

An Extract from *England's Secret Weapon* by Amanda J Field

Throughout both *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* the city is portrayed as the home of modernity and Apollonian rationality, and the countryside as the unchanging site of superstition and irrational behaviour. In the city, each deadly threat has a clear origin: in *Hound*, for example, when Sir Henry's life is threatened, it is from an assassin's bullet, but in the countryside, the threat appears to come from an ancient curse. In some instances parts of the city – such as parks and gardens – are 'appropriated' as countryside to allow the irrational to creep closer to its edges. How the studio portrayed and interpreted these spaces sheds light on 1930s ideas of Victorian England.

The pivotal location that audiences with any knowledge of Holmes wanted to see were the rooms at 221B Baker Street, a space expected to contain all the iconic objects familiar to Doyle readers, such as the Persian slipper full of tobacco, or the jackknife that fixes correspondence to the mantelpiece. Yet in Pascal's script there is no description of the room. Screenplays usually have only pithy, one-line indicators of settings, and these are present for other locations in the film. The graveyard on the moor, for example, is described as ancient and uncared-for: 'most of the tombstones have fallen down; those remaining are crooked and crumbling into decay'. The omission of a description of Baker Street, therefore, is intriguing and it is interesting to speculate whether it was because Holmes was so



embedded in the public imagination that it would be 'taken as read' that the set-designers would know exactly what was required in the construction of his sitting-room. This theory seems to be borne out by the fact that the script equally gives no description of Holmes and Watson themselves, though other characters are briefly summed up: Jack Stapleton, for example, is noted to be 'an intellectual looking young man, pleasant, professorial in speech and manner.'

On-screen, 221B is a representation of the Victorian refracted through ideas of Hollywood interior design. This refraction is apparent in the first scene at Baker Street in *Adventures*. As Billy, the young servant, is sweeping the landing outside Holmes' rooms, there is a ring at the door, and the camera follows Billy's glance over the carved, white-painted banisters, down into the hallway, where Mrs Hudson is opening the double-width front door to admit Watson. The walls of the wide

staircase and hall are painted in light colours, with elegant Georgian or Regency-style panelling, and there is an elaborate multi-branched gasolier hanging from the ceiling. The hallway and stairs are empty apart from an umbrella stand, a circular mirror and a large oil painting. Inside Holmes' sitting room – a vast space – the decor is very different from what one might expect from the 'high Victorian' period, even though all the detective's accoutrements are present. The furniture is dark and heavy, and the mantelpiece has a characteristic Victorian fringe, but the space is uncluttered, the walls are the same light-painted panelling as the hallway, and there are blinds at the windows rather than curtains. This set offers an interesting contrast to that which would be constructed for the Universal films which, although purporting to show Holmes in the 1940s, was to look much more overtly Victorian than the set used by Fox to depict the 1880s. The Fox set for 221B also offers a slightly different perspective on Holmes' character: here he is clearly a gentleman and a fairly well-to-do one. He moves with the times – for example, every book on his shelves looks new, whereas in the Universal films his books are battered and ancient, the implication being that he belongs to the past. The connotation of these gracious, ordered rooms is that London is the home not just of the gentleman, but of rationality. The Georgian or Regency style, a product of the Enlightenment, took its inspiration and motifs from the classical, another age associated with Apollonian rationalism. In the US this architectural style was known as Palladian, Jeffersonian or Grecian: it enjoyed a revival in the 1930s, rendering Holmes' sitting room not only 'period' but fashionable too. The link between the set design and rationality is an explicit one, because the only extended scenes of on-screen deduction take place at 221B, firstly in Holmes' analysis of Dr Mortimer's stick in *Hound*, and then in his first scene in *Adventures*, where he is conducting an experiment to determine which note on the musical scale is intolerable to the housefly.

It might be argued that Twentieth Century-Fox simply made use of the standing sets available on their extensive backlot, and it is true that the majority of the locations used for the two films bear similar traces of Regency design: in *Hound*, the Stapletons' house on Dartmoor is an (unlikely) opulent, double-staircase mansion with classical urns in niches, a huge contrast to the mediaeval architecture of Baskerville Hall; and in *Adventures* Ann Brandon's palatial family home is clearly part of the reconstruction of an entire London square that Fox had built for *Berkeley Square* (1933). Yet these were big-budget A-features for which existing sets could have been extensively customised: the fact that they were not suggests two possible motivations, one concerning historical accuracy and the other concerning the psychological meanings these sets convey. It is quite probable that neo-classical architecture was chosen simply because both films are about 'the past' rather than a 'specific past', which would accord with Zanuck's view that 'nobody buys tickets to see authenticity; they go to be entertained'.

