filming Conservators are conservators with experience of providing support to heritage organisations and private historic houses in preparation for and during filming. They are experts at understanding the risks to historic objects and interiors from filming and how to manage them. They can:

- advise which requests made by a production company can be managed to reduce the risk of damage and give substantiation when requests cannot be accommodated.
- advise which areas are suitable for filming, which objects can and should be removed from filming areas and what protection is needed to protect interiors.
- use their knowledge of how film crews work, the hierarchy of the crew members and the equipment they are likely to use
- supervise crew during filming to make sure the contract is being followed, identify any potential issues and agree with the crew ways to manage risks
- help a property prepare for filming by moving objects and installing protection and clean and reinstate the rooms after filming
- make pragmatic decisions on last minute requests from crew by considering risks and thinking of solutions for how the request can be carried out with minimal danger. Filming crews are always asking for new and bizarre things they want to do in historic interiors and even the best planned filming project will have last minute requests!

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Before filming

These guidelines are an overview of the considerations for historic buildings, interiors and collections during filming, but there might also be an impact on neighbours, local roads, bats and other wildlife that should be considered.

Your site

Before filming it is useful to agree if there are any type of filming activities that are not appropriate for your organisation (political, religious etc.)

An assessment of the interiors is useful to identify areas suitable for filming. Some areas will be more robust and better suited to filming. Filming in more fragile areas should only be undertaken subject to conditions being met to reduce risks, such as fragile collections being removed or protected and restrictions on number of people and equipment allowed.

Crew set up

It is not just the area being used for filming that needs consideration. It is likely a number of crew members will need to watch monitors set-up in a room close by to the filming (sometimes known as video village). Space will also be needed for video and sound equipment trolleys (magliners), lighting equipment storage, prop storage and standby prop preparation. The production may also ask to use nearby rooms as green rooms for main cast and supporting artists. Hair and make-up where possible should be encouraged to be set-up in winnebagos outside if rooms with non-historic contents are not available.

Crews will also require space outside for parking and their facilities such as catering and honeywagons (portable toilets). This is unit base and may or may not be in your grounds. A number of vehicles with essential equipment on will need to be parked closer to the house (tech base). They may also want to set up a tea and coffee station close by or park a coffee van in the tech base (called Craft Services). The access to and parking for these vehicles needs to be considered and managed. If there is vehicular movement on site, trackway may be needed to protect grass.

Location scouts

It is likely initial contact will be made by someone from the Locations team. They may be scouting several properties for the same scene. To decide if they want to use your site there may be several visits (recces). The final recce is normally the tech recce. For this visit it is usually the heads of departments that visit and agree how they will facilitate the filming.

There are several departments in a film crew, but the following are the ones that have the most potential impact on the historic interiors and collections. It is useful to consider each department's interests and prepare for the questions they may ask during site visits:

It is important to gather as much information as possible about the film crew's intentions at this point and be clear on what will and won't be possible. If there are loan items in a space the lender should be contacted to gain permission for filming activities and agree any protection if needed. The production company will also want to know about copyright for artworks in the space.

Contracts

The Location Manager, will provide proposals for the work they want to carry out. These agreements are then formalised in a contract which should also itemise agreed fees and access times for the crew. In addition to venue hire fees, consideration should be given to loss of income if the site has to be shut and additional staff costs (including a Filming Conservator). The contract should stipulate the site has the right to stop filming if they consider the activity to put the building, interiors or collections at risk. It is essential to have the contract agreed and signed before crew arrive on site.

Before crew arrival

Before any crew arrive on site, the rooms they will be using need to be prepared by removing any objects too fragile to stay, not wanted in shot or that do not have permission to be filmed. Protection needs to be put on floors, doorways or to protect vulnerable objects. It is a good idea to take lots of photos of interiors to record the condition of floors, paintwork etc. prior to the arrival of the crew. Filming days can be long (normally 12+ hours), it is essential to draw up a staff rota that accounts for this, scheduling staff in shifts with provision for adequate breaks.

Know your film crew

Department

Questions to prepare for

The Sparks, led by the Gaffer and supported by the Best Boy, in charge of electrics

Cable runs, which lights are required inside and outside, if blackout is required for windows and how this can be achieved.

The Grips, led by the Key Grip, in charge of camera movement

Where tracks, dollies or jibs can be used. It is useful to know the weight loading of floors and staircases as dollies and jibs are heavy.

The Art Department, in charge of set and decoration

If flattage (false walls) and other set dressing is required, if redecoration is possible and which collection items they would like removed from the space.

Special effects (SFX) in charge of special effects and props

If candles or fires are allowed and if they can use atmos/haze. Most organisations do not allow the use of haze/atmos in interiors with collections due to trace deposition of particles on objects and surfaces, effect on the environment and the need to deactivate fire detection systems.

The Sound Department led by the Production Sound Mixer

Whether turning fridges, hand dryers or anything else that could interfere with the recording can be turned off. It is useful to point out chandeliers or security beams to Boom Operators.

During filming

There are three different stages to filming:

1. prep when any set building takes place and props are brought in
2. shoot when the filming takes place
3. strike when filming has ended and the props and any remaining equipment is removed.

The stages usually take place on different days, but it is possible for two or even all three stages to take place in the same property at the same time. The Location Manager and department should be on site throughout the entirety of the filming to provide you with a main point of contact for the crew.

1 Prep

The Art Department and Prop Department will be the primary people on site.

There may also be Construction and/or Riggers if flattage or scaffolding is being constructed.

All props should be checked for insect infestations or mould and felts pads put on the feet of props being put on historic floors and surfaces.

Construction of flattage and scaffolding should be carefully supervised.

2 Shoot

Most departments will be on site so make sure you're familiar with all the departments and their responsibilities.

The First Assistant Director (1st AD) is in charge of the logistics of the crew during the filming and in addition to the Location Manager is a good contact to establish to keep abreast with the crew's intentions. It is useful to have a copy of the daily Call Sheet which gives information of the scenes being shot that day and other key information - including when lunch is scheduled!

The crew should be supervised in all spaces with historic interiors and/or collections at all times. It can sometimes be a squeeze to be in the same room as the filming and not be in shot or the eyeline of an actor.

If there are areas you do not want the crew to go in make sure doors are locked or signs are up asking people to keep out, making sure of course that emergency routes are still clear.

3 Strike

This is the time that the props will be packed up and taken away.

Any flattage, scaffolding or other construction will be removed.

After filming

It is common to walk around with the Locations team at the end of a filming project to check all areas used and agree if any damage has been caused (the photos taken at the start are useful for this). Getting a quote for any conservation or repair work should be done quickly so the production company can be charged before it disbands.

It is important to review each filming project after its completion so that any lessons learnt can feed into future projects.