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Secret Garden



MOVIE MAGIC

Major films are being shot in Yorkshire as studios discover the county's picture-perfect locations, **Catherine Turnbull** reports

One of Yorkshire's best-loved books is *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Set in an isolated house in the Yorkshire Moors - it is no surprise that the county plays a starring role in the latest lavish film, featuring Colin Firth and Julie Walters.

It's the story of Mary Lennox, a sickly, unloved girl, born in India to wealthy British parents, who leave her largely in the care of servants. After a cholera epidemic kills her mother and father, 10-year-old Mary is sent to England, to live with her uncle at the remote fictional Misselthwaite Manor.

When she hears of a secret garden in the grounds and sets out to find it, she discovers, for the first time, the value of love and friendship. *The Secret Garden* celebrates the rejuvenating power of the bracing Yorkshire

air and the beauty that is found in an English country garden.

Supervising location manager Tom Howard scouted the UK for the perfect spots to film. "The audience are looking for something magical and fantastic that fits the world set in Misselthwaite Manor," he says. "When I discovered Duncombe Park in Helmsley, it was so right - it's even next to the moors like in the book - and handy for the North Yorkshire Moors Railway. The locations in the area are breathtakingly beautiful."

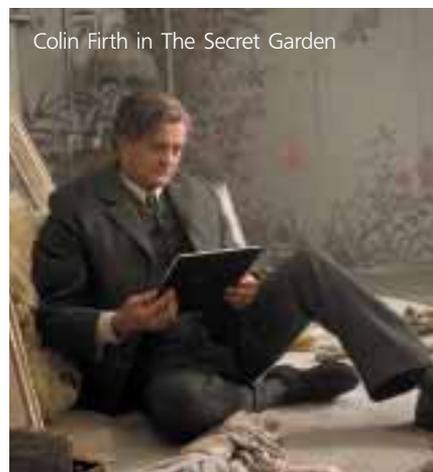
Duncombe Park estate's fine 18th century mansion became the manor, the grounds and parkland were perfect, as was Helmsley Walled Garden, built in 1758 to provide fruit, vegetables and flowers to the Feversham family of Duncombe Park. Here, colourful plants in the borders come to life and capture the magic of Mary's secret garden.



Dixie Egerickx in *The Secret Garden*



Amir Wilson and Dixie Egerickx in *The Secret Garden*



Colin Firth in *The Secret Garden*

‘Yorkshire has amazing and diverse landscapes and great country houses. You can create worlds here without having to shoot in a studio’

“The producers Heyday Films are really creative – known for *Harry Potter* and the *Paddington* films – and used a mix of location filming and some CGI. This version of *The Secret Garden* is set in 1947. Mary moves from the bright light of India (filmed in Abbotsbury Gardens in Dorset and its Indian-style tea pavilion and other gardens in the West Country) to dark, drab post-war England. She then enters the world of colour in Helmsley.

“Duncombe Park was used for interior scenes too, and has lots of lawns and a tree tunnel, and the remains of a military encampment from the Second World War,” says Tom. Scenes were also shot on Rievaulx Moor above the town, Farndale and Allerton Castle. “We looked at Rievaulx Abbey, but it wasn’t what we wanted, so they filmed at Fountains Abbey’s monastic ruins and created ponds for the children to splash about in.

“Yorkshire has amazing and diverse landscapes and great country houses. You can create worlds here without having to shoot in a studio. It is one of the best filming locations in Europe.”

The Secret Garden is released in cinemas and Sky Cinema and NOW TV with a Sky Cinema Pass.

Film company is based in York

Yorkshire has so much to offer for location filming that one production company has set up home here, where it has already made an astonishing nine films in 18 months – completing two since lockdown restrictions were lifted. Producer Philippe Martinez of MSR Media, previously based in France and LA, has moved to North Yorkshire, as has →



John Cleese in *Father Christmas is Back* – Birdsall House



Jeremy Piven in *My Dad's Christmas Date*

executive producer Lee Beasley, and one of their stars, Nathalie Cox.

"I was invited here by Alan Latham of Highfield Grange Studios in Bubwith to see if we could work together more. I didn't know Yorkshire, but once I had seen the beautiful countryside and York, I wanted to make the place part of the story in films," Philippe says. MSR Media is based in the grounds of stately Naburn Hall, near York, and there is a wealth of historic buildings on the doorstep.

MSR shot romcom, *My Dad's Christmas Date*, starring Jeremy Piven (*Mr Selfridge*), Joely Richardson and Nathalie Cox, in winter 2018 in York, making the most of the festive atmosphere of the Christmas market, St Nicholas Fair, Shambles and locations around York Minster. "York is a great city and perfect for a great Christmas comedy like this."

About to be released, the feelgood family film centres around the quest of a teenage girl to find a new partner for her widowed dad, and a new mum for herself. "It's a time to focus on a feelgood Christmas and romance and bring some positive messages about traditional values and cheer to people," says Philippe.

MSR has filmed at many other local sites, including York Art Gallery, Castle Museum, Micklegate and in Slingsby, Howden and Ampleforth. York also doubles up for London in MSR's Mister Mayfair gangster comedy series.

Filming is also complete for *Miss Willoughby and the Haunted Bookshop*, starring Kelsey Grammer (*Frasier*, *Cheers*) and Nathalie Cox – the first in a franchise of light-hearted paranormal mysteries. "It's about a rich heiress and we found the



Director Philippe Martinex and cast at Birdsall House for *Father Christmas is Back*

perfect location at Birdsall House. It's a very sophisticated British product." Although this Miss Willoughby is fictional, the real family of that name live in the stately pile on the edge of the scenic Yorkshire Wolds.

Next year's festive comedy, *Father Christmas is Back*, stars Cox and Grammer again, with Elizabeth Hurley, Caroline Quentin, John Cleese and Kris Marshall. The whole cast and crew relocated to York and lived in a bubble for the duration of the shoot, for up to five weeks, facing the challenges of filming with a Covid-19 risk assessment officer, who ensured the safety of all involved.

Philippe believes the damage of the pandemic will leave a permanent scar on the cinema industry. "We always hope for a theatrical release, of course, but cinemas are in decline. They will resume at some stage in some way, but my clients are Amazon in the

UK and Lionsgate in the US at the moment," he says. MSR Media partners with Highfield Grange Studios in Bubwith, where parts of the films are shot, and Goldfinch in London. "We do everything from concept, to writing, to creating to distributing movies worldwide – from Yorkshire. We are planning four movies for next year."

Not only are the locations great for the production company, but Philippe discovered a pool of talent here, and some crew have relocated. It's also good for local businesses with stars staying in hotels and around 120 jobs have been created. "We are here to stay, and we are investing locally," says Philippe. "We just need to build up our infrastructure."

My Dad's Christmas Date will be released on Amazon in the UK on December 4