



**Left: Chris Burt, *Morse* Producer (L) with an assistant on location at Braunston Lock No 2:** His enquiry-call at Braunston Marina was to have many unforeseen consequences. (Tim Coghlan)

**Below: *Morse* at an exhibition on Oxford's criminal history:** It is here that he attends a lecture by the attractive American Dr Millicent Van Buren on the 1859 Oxford Canal murder of Joanna Franks, and convinces himself that the wrong people – the boatmen – were convicted and hung. But before he can make his point to her, he becomes ill and is rushed to hospital with a burst peptic ulcer. (Carlton TV)

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y first encounter with the Morse circus – for circus it was indeed to prove – was on the morning of Tuesday the 23rd September, 1997, a sunny early autumn day. One of our staff came into the

marina office to report that a couple were seen wandering around the yard, taking lots of photographs, and showing a much greater interest in the place than your average tourist. It was somewhere near the low-point in my fifteen-year battle with the local district council over the marina and our plans to expand the moorings. Already four Braunston parish councillors, including one who was also the district councillor, had been banned from entering the marina through solicitors' letters, because of taking unauthorized photographs to be used for purposes I saw as potentially harmful to the marina. My first thought on hearing of our latest visitors was, 'Here we go again!'

I went out into the yard, and there by our small Georgian dry dock was a tall smart-casually dressed man in his fifties – sporting a particularly fine black leather jacket. With him was a glamorous female who was equally tall, but somewhat younger and rather leggy to boot. He was snapping away with a large expensive camera, when I went and asked him his business. I was somewhat knocked over when the man introduced himself as Chris Burt, the current producer of the *Inspector Morse* television series. He told me he had been recommended to look at our historic marina as a potential filming location for the new episode they were planning to film the following summer – *The Wench is Dead*. The recommendation had come from none other than the author Colin Dexter himself. My tune immediately changed to the flip-side. I offered our finest coffee and the full use of the marina facilities. Also I would take them round personally and show them what we could offer – both at the marina and the canals round about. And they could go ahead and take as many photographs as they liked.

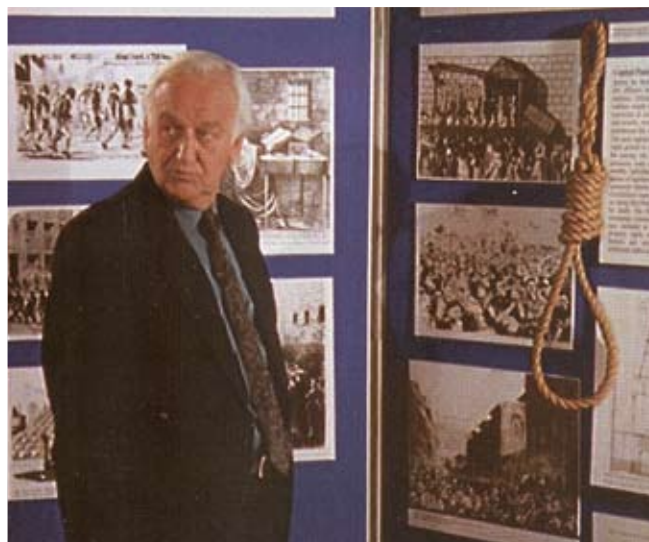
#### **A drink and a think**

After a good look round the historic marina dry docks and warehouses, I suggested we visited Braunston's ancient canal-side inn – the *Admiral Nelson* – for lunch. Given the prominence of pubs in most Morse episodes, I told them that this one would go down a treat – just the place for the good inspector to 'drink to think.' So there we went, and sat outside by the lock, watching the last of the summer winding – as the boats rose or fell before us. On

a sunny day, this is always a busy spot, with the canal-world at its best. Chris Burt could hardly contain his enthusiasm. Not only was the location to be Braunston, but he asked me if I would like the job of canal technical expert to the episode. He wanted the historic canals scenes to be as accurate as possible – getting things right had been one of the things that had made the Morse series so good, he emphasized. But I knew what this would involve, and much as I would have liked to do it, I suggested a better man than myself – the canal historian David Blagrove. And so he got the job, and I had the pleasure of following developments from the inside

I told Chris Burt that I was intrigued by two things: firstly, the *Inspector Morse* series had already been running for fourteen years since 1983, with something like 30 episodes in the can, and Kevin Whately as Sergeant Lewis had already announced that he wasn't doing any more. John Thaw as Morse was now 65, and should be using his pensioner-pass for that *Last Bus to Woodstock*, rather than solving murder mysteries.

