

# How a recording studio on a farm in Wales changed the face of music



*The story of Rockfield Studios is finally to be told in a film to be aired this evening. David Owens discovered how the legendary recording studio has weathered the storms of time and the dictates of musical taste...*

**T**UCKED away in the verdant Welsh countryside, several miles from the border, is a rock 'n' roll Camelot. Amid the rolling hills and the patchwork fields of Monmouthshire is a revered setting that has acquired mythical status.

It has borne witness to the birth of legends and acted as a bystander to rock history.

In the six decades since its conception, Rockfield, a residential recording studio which started out as a dairy farm, has become a holy grail for musicians.

This mysterious and magical mecca has acquired as many notorious stories as it has hit records. Its reputation for sonic alchemy is undeniable and the secrecy with which it protects the artists who have flocked there through the decades is legendary.

It's a place where dreams are fulfilled, nascent stars transformed into supernovas and folklore sealed in the countryside under a starlit sky.

Described by Coldplay's Chris Martin as a "musical Hogwarts" and by Liam Gallagher as "the Big Brother house with tunes", the extraordinary story of Rockfield Studios is to be told in a new film

– Rockfield: The Studio On The Farm – to be premiered on BBC Wales and BBC Four tonight.

The movie chronicles the journey of maverick Welsh brothers Kingsley and Charles Ward, two idiosyncratic frontiersmen who created one of the world's most famous recording studios on their dairy farm in the 1960s.

If only those cows could talk, imagine the stories they'd tell. While we await that startling linguistic breakthrough, the film ably fills in the gaps of the studio's momentous history, documenting the story of how Rockfield quickly became renowned as the world's first residential recording studio, whose walls reverberated to the sounds of some of the most important songs and albums in rock history.

It was home to everyone from Ozzy Osbourne to Robert Plant, Queen to the Stone Roses, Bowie and Iggy Pop to Oasis.

The film explores many of the studio's epochal moments, including:

- How escaping to the country provided detonation point for Black Sabbath and year zero for heavy metal;
- The point at which Queen would forever be enshrined in rock legend recording Bohemian Rhapsody in the studio's converted stables;
- The Stone Roses spending 18 months attempt-

ing to record their highly-anticipated Second Coming album, unwittingly saving the studio into the bargain;

- Oasis soundtracking a generation with the recording of What's The Story (Morning Glory), drinking the local pubs dry and causing carnage;
- How the beautiful surroundings of the farm inspired Coldplay's Chris Martin to write the song that would provide their breakthrough hit.

The documentary also tackles the tragic death of the Charlatans' Rob Collins, who died in a car crash

in the lanes near to Rockfield in 1996, while his band were recording their Tellin' Stories album at the studio.

The film, made by Cardiff-based Ie Ie Productions and directed by Hannah Berryman, features many of those who have recorded there – including Liam Gallagher, Manic Street Preachers, the Stone Roses, Coldplay's Chris Martin, Ozzy Osbourne, Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant, Tim Burgess of the Charlatans, Simple Minds and Jim Kerr.

It's a warm, quirky and fascinating portrayal of a family of farmers unwittingly catapulted into the heady world of rock 'n' roll and how, against all the odds, they navigated financial deep waters in the face of an ever-changing music landscape.

"We haven't seen it yet, is it going to win a Bafta





➤ The innocuous-looking Rockfield Farm in Monmouthshire and, right, Kingsley Ward in the studio in the early days and the Ward family on the farm



do you think?" laughs Rockfield co-founder Kingsley Ward, 80, a lovably grumbly octogenarian with a throaty rasp and plenty of tales to tell, who is still very much at the helm of the business today with his wife Anne, also 80, and daughters Lisa, 52 and Amanda, 50.

"To be told by Hannah that your family are TV gold, I did think, 'Oh my, what have we done?'" says Lisa, understandably nervous at her family's depiction on screen. I reassure them the film is a warm, loving portrayal of an incredible family who have led an incredible life.

It seems to do the trick. When I'm patched through to Kingsley and daughter Lisa, they are on separate phone lines and in different locations, both shielding due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Having wanted to interview the Ward family many times over the years, I understand more than most how the family has made it among their priorities in running the studios to dismiss requests for interviews from journalists, intent instead on respecting the privacy of the artists who have recorded there. This, in turn, has created the air of mystery and intrigue that has surrounded the studios for decades.

In creating this film, the Cardiff production company has pulled off something of a coup.

Obvious first question, then, why now do they feel comfortable letting a film crew intrude into their lives?

"On many occasions during the during the last 20 or 30 years, people have approached us to make a documentary," says Kingsley. "When Hannah

approached us and told us the BBC was involved, I thought, well, this is better, it gave it much more credibility.

