

The Making of the Film *Tarka*

David Cobham

On 25th April 1972 my wife and I were at Ox's Cross putting the finishing touches to a film we'd just made with Henry for the BBC called 'The Vanishing Hedgerows'. Henry was obviously pleased with our efforts because suddenly, out of the blue, he asked if we'd ever thought of making a film of *Tarka the Otter*. That was how it all began.

The next four years were spent negotiating options, raising the finance and writing the script. Henry started producing a treatment but it proved too much for him and it was agreed that Gerald Durrell and myself should take on this responsibility. Gradually over a year the book was turned into a treatment and thence into a shooting script. The process of script writing and the mechanics and magic of film making can't be better illustrated than by the passage in the book where the barn owl lands on the hollow tree at the bottom of which is Owlery Holt. This is how it reads in the book.

The white owl alighted on the upright branch of the tree, and the otter heard the scratch of its talons as they gripped the bark. She looked from the opening, and the brush of her whiskers on the wood was heard by the bird, whose ear-holes, hidden by feathers, were as large as those of a cat.

In the script this was broken down into twenty-eight separate scenes depending on how and where the individual shots to make up that sequence were to be taken. Locations for this sequence ranged from Canal Bridge in Devon, Whitchurch in Hampshire (our main filming base) through to Earsham in Suffolk.

Preparation and filming started in June 1976 and we were lucky right from the start to have the co-operation of Philip and Jeanne Wayre who had recently started the Otter Trust at Earsham. The Otter Trust had agreed that we could replace four of their otter breeding boxes with special sets to represent the holt in which *Tarka* is born. The welfare of the otters was paramount and no direct lighting of the holt was possible. Instead the light was either bounced off water through the entrance to the holt or through a glass tray of water from above. Meanwhile all we could do was wait for one of the four bitch otters to produce some cubs.

At the same time the rest of the interior of the otter's holt was being constructed. It was in two sections: the hollow trunk of the tree up which the otter could look at the owl and the top half of the trunk, the owl's roosting and nesting place, into which the owl would enter as if from outside and peer downwards at the otter below.

The exteriors of the Owlery Holt tree by Canal Bridge on the river Torridge were another matter altogether and not so easily organised. In May 1973 I had taken Henry to Canal Bridge to interview him for a pro-

gramme the BBC were making on otters and in particular, for him to talk about the first time that he remembered seeing an otter. During a break in the filming I asked him if he could show me where Owlery Holt had been. We searched in vain for the 'twelve great trees, with roots awash'. Owlery Holt had gone.

Our answer was to make two Owlery Holt trees. The first one was a real hollow tree which was transported to Earsham in Suffolk and placed in one of the otter's enclosures and braced so that it leant out over the water. A barrier of roots was built into the entrance of the holt at water level. The banks were grassed over and planted with balsam, tansy and the other plants found on the banks of the Torridge. This tree would be used for all the close up filming: for the otters going in and out of the holt and the owl going into its roosting place.

The second tree was a replica of the first but made in fibre-glass and transported to Canal Bridge and embedded in the river bank above the bridge. This would be used for all long shots showing Owlery Holt in relation to the river and Canal Bridge.

All this preparation had taken about six months. Tests had been made at the beginning of 1977 and now we were ready to start filming in earnest. But where were our stars — the otters? In June 1976 one of the otters had produced a large litter of three cubs, one of which was very small, a runt, that was expected to die. Jeanne Wayre hand-reared it for us and a special otter-handler, Peter Talbot, was taken on to look after it. 'Spade' as the otter was called became very tame and by December 1976 when he was almost full grown would walk to heel just like a dog and come when called.

The Owlery Holt sequence was begun early in 1977 and wasn't completed until July or August later that year. First, all the interior scenes in the holt were shot — the otter curled up asleep, waking up and then looking up towards the owl. Then on a separate set we filmed all the scenes of the owl entering the roosting chamber and settling down. Reg Smith of the Weyhill Wildlife Park provided us with a tame barn owl and on one of the 'takes' of the owl entering the hollow tree a bit of magic occurred. Terry Channell the cameraman noticed that when the owl shook its feathers a piece of down floated downwards.

Terry suggested that we should use this same bit of down when we filmed the owl's point-of-view shot looking down the section of tree trunk towards the otter below. And so that is how we got the beautiful shot of the bit of down floating towards the otter in the holt below and landing on its nose.

So now all the interior shots of the owl and otter in the tree were in the can and all that remained were the exteriors.

