



CHAPTER FOUR

The Amazons Attack

My father said that his first impression of the film crew was ‘What an awful mess of trucks and weird people!’

He’d just come from his office in the electronics industry where everybody drove smart cars and wore suits with neat ties. Dad didn’t even own a pair of denim jeans, let alone purple bell-bottoms. One of The Arthur Ransome Society members took one look at his footage of the making of *Swallows & Amazons* and said, ‘It looks like Woodstock.’

Woodstock on wheels, except that unlike a music festival everyone had to keep quiet when filming was in progress. The notion of ‘Free Love’ was virtually typed on the Call Sheet. Goodness knows what the crew got up to in Ambleside. None of the men on the crew wore peace pendants, or behaved like Dylan the Rabbit from *The Magic Roundabout*, but they smoked cigarettes continuously.

We children were all staunchly anti-smoking, particularly Sten, whose father had a ‘No Smoking’ sign on the front door of their house in Whiteway – even though it happened to be called *Lucifer Lodge*. Kit showed us how to sabotage a cigarette. We would use the tweezers on her Swiss Army knife to remove a bit of tobacco from the end, and would insert an unlit match-head before stuffing the tobacco back inside. The cigarette would then be returned to the victim’s packet. Soon after the cigarette was lit and a good smoke was being enjoyed, the match-head would suddenly ignite and flare up, terrifying everyone in the vicinity. We got Gareth Tandy good and proper.



Dad and me painting.

Dad couldn't bear the notion of hanging around all day, so he brought some watercolours with him to do what he never normally had time for, while looking after us.

My mother had to leave that Tuesday to spend four days at the Bath and West Show – a long-term commitment that could not be cancelled. By this time she had been working for Harlech Television (or HTV, as the station became known) for about four years. She started with the company as an 'In Vision Announcer', reading the News with Martyn Lewis from the studio in Cardiff, before moving on to present her own children's programme called *It's Time for Me*. By 1973 she was presenting a women's afternoon programme made in Bristol called *Women Only*, with Jan Leeming. They had to host the HTV stand at regional agricultural shows. I'm not sure what the

farmers thought. They were meant to be a celebrity highlight for rural communities.

I have a horrible feeling that in this Woodstock-like atmosphere, where my father was feeling out of place, I took on my mother's role and got a little bit too bossy in the school bus. Sten didn't respond to my command that we needed to get on with our lessons, so I took his books out of my desk, where they'd been kept for some reason.

The result was a head-on attack from Sten, who must have been so offended that he not only fought me but would not let go. Perhaps this was a good sign, in that we had become like a real family. Perhaps it was because the balance had been tipped by our real families turning up. Sten's father had arrived with his little sister. My little sisters were playing outside too. Perhaps it had something to do with the red and yellow sweets we had started eating on the bus.

Dad said that Sten was always picking fights. He *was* an eight-year-old boy. '*Lessons went on till lunch,*' I wrote. '*We were just settling down and Mrs Causey went upstairs to get Sten down for more lessons. A fight started again.*' This time Sten attacked poor Mrs Causey but he calmed down a little in due course. '*More lessons came after that excitement.*'

Luckily for Claude, we were filming the scenes on Wild Cat Island where the Amazons attack, '*when we fell flat on our faces and the Amazons' arrows flew over our heads.*' Our aggression could be constructively utilised.

We loved this scene, and it was good that Nancy and Peggy had at last arrived on Wild Cat Island. They were using the hazel bows made for them on site by Bob Hedges, which can't have been very flexible, but my parents both knew how to use the long bow. They had been taught how to shoot in about 1958 by their neighbour Tony Norris and his wife Cecily who encouraged them to practice every evening on their long and beautifully cut lawn in the village of Clent in Worcestershire, where I was later born. They joined the Worcestershire



Mum teaching Lesley how to shoot.

Archery Society where they gained further experience of shooting at 60 yards, while making life-long friends. I had no idea that archery would play a pivotal role later in my life.