"It's always been independent people approaching us previously, but I always took the view that the BBC is kosher," he laughs.

"That's the reason we did it after so many years and after we had turned down many offers."

Lisa elaborates on her family's need to feel comfortable in the hands of the filmmakers.

"Yes, Rockfield is a business, but obviously it's my dad Kingsley's life's work and it's becoming my life's work. It's also my home, it's where I grew up, so we've got a different type of attitude towards the place than it purely being a business. It's a very personal story, so anybody who's going to make a film, we have to feel very comfortable with them.

"With Hannah, we just clicked and she really understood that side of it, because it is a big thing for us. We're looking forward to seeing it, but at the same time there's a certain amount of trepidation because it is our lives up there on the screen for everyone to see."

The story of Rockfield was forged in the late 1950s, when Kingsley and his brother Charles, starting out in the family dairy farming business, yearned to do something different – they wanted to make music.

Bewitched by Elvis Presley, the advent of rock 'n' roll led to them writing their own songs, forming their own group and staging their own gigs. They even released a couple of singles in the UK and US.

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## Rockfield stories

Manic Street Preachers

Did you know the mixing desk at the Manics' Door To The River studio, pictured, was originally sited at Rockfield in the 1970s?

"We've tried to figure out the records that have been recorded using it," said James Dean Bradfield. "So far we know that two Simple Minds albums were recorded on it – Empires And Dance and Sons And Fascination, I believe.

"We know that Farewell To Kings by Rush was definitely done on it, which sealed the deal for Nick because he's a super mega Rush fan.

"We've also established a small part of Bohemian Rhapsody was recorded using it.

"And what is amazing for me is that Heaven Up Here by Echo and the Bunnymen was recorded using it – one of the best British albums of all time.

"It's a brilliant desk. It's certainly got some pedigree. For us, there are definitely ghosts in that desk."



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## Rockfield stories

60ft Dolls

Retreating to Rockfield, the hedonistic Dolls recorded their debut album *The Big 3* with Pixies producer Al Clay, who was brought in specifically for the job after bigger names such as Bernard Butler and Pete Townshend had been banded about.

"We had to be locked away. We had a strict midday to 8pm curfew. It was the only way the record company could get us to record the album," said frontman Richard Parfitt. "Al Clay was great – he was the right guy for us.

"The wrong guy would have been somebody who turned up with a bottle of Jack Daniels, who wanted to join the band. Al was the opposite because he was like a military sergeant-major figure. He told us we weren't leaving the studio and he'd lock the door. It was like bootcamp.

"I remember Al laying out his clothes in his room – 10 shirts, 10 pairs of trousers, four pairs of shoes – and all of it was exactly the same.

"The shirts were all white, all the shoes were brogues. He looked exactly the same every day.

"He actually had an air rifle that he would fire at us when we were playing. It was his way of keeping us on our toes!"

The album was well-received and propelled the Dolls to a deal with Geffen in the US and support slots with Oasis and the Sex Pistols, but the band's appetite for destruction was insatiable and the group imploded not long after.



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"My brother was very good at writing songs and I was very business-orientated, so we made a good team," says Kingsley. "For our first recording we borrowed a tape recorder. This was 1960 and we'd never seen a tape recorder before."

Taking their songs to London, they played them for EMI producer George Martin and impressed pioneering producer Joe Meek so much he offered them a deal – releasing a record in the US as the Thunderbolts and in the UK as the Charles Kingsley Creation.

"All the time we were running rock shows at the Little Mill Hall in Monmouth, where we used to back Ricky Valance, Nero and the Gladiators, Shane Fenton and the Fontones, we put them all on at Little Mill," he recalls.

More crucially, the pair had created their own attic studio at Rockfield Farm. Not having anywhere to record, they built a studio in the attic of their farmhouse and started recording with their friends. Unwittingly, a legend was born.

"We got to know all the local groups and the local groups used to come up to the attic where we had created our own studio," says Kingsley. "We recorded them and used to charge about £5. We were a commercial studio, we just didn't know it. We were probably the first commercial studio outside London by accident.

"At first we called the studio Future Sounds. In 1965 a band from Newport turned up called the Interns. They had a record contract and we recorded a record called *Is It Really What You Want?* That was the first commercial record ever released from Rockfield. It was also the first time we ever had a record on the radio.

"We got better and better at what we did," remembers the Welshman. "Then, the same year, a band from America turned up called Elephant's Memory who eventually became the Plastic Ono Band, backing John Lennon and Yoko Ono. They had nowhere to stay so they stayed in the house with my mother. And that's when Rockfield became

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the world's first residential studio – all of this completely by accident, by the way."