Secondly, *The Wench is Dead* was the only Morse book that had not been made into an episode, and in my opinion for a very good reason. The canal murder story is set in Victorian times and Morse solves the mystery of who really murdered Joanna Franks whilst lying in a hospital bed recovering from a perforated ulcer – with Lewis doing all the running around. Morse of course never meets the real murderers – confronting them with their wickedness – so that element of drama would be completely lost. And the story – in my opinion the best Colin Dexter ever wrote, for which he won the Golden Dagger Award for Fiction – was far too complicated to get over in a two-hour television episode. Chris Burt was undismayed: ways had already been thought out for dealing with these matters, which would be revealed in due course. 'We use the very best script writers, you know.'





Tim Coghlan takes a lighter look at his chance involvement in the filming at Braunston of the *Inspector Morse* canal-themed episode *The Wench is Dead* – and its unforeseen consequences

**Inspector Morse on the case:** Actor John Thaw on location on the Kennet & Avon Canal. Although *The Wench is Dead* episode was set on the Oxford Canal – in fact none of it was filmed on that canal. (Carlton TV)



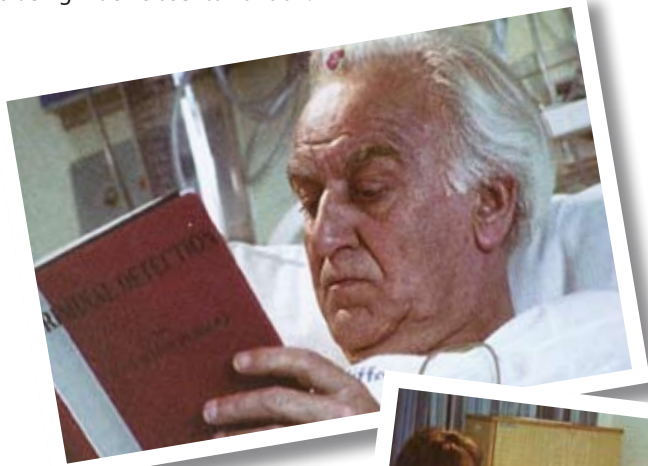
# *Bringing the dead wench to life*



He drove me back to the marina in his large smart BMW where I asked him to sign our visitors' book – thus recording the date of his visit for posterity. He gave his address as Shepperton Film Studios and added the comment; 'Let's hope we can film "Morse" here next year.' There was a hint of qualification in his comment, after his earlier enthusiasm for Braunston as definitely the chosen location. Over the coming weeks I began to understand why.