First, we filmed the close up shots of the owl landing on the dead tree and disappearing into the hollow chamber within. This was filmed at Earsham. Then we travelled down to Canal Bridge in Devon to film the

establishing shots of the Owlery Holt tree in relation to the river and to the bridge. The key shot here was of the barn owl sailing down from Canal Bridge and alighting on the tree. For this another barn owl was used — a barn owl called 'Green'. In 1973 I had made a film for the BBC called 'The Private Life of the Barn Owl' and for this purpose had reared five owlets called, because of the coloured rings on their legs, Blue, Red, Orange, Yellow and Green. Green was by far the tamest of the five and if flown loose would consistently return from a great distance when called by her handler. She was therefore the obvious choice for this very difficult shot which not only involved flying a distance of some hundred yards but also dropping down in height from about eighty feet from the Canal Bridge parapet to five feet at the top of the hollow tree.

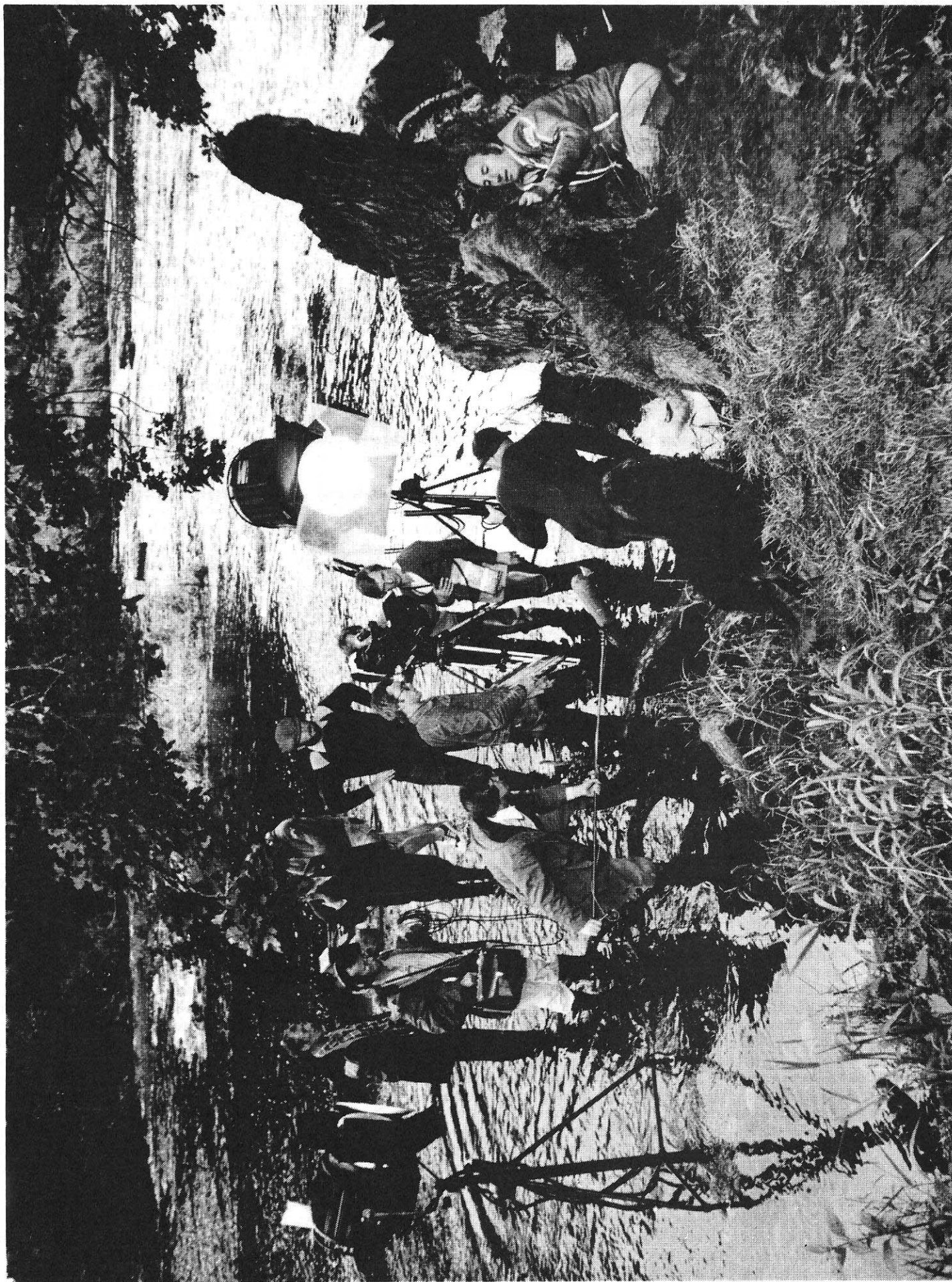
After a day's rehearsal and training, Green performed brilliantly, landing spot on cue right beside the camera. And to show it wasn't a fluke repeated the flight flawlessly twice more.