Arthur Ransome learned to shoot as a boy on Belle Isle on Windermere, whereas Mum had given the Amazons archery lessons in the field outside the bus.

It looks pretty scary on the big screen when those arrows, fletched with green parrot feathers, zip over our heads. Much to Kit's disappointment, these were actually fired by Terry Wells and another Prop-man.

They strung up fishing line in the direction and precise angle at which the arrows were to fly and pulled it taut. Next, they firmly attached loops of nylon to the arrows and literally shot them down the invisible line. This ensured that we would not actually get hit, but it was quite thrilling.

After being on location for more than two weeks, this was only the second day that Kit and Lesley had appeared in front of the camera. The waiting around must have been pretty frustrating for them.

‘David Wood came up today,’ Suzanna noted in her diary. *‘He was the writer of the script. He knew Anna and Marilyn. Anna is my agent and drama teacher and Marilyn was the producer of the Treasure Seekers, a Jackanory I once did.’*

Mum was rather in awe of David Wood, since he had played Johnny in *Z Cars*. She hadn’t actually seen *If...* but had watched him on *Jackanory*, the BBC children’s programme, when Suzanna appeared in the photo captions illustrating the story. Suzanna had also taken part in an episode of the 1972 anthology series *The Edwardians* concerning the life of the author E. Nesbit, who happened to be a friend of Arthur Ransome. That episode and another, about ‘Daisy’, Countess of Warwick, played by Virginia McKenna, were directed by James Cellan Jones – another film-maker who was passionate about classic book adaptations.

Wednesday 30th May – Fourteenth day of filming

I must have lost my pen, for this diary entry on the making of the film is written in pencil.

I woke up and dressed. After breakfast the mini-bus took us to our usual location. It was horribly wet. I did one and a half hour’s lessons and was then taken to the island to clean fish. In this scene we could talk to each other about them.

Although we had a late start it was a good day, a day when Claude encouraged us to improvise. The dialogue about preparing perch, in the little scene set on the rocks at the northern end of Peel Island, is our own.

Suzanna was very good at gutting fish. She is not a remotely squeamish person, in fact she loves snakes and other reptiles. A stoic,

who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster, she is probably the most gutsy film actress there is. No fuss or over-long scenes for her. I was more interested in examining the high dorsal fin of the perch and could have spent all morning standing on the rock. I knew Arthur Ransome used a line drawing of one of the perch he caught as a book illustration, a perfect one.

Claude did not take many 'takes'. His aim was to get fresh performances. He wanted us to react rather than act. By this time, he had started to film the rehearsal, and then one 'take' as a back-up, to give the Film Editor an option. Then he would change the camera angle. It is probably a good policy when filming with children, as charm is difficult to replicate. Richard must have been pleased to hear that we gained a reputation as 'One Take Wonders' on *Swallows* because cans of 35mm film stock did not come cheap.



On Peel Island with David Blagden, our Sailing Director.

When it came to the scene in which we returned to the camp to find the abrupt note from Captain Flint, Claude took me to one side and suggested that I add a line of dialogue at the end without letting the others know. He told me to say – ‘*And he used my crayons too.*’ I wish he hadn’t. The secret made me self-conscious, and I did not deliver the line well.

We stayed on the island while they set up for the night scene when the Swallows are huddled together, under canvas, discussing by candlelight how they could win the war. Looking back on it, my line was straight out of a guidance manual on how to conduct naval warfare. ‘*If there was only something we could do that they could not. That would help.*’ That was the last scene of the day. And this speech was key.

I’m not sure why but I described it as being ‘*very strange in the tent.*’ Unlike real siblings, the four of us had never been together in such a confined space. It was a bonding experience.

Thursday 31st May – Fifteenth day of filming

After leaving Oaklands, we arrived at the location. We changed into our costume. After some lessons we did some filming but not much. We had lunch. After lunch we filmed on the pontoon. It was the dawn scene when the Amazons were calling us in.