### **Tempting alternatives**

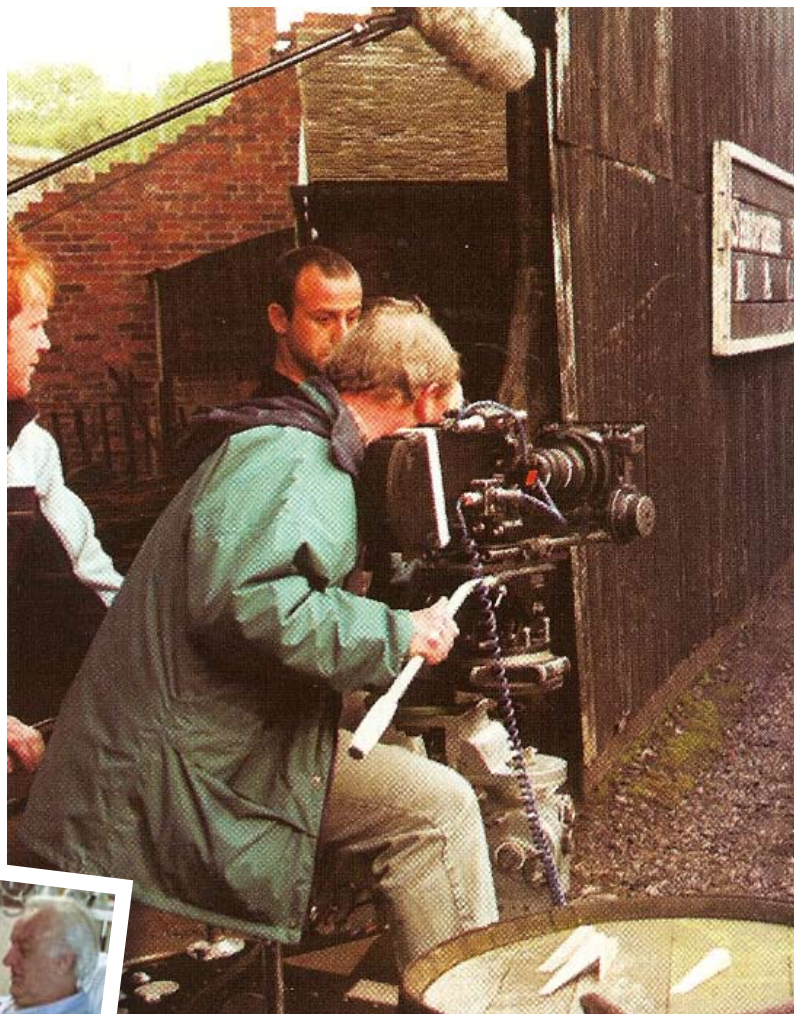
Burt's visit was followed a few weeks later by the first of two visits by the locations manager and his assistant, to go through the detail of just what was wanted. I showed them various places around Braunston and towards Napton which I thought would fit the bill. They told me they had already been looking at locations on the Kennet & Avon Canal, which offered a tempting alternative as being much closer to London.



Matters in one sense were made worse when I suggested that rather than using our dock yard area - for an authentic looking Victorian canal dockyard from which Joanna Franks and her four escorting boatmen would set off on that fateful voyage – they looked instead at the one at the Black Country Museum as being far better. Unfortunately all our historic buildings were painted white in the 1960s, and warehouse windows modernized, and we were stuck with this. Once they visited that museum, they readily agreed, which made Braunston even less tempting.

The one high-card we had left was the Braunston Tunnel. There is an awful scene in the book, where shortly before the murder, the narrow boat *Barbara Bray* is being legged through a tunnel by two of the crew, with the boy escorting the horse over the top, whilst the captain and Joanna Franks do their own legging in the rear cabin. She is fully aware that her lover will shortly hang innocently for the crime she and her husband are in the process of committing. I still wonder how author Colin Dexter could have imagined such a nasty thing. He later told me he still got letters from readers on the accuracy or otherwise of the Victorian bloomers which the good lady wore on this occasion.

I showed the location manager how the legged-boat could emerge from the eastern end of Braunston Tunnel, where the scene could be easily filmed – close access for supporting vehicles was more or less essential – and that did it. The small tunnel on the K&A could not compete. In March 1998, it was finally agreed to do it at Braunston, and also the arrest scene at Lock 2 on the Braunston Flight, and on the back of that a couple of other small bits. At best there would be a few days of filming in Braunston, but at least our name was still in the frame, which could give us



enormous publicity. I smiled when I later heard that tunnel scene was abandoned, I was told, after a risk assessment on the actors' lack of legging skills, and the dangers this might pose. The budget did not extend to trained look-alike stunt men.

Braunston was now in the frame, with filming in early June, almost immediately after the then annual Braunston Boat Show, which was held over the late May Bank Holiday. It was all very convenient as the departure scene at the Black Country Museum was due to be filmed in the week before the show – so the narrow boats to be used in the filming could be with us for the show. I suggested to Chris Burt that we should invite John Thaw to open the Show on the *Barbara Bray*, but he said this was not the sort of thing Thaw would enjoy – he was

**Top left: Morse now recovering in Oxford's Radcliffe Hospital:** Dr Millicent Van Buren has called to visit him and given him a copy of her book on the Oxford Canal murder, which he studies with great interest. (*Carlton TV*)

**Bottom left: Morse on the mend and visited by 'very good friend' Adele Cecil:** In spite of all temptations, Morse never marries in the series - despite the author Colin Dexter considering finishing him off in this way. (*Carlton TV*)

**Centre: Coventry Basin in Victorian times:** In reality the Black Country Museum, in which Joanna Franks and her four escorting boatmen are filmed setting-off on that fateful voyage. (*Carlton TV*)





too like the character he played, and hated the patrimony of the crowd. The character of Lewis was of course out of it, which only left Chief Superintendent Strange who, as actor James Grout in real life was not very well, and certainly would not be up to sitting on the bow of the *Barbara Bray*. Instead Burt suggested I should write to Morse author Colin Dexter – who was always game for anything – and invite him. It was a brilliant suggestion, which began a warm friendship, which has continued to the present day.

