



**THE MAKING OF NAPOLEON
AT THE OLD ROYAL NAVAL COLLEGE**



LONDON

Film London's Winona Navin-Holder spoke to Luke Flynn, Estate Operations Manager at the Old Royal Naval College, and Steve Mortimore, Supervising Location Manager, about their shared experiences working on new Ridley Scott epic, *Napoleon*.

Luke, how long did you have *Napoleon* filming with you at the Old Royal Naval College?

Luke Flynn: "The Old Royal Naval College played host to *Marengo* (the working title for *Napoleon*) for a seventeen-day production period, featuring prominently in six scenes filmed over three days. The entire site was utilised very creatively, with the iconic Painted Hall standing in for the magnificent Chateau De Saint-Cloud and the upper grand square transformed into a bustling Parisian Street, complete with citizens enduring cannon bombardment. The production team meticulously recreated historical events, such as the infamous failed assassination attempt on Napoleon near the opera house. Fortunately, glimpses of these carefully crafted scenes have already been seen in the trailer, building anticipation for the film's release and the opportunity to witness the grandeur and historical drama unfold on screen."

Steve Mortimore: "As the film has not been released yet, I won't go into more specifics about the actual scenes we shot with ORNC, you will have to wait until November 22nd for that! But I will tell you they were one of our major London locations. We really did take over the entire site while shooting there, capturing some of the film's key scenes. It was definitely a collaborative effort filming some of the action sequences. For instance we worked closely with Greenwich Film Office, and the Met Police Film Unit, in order to put an intermittent traffic control in place on the A206 Romney Road, to ensure the noise of cannon fire wouldn't distract any passing

drivers and potentially cause an accident."

How much set dressing took place at the venue? Did it look radically different or was it still easily recognisable?

LF: "The production crew dedicated substantial energy to modify the venue's look, creatively enhancing its elements to accurately depict the movie's specific time periods and locations. But while the venue underwent substantial changes, the production team ensured that it still retained elements of its original identity, just with a Napoleonic facelift."

(The cannon fire scene at ORNC)



“External set dressing at the venue involved various elements such as artificial foliage, gravel roads, and numerous French flags, complementing the existing architecture. However, the iconic Painted Hall stayed true to its historical essence by undergoing minimal changes on the inside. Its original, breath-taking appearance remained unaltered, with only a handful of additional elements like prop furniture and a pulpit carefully placed to enhance the film’s atmosphere.

I’d say overall, despite the extensive set dressing, there might be aspects that remain easily recognisable to those familiar with the venue, such as the colonnades and iconic domes.”

In *Napoleon* we see the Old Royal Naval College double for 18th and 19th Century France. What makes the location so successful for filming a period piece like this, and how do you manage a production of this size and scale?

SM: “I have filmed with Old Royal Naval College a few times over the years, but never quite on the scale that we did for *Napoleon*. We totally took over the place



(The Painted Hall at ORNC)

for weeks in order to complete the preparation, filming and reinstatement. The beauty of filming there is that the scale of the site itself, allows for extremely ambitious levels of production design, and logistically complex shoots.

Although of course this can only be achieved with the expertise of all the stakeholders involved.”

LF: “The Old Royal Naval College is easily accessible and well-equipped to handle film crews and equipment. Its convenient location in London makes it a practical choice for filmmakers based in the UK,

while our film-friendly policies, space to stable animals, park technical vehicles and our nature as a private site make it an efficient and visually striking choice for a production of this size and scale.

The site boasts a mix of architectural styles, including Baroque and Palladian elements. Due to its architectural versatility and historical ambiance filmmakers can use different parts of the building complex to serve as a convincing stand-in for various European cities, while the ornate detailing, expansive courtyards, and period-specific structures offer a rich visual palette for filmmakers.

"Additionally, the location's adaptability, wide road and open green areas allows for creative set dressing and manipulation, enabling it to seamlessly portray the essence of different European cities throughout history.

Its rich 17th-century history lends an air of authenticity to the film, immersing viewers in the Napoleonic era. The diverse architectural styles within the site also provide a versatile backdrop, enabling filmmakers to recreate various locations from that period, from grand palaces to military barracks."

How important is it in creating a sense of place, atmosphere and authenticity, to use real locations for a period production like this?

LF: "Using a versatile location like the Old Royal Naval College can be cost-effective for filmmakers, as it eliminates the need to build elaborate sets from scratch or expensive CGI. This can significantly reduce production costs while still delivering visually stunning and historically accurate scenes.

While green screens are still commonly used here, this is usually only to position the local backdrop in a different era and maintain immersion. You don't want to see the modern Canary Wharf

skyscraper skyline in the background of a period production after all!"

SM: "Old Royal Naval College really is a classic filming location, there is nothing quite like it in Central London or even the UK overall. The Baroque architecture was the perfect backdrop for depicting period France. With the buildings natural aged patina, there were just a handful of modern signs to remove, and once you cover the ground with gravel it becomes a Director's playground. You can see some of the scenes we filmed there in the recent trailer, and it really does look authentic to that period.

I really think that Ridley had a lot of fun there shooting the scenes that we did.

It was a real dream come true for me and the team, to get to scout and manage a film of this scale, that was shot entirely, 100% on location, it was unprecedented. We filmed back to back, for 16 weeks, over 35 locations. As well as for Ridley, I think it must have really helped Joaquin too, for him to turn up to these magnificent locations for real, and see them dressed in all their glory, with hundreds of background artists and

(The Painted Hall at ORNC)



dozens of horses. It really must do its part in helping to create movie magic for everyone involved."