Quickly gaining the patronage of legendary Welsh musicians such as Heather Jones, Tebot Pwys, Dave Edmunds and Love Sculpture, Andy Fairweather Low and Amen Corner and influential rockers Budgie, the business escalated and, with it, a change of name.

As for the name, Kingsley recalls it was Dave Edmunds who inspired the studios' more-than-suitable moniker.

"Dave drove in one day from Cardiff and on the motorway it said, 'Rockfield – turn left' and he said, 'Why don't you call it Rockfield after the village?' and we had never thought of that. So we went from Future Sounds to Rockfield on Dave Edmunds' suggestion."

Quickly things took off. Rockfield opened the Coach House Studio in 1968, followed by the Quadrangle Studio in 1973. It was a steep learning curve for the farming brothers.

"When we first started off in 1960, me and Charles had a big milking herd and we had 500 pigs," recalls Kingsley. "We were farmers as well as running a recording studio and we kept the farm going all the way through.

"We finally gave up milking the cows in 1972. So we were operating in these parallel universes. One side me and Charles were milking cows and running pigs and he was writing songs and building things and I was doing the business side and recording bands. People couldn't believe it, but it's a great story, isn't it?" he laughs.

Kingsley's new wife, Anne, left her job in the local bank to look after the books and they continued farming all the while. Animals were moved out of barns and musicians were moved into the spare bedroom. He admits their parents were, at first, a little bemused by it all.

"Initially they couldn't work it out at all, because they were farmers," he says. "Over time they got right behind us and they suddenly realised something was happening that was different to everybody else. My parents embraced it even if they

didn't understand me and Charles running from making hay and milking cows to recording groups. It was chaos really, but that's what it was."

Kingsley remembers Black Sabbath turning up in the late 1960s and acting as if they had discovered their own personal nirvana, the Brummie group never having visited a farm before.

"I hadn't actually heard of them, to be honest with you, but they were the first really big heavy metal band turn up," he remembers. "They did all the demos for *Paranoid* at Rockfield. I engineered the sessions and they were amazing. Ozzy [Osbourne] was a star and Tony Iommi is such a good guitarist. That was the first major rock group which turned up."

It seemed the idiosyncrasies of these music-loving farmers enchanted the visiting musicians.

"Yeah, I think so," Kingsley agrees. "They were coming to the country to stay, so we were different to anything they had experienced before. People like Ozzy said not many people had been on a farm before and they had never been to the country before. He'd never met people like us.

"They were so interested in us because we were so different to what they had met in London and other cities. We were like a novelty act to them. They liked us because we were so different. They thought it was brilliant because they weren't used to it."

Noting the success of Rockfield, other like-minded studios quickly emerged.

"People copied us all around the world," says Kingsley. "Charles and I proved that you didn't have to be in a major city to have a studio. We proved you didn't have to be in London, New York or Los Angeles to make a successful studio. They all copied us and now there are hardly any others left."

However, it was doubtful that those others had a landing strip for aeroplanes to jet rock stars and record companies in and out.

"That was the 1970s for you," laughs Kingsley. "I had to move the cows out of the way first. I wouldn't stand behind the aeroplane when it took off because you would be covered in cowshit and you'd be bloody plastered."



> Through the decades... psychedelic rockers Hawkwind at Rockfield in 1973, with bassist Lemmy on the right. Pictured right, Queen in the 1970s, Simple Minds' Jim Kerr recording a horse in the 1980s and Oasis in the 1990s



> Kingsley Ward with Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi



## Rockfield stories

### The Damned

The Damned star Dave Vanian has exploded a 38-year-old Welsh vampire legend by revealing he was the mysterious figure who made the local headlines back in 1980.

The punk legend was recording the band's Black Album at Rockfield Studios when he decided to step out for a breath of fresh air one night and take a stroll to a nearby cemetery.

"There was a full moon and, Monmouth in the full moon, you can see everything," he recalled. "It was very bright because there's no city there, it's just countryside."

"So I went for a walk to the local graveyard, which was, like, a mile down the road and I walked around and as I left and started heading back up the lane to the studio, I was caught in a Mini's headlights as I was coming out of the cemetery and the car veered off the road almost and then screamed round the bend."

"The local newspapers, the next few days, had a thing, where a woman claimed she had seen the ghost of a vampire coming out of the local cemetery. It became a big deal and I decided to say nothing."

Vanian, who has always enjoyed a good vampire tale, admitted he was dressed like a creature of the night: "It was very chilly and I was wearing an ankle-length wool cloak to keep warm," he laughed.

"I became entrenched in a ghost story. I've become an urban legend down there. I guess the locals will read this and realise they've never had a vampire ghost haunting the cemetery."

The 1970s was when Rockfield took a giant leap forward thanks to the band with whom the studio is inextricably linked - Queen.

