Bygones

On set: A BBC film crew at the Dixies Arms, Lower Bagthorpe, for a scene for the 1981 adaptation of DH Lawrence's Sons and Lovers.
As well as being my first extra job, it was my first job for the BBC and also my first job “on location.”

It was a Sons and Lovers production starring Eileen Atkins and Tom Bell and a couple of dozen of us had to be on set by 8am and you are nobody’s friend at that time of day!

The location was the Dixie’s Arms pub, on School Road, Bagthorpe.

The make-up ladies swooped on us and my hair was scraped back into a Victorian bun and they dressed me in original period costume, including a lace-up corset that squeezed my figure into a strange shape and turned my ample bosom into a bad case of mammary.

I was given a pair of original boots of the day. In danger of losing the heel, someone in the wardrobe department had the foresight to fix the heel back in place from the inside with a steel screw, but didn’t quite get the head down far enough as I was about to find out. I was now told to go and get some breakfast.

I swear I have never seen such an array of food in my life and it was mine for the taking. I dined luxuriously and spent a few hours reading old newspapers left on the “bus turned diner” by the previous users.

I was finally called inside and placed behind a very small two feet square serving hatch through which I had to serve the son “William” a drink and to this end was given a large jug of what looked like shandy.

This initiation into the acting world was an eye-opener for me. I learned the terminology: action; cut; reset; it’s a wrap and QUIET ON SET PLEEEEASE!!!

The tension can be palpable. We re-set that shot so many times I ran out of “shandy”.

Fearful of upsetting anyone by asking for more, I picked up and served from a dark green bottle. Unknown to me it was brandy! When I tell you I have never been a drinker, you can understand why “William” got drunk.

Now we all moved outside and to my astonishment the modernised pub I had arrived at that morning had been changed into what it would have been like back in the day. I hurriedly took this snapshot.

Now came my big chance. I was to walk out on to what had been the car park with a huge basket of bread, walk through the crowded set to a large wooden excitement table, spread it with a tablecloth, put the basket on it, walk back into the pub and return carrying two huge stone flagons of ale.

I can do that! My foot hurt and I tried to walk on my toes but it looked odd so I gritted my teeth. “...aaaand ACTION!”

Out I came hauling the heavy basket, swung it on to a bench and spread the cloth.

“Neenaw neenaw neenaw...”

“CUT!”

The Dixies Arms was at the bottom of a steep hill and we waited until the police car had raced past. Someone was dispatched to hold the traffic back at the top of the hill.

“Reset!”

I folded the cloth and hauled the basket back inside.

I picked up and served from a dark green bottle. Unknown to me it was brandy!

Joy James

“...aaaand ACTION!”

I trotted out of the pub and headed for the table. Down went the basket, out came the cloth and a mopped came pop-pop-pop-pepping up the hill... another runner was sent to stop the traffic.

We were stopped by a train, a motorbike, a load of lads on modern push bikes who stopped dead in the middle of the shot, and finally by a stout grey-suited gent with a small glass of scotch in his hand who asked what we were doing.

And there were other stops too. Sometimes for technical reasons: maybe a bulb blew, then a camera went down or someone fluffed their lines. My foot was now squeaking in blood. And do remember, before I can “re-set” I have to fold up the tablecloth and haul it and the bread basket back inside. I was beginning to get a bit frazzled.

“...aaaand ACTION!”

After several hours, I finally made it. I got the tablecloth spread and smoothed to perfection, heaved the bread basket in situ and was just on my way back with the two very hefty stone flagons of ale when a jet pulled overhead.

“CUT!”

I stopped dead, dropped the flagons on the ground and screamed: “These tables had lain more times than I have!”

The crew roared with laughter and Stuart Burge, the director, laughed loudest. He bid us all go get lunch and we would try again in an hour.

When we got back, the bread basket was empty and the rope in the sky-high trees above had gained a lot of weight.

A few years down the line, Stuart was doing another famous DH Lawrence film, The Rainbow, and mindful of my outburst that day, rang Jack Dermann, my agent and specifically asked for me to play the midwife.

I got my name in THAT production!