Could you tell me a little bit about the location research and receiving process for *Napoleon* as a whole? How many of your locations did you manage to find within London?

SM: "When I first read the script, I just assumed that a large section of it would be filmed in France. Then the producers told me that with the exception of a few weeks in Malta, they wanted to film the entire thing on location across London and the UK, with no studio set builds used at all. This was going to be an unprecedented challenge I thought, but good fun. The first course of action was to break down the script with the Production Designer (Arthur Max), leaving us with a comprehensive list of all of the locations that we would need. The next step, was to research what these locations would have looked like at that particular time in history. I saved a large selection of images, which myself and Arthur then went through, picking which references best reflected the time period we were trying to evoke. These were then the benchmarks we used going forward into our location search. Next it was a case of going through my personal location library from over the years,



selecting familiar locations that I felt best reflected our references, and of course scouting out some new locations too.

I am still astounded, even after all these years, by what London and the UK has to offer for replicating foreign countries. We are truly blessed here, and I guess that is why London has evolved into a vital hub for international filming.

After many weeks scouting the chosen locations with Arthur, we then did a presentation to Ridley over video conference, as he was still out in Los Angeles at the time. Then the following

(ORNC exterior)

month when Ridley got to the UK, we took him to all of the shortlisted locations to start locking them down. I think we ended up with around 10 London locations in the end, and around 25 across the rest of the UK, so 35 in total."

Ridley Scott is widely considered to be an auteur within film production, does working with a director that has such a clear sense of aesthetic change your job at all as a Location Manager?

SM: "I used to do TV Commercials for his company (RSA Films) back in the late 1990s and it was definitely good training for getting into feature films. I also did *All the Money in the World* with Ridley a few years back, with just a few locations, so that was a good pre-*Napoleon* test!

He is very matter of fact, the location either works for him or it doesn't, and if it doesn't, then you just move on and find an

alternative. There is not much 'selling' a location to him, as is the case with many other directors. He is also very visual, it's all about the storyboards when working with Ridley. With many locations we would meet for a coffee just beforehand, and he would sketch precisely what he was looking for at that particular location. We would then head off and try and make the location work as per the sketch. Often when you asked him a question regarding a scene at a particular location, the answer would be – "look at the storyboard!"

His storyboards are also a piece of art, on most other films you just shred the storyboards afterwards, with Ridley's you frame them then and hang them on the wall, they are a true masterpiece to treasure!"

(Joaquin Phoenix as Napoleon)

How would you both describe the overall filming experience on *Napoleon*? Were there any particular challenges within the shoot that your team had to 'problem-solve' around? Or any particular highlights from the experience?

I think it must have really helped Joaquin, turning up to these magnificent locations for real

LF: "Having joined the Old Royal Naval College team just a few weeks before the production began, this experience was truly eye-opening for me! Getting to witness the intricacies of

filmmaking up close, particularly on the grand scale of *Napoleon* was an amazing way to begin my role here. Thankfully, my very experienced predecessor, Ian Allchin, was also there to guide me through the process, and the locations team put in an immense effort to ensure the site was taken care of and prioritised throughout, whilst still meeting the objectives of the production.

Despite the level of planning that always goes on before shooting, I quickly learned that flexibility is crucial to achieving the exceptional results that are seen on screen. One standout moment of



'problem solving' for me, was the discussion around the assassination attempt scene, just a few days before shooting. The request for a more realistic explosion, and an example video test, had left us slightly taken aback when considering the proximity of the explosion to our buildings. However after collaborative efforts, the result (which fortunately for us will have involved the magic of CGI), became a testament to our teamwork."

SM: "You can actually spot this scene in the trailer, where Napoleon is seen standing over a carriage which is on fire. It was definitely a complex sequence to

shoot, which involved rigging an SFX explosion with a large controlled fire. When you are creating a controlled SFX explosion just metres away from a heritage listed building, you can imagine the safety precautions that were needed, nothing can be left to chance. But equally important was the trust and understanding from Luke and his team which made it possible."

Filming at the Old Royal Naval College is always a great experience for me and the crew as a whole. Luke and his team just seem to find a way to make it work, whatever the ask, which is really important for a locations team.

Location Manager Emily Coldwell, Assistant Location Manager Sam Milner and Locations Assistant Harriet Stovold from my team, were on location day-to-day, managing the running of the site for the production. They worked extremely closely with Luke and his team over many weeks to set things up for an incredibly smooth shoot."

LF: "Witnessing Ridley Scott and Joaquin Phoenix collaborating closely was truly exhilarating. The whole experience provided me with a fresh perspective on a production team's dedication to making even the most seemingly

(The assassination attempt shot at ORNC)



insignificant details shine. It highlighted the extensive lengths everyone went to in order to create what I'm sure will be a truly remarkable film."

As a location are you keen to continue hosting more films of this size in the future? Perhaps you already have some exciting filming projects lined up?

LF: "As a venue, we are enthusiastic about maintaining our longstanding tradition of hosting a diverse range of feature films and TV shows. While the recent strikes have posed challenges, causing a slowdown in productions, we are still eagerly anticipating the release of several projects that were filmed here. Among them are George Clooney's biographical sports drama film *The Boys in the Boat*, the final season of *The Crown*, *Bridgerton* season 3, and Disney's upcoming series *The Ballad of Renegade Nell*. We remain committed to providing a platform for such noteworthy productions, showcasing our dedication to the world of cinema and television."

Interview by Winona Navin-Holder

Napoleon will be in cinemas from November 22nd, watch the trailer [here](#).

You can find further details about filming at the Old Royal Naval College [here](#).