A more interesting theory is suggested by Juan Antonio Ramirez's contention that buildings in the neo-Classical style were felt by Hollywood to be too austere to 'serve as environmental vehicles for romance, passion, and other emotionalised qualities' on which commercially successful films depended. Yet they were chosen here and it is tempting to suggest that they were intended to give the viewer some insight into the personalities of the people who inhabit them: Holmes, who is a 'calculating machine' rather than a human being, and Stapleton, the intellectual who will kill to achieve his ambitions. Stapleton's house not only stores his scientific collection of local flora and fauna but appears to act as a bastion against the intrusion of the irrational, illustrated in the scene of the seance which is brought to an abrupt conclusion by the baying of the hound outside. However, the analogy can only be applied so far, because there are aspects that do not fit this pattern: Ann

Brandon, for example, is a romantic, even melodramatic, character and the classical opulence of her family home probably points only to wealth rather than to austerity of emotion.

Both films present particular locations as ‘unchanging’ by separating them from the contemporary either geographically or psychologically. In *Hound*, it is Dartmoor and Baskerville Hall that are coded as timeless, primitive places because of their isolation and the way they are haunted by the memory of evil deeds. In *Adventures* it is the Tower of London, cut off by fog from the rest of the city and bound to a centuries-old set of traditions, as well as the gardens where Lloyd Brandon and his sister Ann are pursued by the murderer.

The opening title-card of *Hound* warned that Dartmoor was a ‘primitive’ place, and its role is made even more explicit in the script, in which there is a note that reads: ‘it must be borne in mind that the moor with its foreboding atmosphere is the real ‘heavy’ in our story. Every effort should be made in the shooting....to emphasise the eeriness of this strange terrain’. Fox art director Robert Day, chief assistant Hans Peters and a crew of 98 artisans spent seven months constructing a 300 x 200 feet moor on the studio’s ‘cyclorama’ stage.. The pressbook claims that the studio sent three experts to Dartmoor to gather data and then to decide what would have been different ‘in Victorian times’. To emphasise the set’s authenticity, the pressbook also relates a story about Richard Greene becoming lost on the ‘moor’ during filming and having to call out for someone to help him find his way out, a story repeated in many press editorials. Though the story was probably just a publicity stunt, it does help code the moor as a sinister place cut off even from the workaday surroundings of the rest of the studio. Baskerville Hall itself is described in Pascal’s script as ‘just as it was in 1650’: its rooms are lit by candle sconces, ancestral portraits line the walls and the long dining table is overlooked by a vast inglenook fireplace.. This enables a credible flashback to the age of Sir Hugo, for a scene in which he and his companions enjoy a roistering evening around the very same table. The fact that the audience ‘sees’ the events that happened 250 years ago elides the difference between past and present. It is also, of course, instantly recognisable as a typical horror-genre setting, thanks largely to Universal having established the ‘creepy old house’ look in their 1930s horror films.

In *Adventures*, the Tower of London has similar connotations (partly, perhaps, because it had appeared earlier that year in a Universal historical horror film starring Basil Rathbone and Boris Karloff): here the ancient, battlemented building, seen only at night, recalls childhood tales of royal prisoners, executions and, of course, the crown jewels.. In the midst of the modern Victorian city, the Tower’s keepers wear an archaic uniform, and keep intruders at bay not by gates, but by a moat and portcullis. The isolation of the Tower in the fog, and its role of protecting England’s royal heritage, separates it from the contemporary, as effectively as does the physical isolation of Dartmoor. In addition to using the Tower to evoke a space that stands apart from the modern city, *Adventures* codes the murder of Lloyd Brandon and the attempted murder of his sister Ann in this way, by having them take place not on the streets, but in large London gardens thick with trees and undergrowth. During a prolonged chase-sequence, Ann constantly battles with branches that lash against her face, and roots that trip her up, rendering the gardens of the gracious mansion an uncivilised, jungle-like space.

This is an extract from *England's Secret Weapon, The Wartime Films of Sherlock Holmes*, by Amanda J Field

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