"That's when it really started to change, when big producers started to come in the 1970s," says Kingsley. "Then Queen turned up and recorded their breakthrough single Killer Queen and Sheer Heart Attack."

"A year later they came back and had loads of money the second time because by then they were a huge band. They recorded the album A Night At The Opera and, of course, Bohemian Rhapsody."

Kingsley vividly recalls Freddie Mercury sketching out the song on a piano away from the rest of the band.

"He was in a stable storeroom which is an office now, where he was playing the piano. I said to Brian May, 'You've been here a week, you haven't done much' and he said, 'Freddie's been in there writing something.' I went inside and there's an old piano in the corner where he was putting the finishing touches to what became Bohemian Rhapsody. It wasn't called Bohemian Rhapsody then, it was called Freddie's Song. We were all outside playing frisbee in the yard, which is what we used to do in them days."

Did he get a sense that this song was something out of the ordinary, something otherworldly?

"Well, only when I heard it on Radio Luxembourg coming down the motorway three or four months later," he laughs. "I was like, 'My God, that's what he was playing in the storeroom.' I recognised it straight away. I couldn't believe it, to be honest. It was such a massive record."

The huge global success of the Bohemian Rhapsody movie provided an unexpected publicity boost for the studio.

"The thing about Bohemian Rhapsody the film, is that it mentions Rockfield Farm, not Rockfield Studios, but it has been seen by about 400 million people worldwide, I should think and, of course, Rockfield now is such a global name," says Kingsley.

For the young Lisa Ward, Freddie Mercury and co provided her first memory of bands at her home.

"They were the first band I can remember having seen at the studios and then recognising them when I saw them on television," she says. "I was six going on seven when they first came in 1973-74."

Growing up on a farm which she not only shared with her mother, father and sister, but also her uncle Charles, his wife and three children - not forgetting a host of visiting rock musicians - she was living a life unlike anybody else she knew. It was, however, a teen heartthrob who persuaded the youngster that her situation was a little different to that of any of her schoolmates.

"The weird thing is, when you're a kid you take everything at face value, don't you?" she says. "I didn't know any different. I was born into this environment. This was our norm, but one of the first occasions when it struck home how different it was for us was when David Cassidy came to the studio at the height of his fame. He came to have a look at the studio. This was at the height of the Partridge Family in the mid-1970s, when he was hugely successful."

It was her mum who hatched a surprise for Lisa and younger sister Amanda.

"For me or my sister, to have a day off school we would have had to have broken both legs," she recalls. "Basically we went to school no matter what, but this one particular day she said she was going to come and pick us up from school at midday for lunch, but didn't tell us why."

"The reason was that David Cassidy was coming over in the afternoon. She knew this was a big thing and would be hugely important to us."

"I went back into school and was talking about what had happened and nobody believed me. Luckily, they took photographs and there's a photograph of us all. There's five of us. 'Three cousins, my sister and myself, two of our ponies - who were the centre of our world - and David Cassidy. I had to take the picture into school to prove that it happened."

"That was first time I remember thinking, 'Hang on a minute, what we do is a bit different!'"

Lisa says that despite being frequently



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surrounded by rock stars, she has only been starstruck once.

"That was when Joe Strummer came to Rockfield to produce the Pogues' album Hell's Ditch. I was pretty starstruck then. I loved Joe Strummer and I loved the Clash - and to top it off, he was such a great bloke as well."

It's not been an easy ride for the family and the film details the various travails of the Ward family's fight to keep their business going in the face of an ever-shifting music industry.

Rockfield may have been there at the birth of some of the biggest bands in rock history, but time and new tastes took their toll on the studio. Charles Ward stood aside in the mid-1980s to create his own Monnow Valley Studios, with Kingsley taking sole ownership of Rockfield.

With advancing technology and a stronger focus on electronic music, the latter half of the 1980s provided some difficult times. After the recession, the music industry was struggling, but one band helped change the lives of the family and Rockfield - the Stone Roses, who decamped to the studios in an attempt to complete their hugely-anticipated follow-up to their eponymous debut album.

"I think they booked in, officially, for a couple of weeks. But they stayed. I think it was 13 months in the end that they were here. And that saved us. The Stone Roses saved Rockfield," says Lisa.

After studying design at college in London and living there for the best part of 10 years, Lisa returned to Rockfield in her late twenties. It couldn't have been timed any better. British music was buzzing thanks to the emerging Britpop scene - and even the Stone Roses had finally released their Rockfield-created opus The Second Coming.

"When I first came back, that was 1995," Lisa recalls. "Oasis were in one studio and [classical violinist] Nigel Kennedy was in another."

"I remember the first time I saw Oasis they were playing Glastonbury, it was when I was living in London."

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