How do you film two girls sailing a thirteen-foot dinghy, talking to their brothers who are sailing along in another small dinghy, while calling out to two other girls in red bobble hats dancing about on a wooded island that both the small boats are approaching?

The scene looks so simple on paper. It is the one when the Swallows sail back to Wild Cat Island with the captured *Amazon* to find Nancy in a fury and Peggy anxious to get home. A single page of script.

My lines were –

Titty: Nancy looks as if she’s dancing with rage. What’s that thing fluttering?

Susan: It's one of our blankets.

Titty: They're surrendering! They're surrendering! It's a white flag.

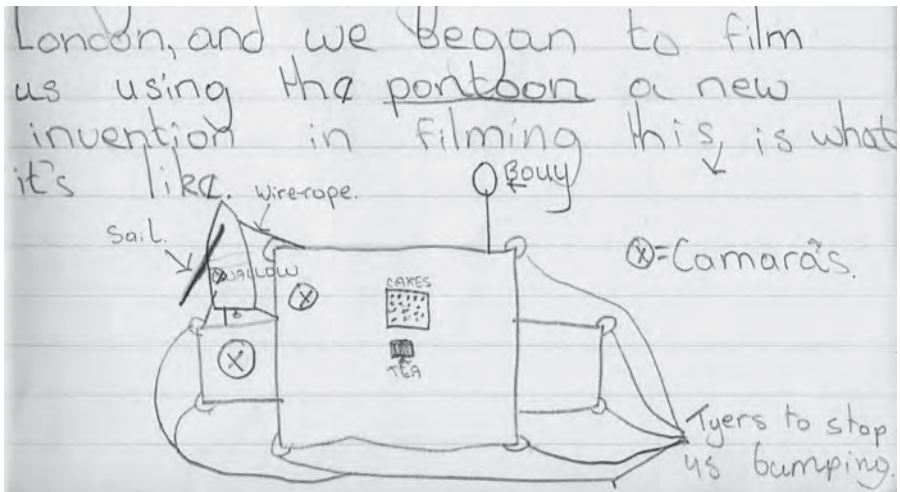
Claude soon discovered that he was shooting the most complicated of sailing scenes, on a cold grey day in the Lake District.

It is extremely difficult to describe how he managed this, but I will attempt to do so. There was no room in the dinghies to film us sailing, unless a cameraman was sitting in the bows. For this scene and others, a decent 'two-shot' featuring the characters sailing one dinghy calling to another beyond them needed to be captured from a third vessel, preferably one lashed alongside.

The production had a pontoon especially built for this purpose, skippered by Ernie Russell who was in charge of the support boats. It was basically a twenty-foot raft, equipped with outboard engines and surfaced with a number of standard flat camera boards. It was rectangular but with added arms on either side.



Swallow lashed to the camera pontoon on Coniston.



Suzanna's sketch of the pontoon in her diary, 1973.

The idea of this cross-shaped platform was to enable Claude to film us either side-on, from astern, or across the bows of the dinghy, which was wired by its keel to the pontoon. The camera was normally on a tripod but could be mounted on a short section of track.

Electric lighting was not something that could be used on the water, but two large reflector boards were always deployed to ensure our faces were not hidden in shadow.

As well as the Director and camera crew, the Sound Recordist and 'Boom Swinger' needed to be aboard this pontoon, along with Sue the Continuity girl, Costume and Make-up, obviously the two boatmen who drove it, and David Blagden, the Sailing Director. He had to work with Claude, the wind and the boatmen, so that we were sailing while the pontoon travelled with us. This was tricky enough on open water. If we were near the shore it could become more difficult.

As you can imagine the dinghy could easily start to sail away from the clumsy pontoon – or worse. Our mast socket broke that first day. They should have had my father advising them. He sat quizzically watching from the shore.