Meanwhile, we were also, whilst in Devon, filming all the shots of *Tarka's* 'joyful water-life', travelling down the Torridge past Bideford across Braunton Burrows back up the Torridge again and to its source on Dartmoor.

As I've already said, 'Spade' our tame otter would come when called and most of the shots of him travelling down a river or across a marsh were accomplished by the handler taking 'Spade' to some distant point upstream, releasing him when the cameraman was ready and calling his name. If we wanted the otter to stop at a particular rock in the river as if he was following another otter then we'd anoint the rock with fish juice, an irresistible lure. On some occasions, for example if there was no cover for the otter handler to hide behind, we'd use our magic box. This was one of the otter's travelling boxes the door of which had been fitted with a catch that could be opened by a radio signal. In this was 'Spade' in his box could be hidden behind a small fold in the ground and released automatically by a switch flicked over beside the camera.

At the beginning of August 1977 the hunting scenes were scheduled to be filmed. Up to this point a very small unit, my wife and I, two cameramen, an otter handler and a general assistant/stills cameraman had carried out the filming. But now with the arrival of actors and actresses, extras and otter hounds a larger unit was called for. Every available room in Torrington was taken as make-up ladies, grips, sparks and production managers, assistant directors and location caterers joined us to make sure that everything proceeded smoothly and efficiently during the three week period.

Richard and Anne Williamson and their children, Brent and Bryony, joined us at this point not only to act as unofficial advisors but also to take part in the filming as well. Every day the large crowd of extras making up the hunt followers would be marshalled at the



Photograph by kind permission of Rank Film Distributors

Arts Centre in Torrington, dressed and made up before being assembled for filming at Canal Bridge.

The hounds, those shaggy otter hounds from the Kendal and District Otterhounds, were everyone's favourites. All the shots of the hounds chasing Tarka were done as follows. The otter and hounds, for obvious reasons, could never be in the same shot. For every shot a trail was made, using some of our tame otter's bedding, along the line that the hounds were to follow. Later, when the otter hounds were safely back in the Lake District the same process was repeated with the otter running pell-mell along the same line.

At one stage during the hunting scenes, Deadlock, the villain of the story, has to thrust his head and shoulders into the entrance of the Owlery Holt. The hound playing Deadlock had been cast for his looks rather than for his fearful disposition for he was in reality a rather placid animal. However, like most dogs he was greedy, and it was felt that a tin of 'Chum' strategically placed at the back of the artificial holt would ensure an energetic response. All was set. The hound was shown the tin of 'Chum'. He saw it placed at the back of the holt. He struggled against the restraining hands of his handler. The cameraman pronounced himself ready. 'Action' was called and the hound leapt forward and buried himself in the entrance to the holt, making satisfactory lunges with his powerful shoulders and great rumblings from his chest. I signalled to the huntsman to pull him out for this was the final part of the scene. To everyone's amusement, as the hound was pulled clear, it was obvious that something wasn't quite right — the hound's head was still firmly buried in

the tin of 'Chum'!

I won't attempt to describe the day on which we filmed Tarka's fight to the death with Deadlock. It has already been beautifully portrayed by Richard Williamson in his foreword to The Bodley Head edition of *Tarka* published when the film was released. It was a very emotional day for all of us and made sadder still when we learned that Henry had passed away that evening at about the same time as we had been filming the death of Tarka.

One of the key scenes in the book is the chapter entitled 'The Coming of the Winter God, who rules with snow and ice'. It had to be a vital sequence for the film too. But if you want snow for a film it never falls and this is what had happened in our first winter 1976/1977. The following winter was our last chance and we made elaborate contingency plans to go as far as Scotland if necessary to get good scenes of ice and snow.

In January 1978 I was rung by Roy Dennis from Inverness to tell me that snow was falling heavily and that it looked good. I called everyone on the unit and we stood by to travel up the following night by train. The next day another telephone call — Inverness was cut off and a blizzard was raging. Three days later we made the journey north and over two days got some marvellous scenes. But the high point for me was when we arrived at Euston Station with one tame otter and British Rail couldn't decide what kind of ticket 'Spade' should have. Eventually he travelled in great style in the guard's van on a dog ticket!