#### **A literary opening**

For a few weeks my letter went unanswered, and I was getting nervous. Between March and the end of May, there was not that great a time frame to play with. Then one late-April morning I was rung by Colin Dexter, who said he would be

very pleased to come, and would be happy to do anything that was required of him. I told him I would ring him nearer the time to talk through the final programme, to make sure he was happy with it. However following that risk assessment, his tunnel-legging skills would certainly not be required. He laughed.

When I later rang him with the final arrangements, he was not quite the cheerful man I had spoken to before. He was of course game to open the show, but he felt he had made a dreadful mistake in agreeing against his better judgment to write another Morse book, to be made into the definitely final television episode. Kevin Whateley, as Lewis, had agreed to come back on this basis. But Dexter was totally lacking inspiration. 'I wrote the previous books because I wanted to. This one I am now writing against a deadline because I now have to. I've had enough of Morse. This time he'll either get murdered by the murderer, or have a heart attack, or just get married.' Dexter had not quite lost all his humour – he in fact went for the heart attack option.

I had asked Colin to be with us by 9.30, as one Ed Rimmer of *Challenger Syndicateships* had asked me to 'launch' his fleet's latest addition at the Show, to be named *Shrewsbury*. I had suggested that Colin did the honours instead and the Saturday edition of the local *Rugby Evening Telegraph* said they would make a photo-story for their front page if the photo was taken by ten o'clock. This would help publicise the Show enormously.

Colin duly arrived with his wife Dorothy. I was surprised at just how small he was, and for this occasion he wore a dark high street store suit and an open necked white shirt – add a black tie, and he could easily have attended the cremation of one of the many characters he had killed off in Oxford. I also noticed the small brown well-used schoolmaster leather briefcase with which

#### **Top right: The old dockyard at Braunston Marina:**

Initially this was to be used for the setting-off scene, but all the historic buildings were unfortunately painted white in the 1960s. Tim Coghlan suggested using the Black Country Museum instead, which was done. This nearly rocked the boat as far as filming in Braunston concerned.

*(Tim Coghlan)*

**Bottom right: Nelson Lock, Braunston:** It was here that Tim Coghlan had lunch with Chris Burt and his assistant, and consideration given to using the location for the pub scenes. The *Barge Inn* at Honey Street on the Kennet & Avon Canal was finally chosen. *(Tim Coghlan)*



I later observed he always travelled. His wife by contrast wore a Henley Regatta style bright blazer, more befitting the jolly boating weather occasion. The 'launch' comprised opening a bottle of champagne and pouring the first glass over the bow of *Shrewsbury* where its name was, and then making a sort of tongue-in-cheek declamation along the lines of 'I name this narrow boat *Shrewsbury*. May God bless her and all who canal-cruise in her.' Colin loved it and played his part perfectly, and it made the front page.

In the time between that launch and the official opening at eleven, I had a fascinating chat with Colin. I mentioned to him that I must be one of the very few people who had ever read the Elizabethan Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* from which the quotation *The Wench is Dead* came from. The full quotation is: *Thou hast committed Fornication; but that was in another country, and besides, the wench is dead.* (The *Another Country* was used in modern times elsewhere as the title of a play – also, I recalled, concerning the F word.) Colin said the quotation had a popular ring about it, and that was why he had chosen it for the book. I explained that the reason why I had read the play was that at Downside Abbey, where I was at school, the monk who taught us A Level English used to make us read through plays on Wednesday afternoons after games, and this was one of them. The purpose was to 'compare and contrast' the similarities in style – or otherwise – between Shakespeare and his friend and fellow playwright Marlowe, who was mysteriously murdered in a tavern brawl in Deptford. I could now recall little more about the play other than that quotation – which until recent times was banned from the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations as too lewd, despite it being one of his two most famous, the other the other being Faustus on seeing a vision of Helen of Troy: *Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Sweet Helen make me immortal with a kiss!*