The first time we shot a sailing sequence using the camera pontoon, the film crew put on their life jackets, trudged down the jetty with all

their equipment and settled on board before we were brought along by my mother. She handed me over and, looking down at the crew, asked in her loud, clear voice, “Have you all done wee-wee?” The crew looked at Suzanna and I, looked at each other and all got off again. Claude was not amused.

Although we had all read the book *Swallows and Amazons*, and were devoted to adhering to every detail, no-one remembered that John and Titty sailed the captured *Amazon* back to Wild Cat Island. She had a centreboard which was a new thing for the Walkers, so in the book Mate Susan opted to helm *Swallow*, their familiar boat.

I wish this had been detailed in the script. In the film, John was with Roger in *Swallow* while Susan and I were in the *Amazon*. Claude endorsed this because he was trying to achieve a very difficult ‘three-shot’ featuring Susan in *Amazon*, the boys in *Swallow* and the Amazons on Wild Cat Island. He was relying on Simon, who was aged eleven, to keep sailing *Swallow* in exactly the right position while a stiff wind was blowing up Coniston Water.



The camera pontoon on a sunnier day.

This wasn't as easy as it looks. *Swallow* kept racing ahead of the pontoon. It can be gusty around Peel Island and the rocks can be lethal. Sten was on lookout, but he also had to deliver his lines. Simon had wind and did brilliantly. Suzanna sailed well too. We were suddenly whizzing along. She had no previous experience of sailing the *Amazon*. No-one had remembered this sequence when we practised before filming began.

Meanwhile Gareth Tandy, the Third Assistant Director, was standing-by on Peel Island with Kit and Lesley. He had to hide in the bushes for ages, and cue them at just the right time. The girls had to deliver their lines while jumping from rock to slippery rock to keep up with *Swallow*, the camera and the story.

In the photograph opposite, you can see the pontoon with its outboards and odd cross panels, while Susan climbs onto the *Amazon*. Here there are at least twelve crew on board.

By this time Costume, Make-up and our chaperone would have been in a separate safety boat, which would mill about with the life



Wearing our life jackets in the safety boat.

jackets, sunhats and warm clothes that we wore between set-ups. The crew also started off wearing life jackets, but they were soon discarded. We had been issued with dangerous things, old BOAC inflatable vests with so many flappy straps that you were at risk of being trapped underwater.

Claude also had the inevitable problem of modern boats coming along. To avoid this we had one or two men in zoomy motorboats that could zip across the open water to ask vessels to move clear of the shot.

Even with this control you can imagine what happened. We would rehearse, line up ready to go for a take, with everyone in position – and a fibreglass motorboat would roar across the lake, leaving us all rocking in its wake. Then it rained.

Friday 1st June – Sixteenth day of filming

We woke up very late but I did remember to say 'rabbits'. We arrived and changed into our costume. The first scene we did was day-night filming in the harbour. We had the 'leading lights'. After lunch we filmed with the Amazons, when we gave them back the Amazon. Day-night filming was done again. I did my big scene when I captured the Amazon.

The Secret Harbour looks south over Coniston Water to the hills of North Lancashire. It has to be one of my favourite places on Earth. Bringing a small dinghy in there gives you a special feeling either of exploration or of coming home. You need to go there when no-one else is about.

Our secret of Secret Harbour was that although many of the scenes are set at night we only ever filmed them during the day. This was achieved by using the technique called 'Day-for-Night' filming. Filters were put over the camera lens so that it looked as if we were in the dark even though the scene was shot in broad daylight. This had obvious advantages.

Filming at night is exciting, but very tiring. It demands considerable lighting setups, which would have been impossible on Peel Island as they could not get a generator out there. In mid-summer, it doesn't begin to get dark until very late. Children are only permitted to work certain hours, and need to be given several rest days after any night-filming by law. And yet much of *Swallows and Amazons*, including the most dramatic scenes, takes place at night.

