



# On the way to Hollywood

With talk of a merger between Shepperton and Pinewood, could the holy grail of a Hollywood UK finally be in sight? Rob Buckley talks to major studios to find out what they see in their crystal balls

**S**tudios are hot right now. When Michael Grade and his backers bought up Pinewood in February, you'd have been forgiven for asking why. Now they're sniffing round Shepperton. But they're not alone; the all-devouring Liberty is also looking at Shepperton. Is a "Hollywood UK" actually about to happen after so many false starts?

"I expect, if you've talked to Pinewood, they've said they're pretty busy," says Edwin Shirley, md of Three Mills Island Studios. "There's stuff here we only get a look at when they're busy." He's not wrong. Pinewood is chocabloc right now pulling in the likes of the Henson Company's *Dinotopia* and Paramount's *Tomb Raider*.

But features aren't enough. Julie Wicks, Elstree's director of production, points out "you need a mixture of the regular work and the big work to survive. You may have a big feature taking up the whole studio for a few months, but during that time no other clients can come in. And the only way you get new work is by exposing clients to your studio."

In the US, many of the studios are now full of TV work, since Canada, Australia and the UK (on a good day) have been so successful at poaching film work. Similarly, a Hollywood UK needs a strong TV base to support it in the lean times.

So part of Grade's plan is to get in on the television act. Indeed, one of the first things he did after taking over was declare his desire to make

Pinewood a television production village. He brought in Steve Gunn, ex of Teddington - perhaps with the ambition for Pinewood to take on Teddington's former mantel as *the* TV studio of choice. "Of course, we've been involved in TV drama for a while," says md Steve Jaggs, "but since Steve's been on board, we're pretty much focused on light entertainment television."

This extra TV production will be "an added facility, not an alternative," maintains Jaggs. It's the big features that Pinewood still specialises in; more TV is as yet a potential sideline. And, in keeping with the concept of Hollywood UK, bringing the work in still involves "almost acting like the film commission" when in LA. "First and foremost," says Jaggs, "I'm attracting people to this country, because otherwise I don't stand a chance of getting the job."

This is the problem that's inspiring Grade to consider a merger between Pinewood and Shepperton. It's hard enough to get people to come to the UK, let alone to a specific studio. But if you can make the studio large enough by merging the biggest together, you almost have a Hollywood UK for Hollywood US to come to.

While all Grade will say is that he'll let us all know what he's up to when he's ready, Shepperton is just as quiet about the whole deal. Shareholders Ridley and Tony Scott, though, are clearly also keen for a Hollywood UK - which is why the Liberty





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Media bid, angled at television production, isn't going down with them as well.

The "if it's good for Britain, it's good for all of us" view is supported by Elstree's Wicks, who even gave Jaggs a guided tour of her studios recently. "Wouldn't it be good if we all had the same facilities?" she asks. "I'm just glad the business is coming to the UK." A looser, informal Hollywood UK rather than one big studio system for the whole country would be to her advantage.

The big guns like George Lucas are haunting Elstree's corridors at the moment. Lucas, currently shooting the second of his latest *Star Wars* trilogy, has just arrived to film some blue-screen work. "We've the only sound-proofed, 80-foot high studio in the world," boasts Reid. Another feature he's considering reviving is the water tank out the back. "The screen behind it was taken down by Stanley Kubrick when he was shooting *The Shining*." If a Hollywood UK is ever to take off, it's niche services such as these that will bring the work in.

US-style support from local authorities for filmmakers means the East-End-based Three Mills Studios also gets a steady stream of film work. "The council's been very helpful. Producers can decide to shoot location work nearby, then come straight in for studios work," maintains Edwin Shirley. Eleven films at the Edinburgh festival were shot at the studios. *Lock, Stock...* was a local on the manor, while broadcast regulars *London's Burning* and *Bad Girls* have permanent bases at the studios.

By contrast, Bray's Beryl Earl doesn't have a helpful council nor massive sound stages so most of her work is from the UK. She has to rely on mailshots and the occasional trip out to bring in the work. For her, the year has been busy, "although it's slowing

down at the moment. Maybe it's the time of year. We can't attract big features, so we go for smaller films and television. Twickenham and Elstree are closer to town, so that's an advantage for them."

The Film Council gets a thumbs-up from most studios as a way of encouraging overseas companies to consider the UK's studios as well as its talent. "It represents the facilities part of the business, which we've needed for a long time," says Steve Jaggs, who sits on council committees.

But Elstree's Reid is one voice of dissent to a chorus of mild approval for the government's efforts, which include redefining what a British film is to qualify for tax breaks. "Canada and Australia get much better tax breaks. I can see the government's point of view: if it gave film those kind of tax breaks, it would have to give every industry tax breaks. But other countries manage to do one without the other.

"If they just put a few million in, they would get hundreds of millions back from all the films that would be able to come here. Because, right now, we're losing out, particularly to Ireland." And although it's too early for Reid to judge the Film Council, he thinks lobbying government for "a level playing field" should be high on the list of its priorities, if a Hollywood UK is ever to happen.

With at least some government backing and with more and more customers for their facilities, the film studios are feeling the first green shoots of revival. A Pinewood-Shepperton alliance bid, together with tax changes, might just be the catalyst to a full-scale resurgence. With the Film Council on their side, the studios could soon be ready for real growth and Neville Reid could just need *two* water tanks...