#### A Bray connection?

I then asked Colin about the naming of the narrow boat *Barbara Bray* – had it any connection with the Bray working boat family of Braunston? No, it had none – he didn't even know of them, and then Colin went on to explain how difficult it was naming characters or indeed a boat in this case, when writing a book. The name had to be right, and it could take weeks in coming. Sometimes it was staring you in the face, like Ian Fleming seeing James Bond's book of *Birds of Jamaica* on his bookshelf at his Jamaican house Goldeneye, or Blofeld when looking through the list of members of his elite London club.

I then got on to the subject of just how much narrowboating had Colin done; from the book he appeared so knowledgeable. The answer was astonishing. He had only travelled once on an *Oxford Cruisers* narrow boat – taken by a friend – the mile or so from Oxford to Wolvercote, where the boat had gone aground and he had jumped ship and retreated to the nearby pub. He had never been through a lock. Boating just wasn't for him, and much of his research of the Oxford Canal had been done from reading and on foot. He had also had invaluable help from a moorer at Braunston Marina and Oxford don, Harry Judge, to whom the book is dedicated. *For Harry Judge, lover of canals, who introduced me to 'The Murder of Christine Collins' a fascinating account of an early Victorian murder by John Godwin. To both I am deeply indebted.* Harry it transpired had by chance come across a pamphlet on John Godwin's publication – which was put out by the local canal society to promote its canal – whilst cruising in the Rugeley area where the original murder took place. He then obtained a copy of the publication and later passed it to Colin, who like Shakespeare with the original story of Macbeth, had turned a good tale on its head, and in so doing invented a whole new array of plot and characters, with riveting results. In Colin's case the murdered girl became the murderer's accomplice, and an innocent woman's body is dumped in the Oxford Canal, to where the tale has moved.

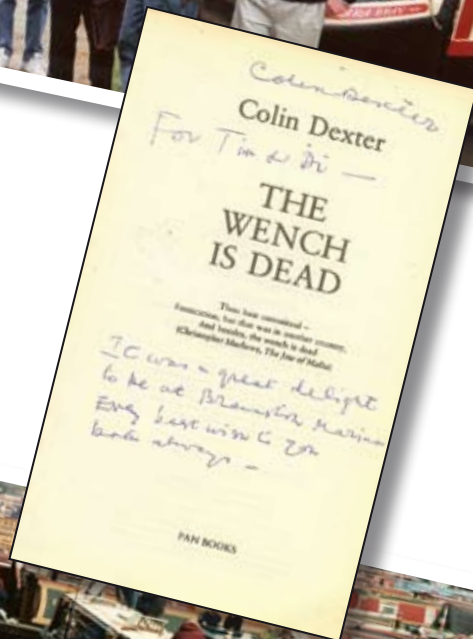


**Top: Legging through the Braunston Tunnel at the 2008 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally:** It was the intention to the film a tunnel-legging scene which kept part of the filming at Braunston. In the end this was scrapped on health and safety grounds, but two days of filming did take place. (Peter Scott)

**Centre: The Champagne Charlie of the canals:** Ed Rimmer (L) of the former *Challenger Syndicateships* with Morse author Colin Dexter (centre) and Tim Coghlan (R) of Braunston Marina following Dexter's launch of the *Shrewsbury* at the 1998 Braunston Boat Show. (Gordon White: *Rugby Evening Telegraph*)

**Bottom: Making a splash:** Morse author Colin Dexter (L) opening the 1998 Braunston Boat Show on the *Barbara Bray* with Simon Ainley, British Waterways Braunston Manager (centre) and Tim Coghlan of Braunston Marina (R). (Gordon White: *Rugby Evening Telegraph*)





**Top: Meeting the Braunston Morse team:** L/R canal artist Tony Lewery who painted the *Barbara Bray* (in real life the FMC butty *Australia*), Simon Ainley, British Waterways Braunston Manager, author Colin Dexter, David Blagrove canal historian and technical expert for the episode, and Tim Coghlan of Braunston Marina. With the *Barbara Bray* and delivery crew (Derek Pratt)


**Centre: Signed Edition:** Before leaving the 1998 Braunston Boat Show, Author Colin Dexter signed the front piece of Tim Coghlan's copy, adding a kind note of thanks. The page also contains the quotation from *The Jew of Malta*.