I remember Claude and Denis Lewiston being intensely absorbed in perfecting our Day-for-Night sequences, which were particularly tricky as many of them were set out on the water. Denis started the day with a scene that was on the island, yet demanded that the camera looked out across the lake. He explained that ideally he needed constant, bright sunlight, which would look like moonlight reflected on the ripples of the water. What he didn't like were cloud banks. And for this we would wait. And wait and wait. And waiting, while out on the water or in a confined space, can be hard for children. In the scene where the Swallows set up the leading lights, Denis had to accept the clouds. It looks fine, as the sequence is set as it is getting dark rather than at the dead of night. However, the fluffy white clouds in the scene where the Amazons arrive look a bit odd.

Even on the island, the Day-for-Night shots would take some time to line up. The candle lanterns had to be boosted with battery-operated light bulbs. If you look at the lantern in Susan's tent you can see a black electric wire coming off it, and even spot a small light-bulb if you are watching on the Big Screen. You don't notice this because your attention is on the dialogue but it can easily be spotted. You might think it would be a distraction for us children but we were all quite down-to-earth and the technical detail kept our interest and our minds on our work.

It was the Amazons' big day, with Kit emanating leadership as she portrayed Nancy Blackett, with all the confidence, grace and rugged beauty Arthur Ransome must have either known or envisaged.

'By Gum, Able-seaman – I wish you were on my crew.'

There was quite a bit of dialogue for Lesley who played Peggy. She did well, but acting opposite Suzanna Hamilton is always easy. It's like rowing in a crew led by an excellent stroke or having a good man at the helm. The part of the practical Susan was not a charismatic one, but Suzanna anchored us all. Her own performance was absolutely faultless.

I had much to react to but not much to say. I did manage to handle the *Amazon* by myself and the long shot when I captured her was achieved in one take. A triumph at the end of an exhausting day.

Saturday 2nd June – Seventeenth day of filming

After waking, dressing and eating we went off in the mini-bus. Sten was sick on the way. We changed into our costume. It was a horrible day. We put on oilies and went sailing. We rehearsed the scene when the Swallows set off to capture Amazon. After lunch we filmed that scene. As I was pushing them off I slipped on a stone and fell in the water up to my waist. Everybody laughed but I went on waving them goodbye.

If it is tricky navigating in and out of the Secret Harbour, leaving from the Landing Place under sail can prove even more hazardous. You need a decent shove to get going so you can catch the wind, escape from snaring tree branches and avoid the danger of flat rocks lurking just under the surface. This was my job on a rainy, grey day with a telescope in one hand.

In the finished film you don't see the shot when I slipped in the water up to my waist, and kept on shoving. The '*Don't forget about the lights*' scene had to be re-shot on a sunnier day.

What you see is a long-shot, on a grey day, with Titty waving furiously from the shore as *Swallow* flies away from Wild Cat Island. You cannot see that my dress is soaking wet, but the trees on the island indicate just how windy it is. While Susan is waving back, Roger is

looking out for rocks for all he is worth. John is sailing hard, running with the wind, with the boom right out and white water on his bow. He hung on, as he had to, until *Swallow* passed the big rock, before coping with a massive, dramatic jibe. You see him rise to handle this, while Susan ducks. She needed to. It was so violent the mast nearly broke, but John 'scandalised' and, spilling excess wind, sailed on. The film cuts to two closer shots of the jibe taken on the sunny day, then cuts back to the long-shot when Susan bobs up and *Swallow* sails at speed, north up Coniston towards dark clouds and rain over Langdale. It's very exciting.

My father watched all this from the shore, knowing the risks, knowing Sten wasn't a strong swimmer. I'm afraid that he thought that Claude overestimated David Blagden's abilities. Dad was of the opinion that crossing the ocean was not quite the experience needed for gaff-rigged sailing dinghies, which could jibe viciously without warning when wind blustered down from the fells. He was concerned about our safety.