By the end of March nearly all the film was complete. There had been more snow so we had been able to build up our winter sequence into something even more effective;

we had filmed the difficult insert shot of the dragonfly landing on Tarka's nose and causing him to sneeze; and one of the Otter Trust otters had produced a cub which we'd filmed at various stages as it grew up. There was just one bit of the jig-saw remaining to be filmed — young Tarka's first journey as a cub out of the holt where he'd been born into the outside world. There was no hand-reared otter cub we could use. What were we to do? We even thought of using a mink cub as a substitute and then just as we'd almost given up Grahame Dangerfield rang up and said he'd just received a four-month-old otter cub which had been injured by a fox terrier in Scotland. He wasn't sure yet if it would survive. Day by day, Tarkina, as she was called, improved until at the beginning of July she was fully recovered and able first of all to crawl out of the holt entrance and peer outside for the first time; next to wander away from the holt and meet Old Nog the heron; and finally to venture out along the root and fall into the water. Now the film was complete.

The editing of the film was already under way and nearly complete when this final sequence was shot. Altogether some 327,000 feet of film had been shot which had to be reduced to just over 8000 feet for a ninety minute film. By November the music had been recorded, sound effects added and Peter Ustinov had recorded the narration.

The finished film was handed over to The Rank Organisation and on 22nd March 1979 *Tarka the Otter* opened at The Rialto Cinema, Leicester Square, London. I wish Henry had been there. Would he have liked it — I hope so.

MEDIUM CLOSE UP of Deadlock sitting apart from the rest of the pack. As the whip flicks by him, Deadlock moves his head to look at the whipper-in.

NARRATOR

And there, apart and morose, sat Deadlock,
his black head scarred with old fights.

CLOSE UP on Deadlock as his lips draw back from his teeth in a menacing growl.

TILT from CLOSE UP two terriers straining at the leash to reveal the fair-haired girl holding them. She is talking to the Master of the otter hounds.

ANOTHER ANGLE as the Master raises his cap to the fair girl and moves off. The camera TRACKS with him as he moves through the throng of hunt followers to stand beside the whipper-in. WIDE ANGLE as the whipper-in leads the hounds, talking to them gently, down to the river. Camera PANS with them as they move upstream under the bridge and away into the distance.

TELEPHOTO SHOT of the hounds as they splash down the river towards camera, searching for scent.

VARIOUS CLOSE SHOTS of the hounds searching the shallows, sniffing over the sandbanks and rocks.

BIG CLOSE UP of Tarka's pad mark in the wet sand, imperfect through losing the toe in a trap. Deadlock's muzzle enters, sniffs at the tracks in the sand. Camera TILTS UP as Deadlock raises his head, lets loose a baying howl to the sky.

NARRATOR

Tarka had touched here, on the shillets,
six hours before.

483. DAY. INT. EARSHAM. NORFOLK.

CLOSE SHOT of Tarka asleep in the holt. Over is heard, in the distance, the sound of Deadlock giving tongue. Tarka is instantly awake.

484. DAY. EXT. ROTHERN BRIDGE. DEVON.

MEDIUM SHOT of the hounds wading their way up the river.

485. DAY. INT. EARSHAM. NORFOLK.

CLOSE SHOT of Tarka as sc. 483. Camera ZOOMS IN SLOWLY as the sounds of the otter hounds get closer.

486. DAY. EXT. ROTHERN BRIDGE. DEVON.

LOW ANGLE as the otter hounds splash from behind camera, go on down the river.

TOR FILMS LIMITED

SHOOTING SCHEDULE

"TARKA THE OTTER"

DATE	SCENE NOS.	LOCATION	ACTION	ARTISTS
MONDAY 8th August	481	COUNTRY ROAD	Van on road to meet hunt.	MASTER
	482	WEARE GIFFARD HALL	The Otter Hounds meet.	WHIPPER-IN SECRETARY HUNTSMAN 6 UNIFORMED HUNTSMEN 25 HUNT FOLLOWERS GIRL GIRL'S FATHER 6 CHILDREN 'DEADLOCK' 'SPADE' AS ABOVE
	484	HEDDENS FIELD WEARE GIFFARD	The hunt moves off along the river.	AS ABOVE
			The hunt drawing the river.	AS ABOVE
		PROPS & REMARKS. VAN (1928 era). CAR. HOUNDS. CLOTHES AS APPROPRIATE. WHIP. FOB WATCH. DRAGONFLIES. 1920 MONEY. POLES.		
		TRAIL TO BE LAID		
TUESDAY 9th August	488	BEAM COLLEGE GROUNDS—A386 CANAL BRIDGE	Owl's POV of hunt approaching.	AS ABOVE — LESSCHILDREN
	490		LA Hunt towards Canal Bridge.	
	493	OWLERY HOLT	The hunt is called off.	
	496		The terrier is introduced into the holt.	
	502		The hunt watching as the terrier fights Tarka (OS).	

Examples from the Shooting Script (left) and the Shooting Schedule (right)