**Bottom: That was the boat show that was!:** The 1998 Braunston Boat Show, opened by Colin Dexter, proved to be the penultimate of these popular shows, which were also a high water mark of narrow boat building - as seen by the many boats here. (Gordon White: *Rugby Evening Telegraph*)

Colin's brief encounter with the canals reminded me of my astonishment when I had once learnt that Dickens had only spent two days in the whole Blunderstone /Yarmouth areas of Suffolk, an area I knew well, which had featured so much in *David Copperfield*. I told Colin of this. 'Ah', he simply said, 'Those opening chapters of *David Copperfield* were the finest thing Dickens ever wrote, and probably the finest opening chapters of any novel in the English language.' With the Braunston Boat Show about to begin, it was a rather unusual time to be attending a tutorial in creative writing.

### **Mistaken identity**

And so to the opening: moored outside the marina was butty *Barbara Bray* and the motor *Fazeley* ready to tow in, with Colin, myself and Simon Ainley – the local British Waterways manager, with whom we organized those Braunston Boat Shows – parading ourselves on the foredeck of the *Barbara Bray*, and Colin at the appropriate moment past the bridge, declaring the 1998 Braunston Boat Show open to a peal of bells from the spire of Braunston Church. It all went very well, with large crowds gathered on the bridge and marina point. Amongst the latter was his wife Dorothy, who overheard a conversation between two women. 'Oo's that on the front of that boat?' 'Oh', said the other knowledgeably, 'That's the bloke from the marina and the other one's from British Waterways. The other one's the celebrity. Now 'oo's 'is name? Oh, I know. Its 'im, its Mohamed Al Fayed – see!' When Colin later heard this tale, he laughed with joy, and has used the story many times as a crowd-warmer-upper in the numerous Oxford and other after-dinner speeches he has made about Morse. On each occasion I have heard it, the telling gets better...

We had only one more official task for Colin to perform and that was to open the beer tent, by pulling the first pint. Like Morse he is a beer man, and concludes every writing session with a pint at the local. I took the opportunity to tell him about my own Oxford Morse-like encounter, earlier in February of that year, which he might like to use in the book he was struggling to write. A don at an Oxford College, whom I had never met before, had rung to ask me to sell his narrow boat, moored at Oxford Marina. When I went to see it a few weeks later, I was told by the marina manager that the owner was an important researcher and lecturer in psychiatry, who carried out tests on live animals, and had received death threats from an extreme animal rights group. Bizarrely, he had named his narrow boat *Zoologica*, which was proudly painted in large letters on each side of the boat. Once the threat was known, the marina – in a noble act of self-preservation for its staff – had moved his boat to the very furthest point from the office in case it was blown up – possibly when the engine was started with the owner on board. I had a delivery crew ready to move her up to Braunston, and with this knowledge and some trepidation felt it my duty to make the checks. I inspected the boat for a booby-trap bomb linked to the control panel, but could find no evidence of tampering. Then I lifted the engine covers nearest the point where the driver would be standing when starting the engine, and again there was nothing. The boat arrived safely at our marina, and was subsequently sold. Without revealing my hand, I tried to persuade the new owner to change the name, but he said he liked it – it had hints of Noah's Ark, and he loved animals. Then he set off for London, where he proposed to moor her - going via Oxford and that marina. Who said Morse's Oxford was unreal? 

**NEXT MONTH** following his chance encounter with the *Morse* circus, Tim Coghlan finds himself on the set with producer Chris Burt for the filming of the Braunston scenes. He visits Colin Dexter's house to see his writer's den. He is invited by Sheila Hancock to attend John Thaw's memorial service in the presence of Prince Charles, where at the lunch afterwards he meets Kevin Whately and sits next to David Attenborough. He writes a Christmas carol with Morse composer Barrington Pheloung. And Barrington Pheloung and Colin Dexter come and stay at his house.