But Simon was proving himself yet again as a very good sailor. He was totally confident. You can tell – even from a distance – how calm he was, how instinctively he read the wind. He knew it would hit him with force as he left the lee of the island.

These wet windy days were a worry to the Producer and a challenge for the crew. They had already lost quite a bit to the rain. Claude was always trying to find a way of making the best use of his time, while David Bracknell, his First Assistant Director, had to make things happen. The practicalities of each day rested on his shoulders.

Coordinating our transport out to the pontoon so that while the camera crew were never waiting for us, we were not missing time at our lessons, would have been difficult. Even getting the tea urns out to the island twice a day must have been a struggle. I'm not sure what we did about anyone wanting the loo while we were out on the lake.

Working in mauve trousers, with a Motorola on his hip, David maintained safety and kept things going, whatever the weather.

“Quiet. Quiet, please!” he would call before each take, then “Camera? Sound?”

“Running,” the Sound Recordist would confirm.

“Mark it!”

The clapperboard would be named.

“Scene one hundred and twenty-one, take one!”

It was snapped shut before Claude whispered, called, or at times shouted, “Action!”

Then off we’d go, in this case simply to fulfil the stage direction ‘*Swallow speeds towards Rio*’. And the rule was to keep going – whatever happened – come the hell of slippery rocks or high water.

Claude finally barked, “Cut!”

David would then take over command and set up either for a re-take or a subsequent shot. Once a scene was completed he’d move the crew on for a new sequence.

David Bracknell was very experienced. He’d worked on a number of hugely popular *Carry On* movies, which were made at a terrific rate. Prior to *Swallows & Amazons* his credits included *Carry On Abroad*, *Carry On At Your Convenience* (I’d seen this at school; it’s all about lavatories), *Carry On Henry* and *Carry On Loving*, with Kenneth Williams, Sid James and Charles Hawtrey. He’d worked on *Far from the Madding Crowd* with Julie Christie, Alan Bates and Terence Stamp, *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* with Janet Suzman and Peter Bowles, and *Battle of Britain*, which starred Michael Caine, Susannah York and Laurence Olivier. We were in capable hands.

My father recognised this, watching patiently from the base camp with my younger sisters. I fear it must have been cold and boring for them, but we were all together and did have a chance to explore Westmorland at the weekend.

Sunday 3rd June – A day spent exploring with my family

It was Sunday and a much-needed, formal unit day off. It was also a day of rest for the ‘Artistes’ as Claude called us. The crew called us ‘Saucepans’. Saucepan lids: Kids. Cockney rhyming slang. There was a lot of that about in Ambleside that year.

When I wandered across the road I found my parents still in bed, exhausted. To keep me busy, Mum had me writing letters to my Headmistress, Sister Ann-Julian and to my Housemistress, Sister Allyne. Amazingly, I did.

My father’s idea of a day out in the Lake District was to drive over the hills and up the Hard Knott Pass, taking car rugs, a picnic and his volcano. This is a brilliant item of equipment with which you can boil enough water to make a cup of tea using an old newspaper. I am sure I’ve read somewhere that Arthur Ransome had one. My mother just pulled on her Charlotte Mason College of Education sweatshirt and came too.



Riding on the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway.

The highlight of the day was a trip on the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway, through the National Park to the sea and back. The historic line was opened in 1875 to ferry iron ore from the mine near a place called Boot to the coast by steam locomotive. My father has always loved steam. He was also thrilled about the self-timing gadget on his new camera.



Hardknott Fort, which Titty Altounyan's grandfather W. G. Collingwood helped to excavate.

We went the rest of the way back. Again we travelled through the pass. On the way back we made some tea. We went back and met a sheep on the way and fed him. We went to the hotel and Mummy got her camera back. We went home to supper and went to bed.

I seem to have done a lot of went-ing in my diary. I was reading Charlotte Brontë, and you can pick up ‘*again we travelled*’ strains of English nineteenth-century writing.