



Laid in Wales

There are no gold discs on display and no deep shag pile carpets. The hub of the operation is a large farmhouse kitchen table – one that, if it could talk, could relate a few tales for the tabloids. JIM EVANS goes back to Rockfield to discover how it has chosen to kit up for its future.

ROCKFIELD STUDIOS WAS THE world's first residential recording studio and is among the best known facilities on the planet. During its 41-years, an A-Z of musicians and producers has passed through its oak doors, sat at the aforementioned table, and recorded hits in the adjacent studios.

The two-studio facility, which is located in the stunningly beautiful Wye Valley close by the market town of Monmouth, was started by brothers Charles and Kingsley Ward in the early 1960s and has gone through various changes during its colourful history, sometimes going with the swim, but more usually against it. Most recently, it has undergone what owner and co-founder Kingsley Ward describes as a major retrofit, combining a wealth of vintage analogue gear with the latest in Pro Tools.

For many years now, Rockfield has operated two main studios, The Quadrangle and The Coach House. Both are housed in what were formerly redundant farm buildings of solid stone construction, and each has a very large main live room plus additional booths and echo chambers. The recent 'retrofit' has seen the departure of the Neve VR60 consoles from both control rooms, replaced by a highly customised 48-channel Neve 8128 with extra EQs, vintage Neve and

API modules in The Coach House, and a similarly doctored MCI 500 series complete with Neve 1061 preamp EQs and API 550 modules in the Quadrangle.

Asked to account for the studios continuing to thrive while so many others are struggling or have given up the fight altogether, Kingsley doesn't beat about the proverbial bush. 'Look,' he observes in his lilting Welsh accent, 'it's simple. We're here because we have never been caught up in fashion. We have tended to totally ignore the directions other studios have taken and what they have done. Now we like to



think that we're probably so far behind that we're in front of the rest. We are what we are and don't make major claims to being anything else.'

Sitting in the sparsely yet practically furnished Coach House control room, he relates the latest chapter in the Rockfield story. 'Until comparatively recently, we had a Neve VR in here which was in fact the very first VR ever built. It was getting on a bit and we thought that with the high running costs, depreciation and so on, why not sell it and try something else, specially as the music business was in the doldrums. After much soul searching we decided to bite the bullet.

'We'd always been a Neve studio, so we started to look round for an old Neve. We came across this 8128 in Holland and my understanding was that while they were brilliant sounding consoles, they had various things with them like RF that people had told us we'd need to address.

'We got it in, stripped it down, rebuilt it, and now we've got no RF and no other problems. To date, everyone who has used it thinks it sounds better than the VR it has replaced.

'At the same time we also bought an old API console from Paris which hadn't worked in years, but we wanted the compressors, the mic amps, and the 550 EQs out of it. We cut it up and took out what we wanted. Then we got all the original Rockfield modules, which were built in the late 60s and early 70 by Rosser Electronics of Swansea. It so happens that Otto our maintenance engineer worked on all those modules and knew them inside out. They were brilliant sounding. Some of the greatest recordings in the world were made using them even though most people today have never heard of them. Bohemian Rhapsody, Rush's A Farewell To Kings – they were all done using Rosser modules and we've got eight of them available now in each studio.

'What we've aimed for here is to create a multi EQ studio, with the very best of EQ all based around an old console. We've also added vintage Neve 1061 EQs taken from another old desk we bought donkeys years ago and have since broken up. The overall result is that you can get the best tracking sounds. All this, combined with Pro Tools, which everyone seems to use these days, gives our clients the best of both worlds, the very best of the EQs from the past with the very latest of today's technologies. It was a decisive move for us and this studio hasn't looked back since we did that.

'We've got the same outboard we've always had,' he continues. 'We decided a long time ago that the record companies have no idea how studios operate and they won't pay for anything. The more you put in, the more they expect for nothing. So we don't bother anymore. We refuse point blank to go down that road. It's suicide road. You never stop spending, you get no thanks, they won't pay for it. So if they want it, let them buy it or hire it.'

Over the years, Kingsley and his team have rarely bothered with the services of interior designers, acousticians or other 'acoustic experts', preferring to go their own way and relying on their own ears and judgments as to what's required. That's still Rockfield policy today. 'Everything is based on what my brother Charles and I have done and learned over the years,' says Kingsley. 'We've had the occasional acoustic designer down here to check out the speakers and make a few suggestions, but generally we've always done everything ourselves.

'I'll tell you the secret,' he adds. 'The secret of studios is never ever call on the services of acoustic design experts and pay them a lot of money for what really doesn't amount to very much. Certainly, it's nice



to have a bit of advice now and then, but paying thousands, maybe millions of pounds to somebody for this sort of thing in my view is money down the pan.

'My answer is do it yourself. Stick your finger in your ear and think as if you were in a group or working as a producer – what would you want? You'd want to put the drums in one part to sound one way and then in another part not too far away where they'll sound different. It's the same thing with the guitars, naturally you can go from echo to nothing by moving round the studios, and the only way to do that is by designing the studio with multiple different areas in it, all different sounding.

'One of the reasons Rockfield has succeeded for 40 years is that we've always done the opposite to what everyone else has. My feelings are that over the last six months Rockfield has become a proper studio again. Producers and others who come here tell us that most other studios are simply acoustically designed boxes. We have been told that we are one of the few true studios. That's possibly right to a degree. It depends what you see in a studio and what you want from it. We built the studios ourselves with little money and we soon realised if you want to get good sounds you've got to put multiple functions in the room. It's not rocket science. All it takes is a brain in your head, a bit of hardboard and some curtaining.'

The main monitoring in both studios has not been altered for many years. 'Monitoring is all a matter of opinion and one man's meat is another man's poison,' Kingsley opines. Pointing to the built-in JBL 4350s, he continues: 'I discovered these old JBLs back in the 1970s when we switched from Rosser desks to Trident TSM consoles for a period, before we took the Neve route. We've had people come in here, put on a tape and the look on their faces says it all. They suggest what we need to do is get some...and they quote a well-known speaker system that can be found in many London studios and cost thousands of pounds. Two weeks later I ask the opinion of another producer and he says those expensive speakers sound dreadful and "If you get those I'm not coming back". We've decided to stick with what we've got and the majority of our clients are happy with them.'

On then to the Quadrangle. Having decided to sell the Quadrangle's 72-input VR — it eventually went to a studio in France — Kingsley and Co began their search for a vintage MCI 500 series desk. 'Years ago,

a good friend of mine Gus Dudgeon, now sadly no longer with us, told me that his favourite sounding console was the MCI 500 series. We found ours in Holland,' he explains.

The Quadrangle studio is a similar set-up to the Coach House except for the console. 'I think the way things are going now, with the resurgence of groups, what they'll want is the great sounds of the past combined with modern processing at the end. To do the latter, we have multiple versions of Pro Tools for each studio.'

Walking around Rockfield, Kingsley proffers a continuous stream of anecdotes and memories. Outside the Coach House he points to the stone wall that inspired Oasis' Wonderwall. Back in the farmhouse kitchen he recalls the time when Black Sabbath were in one studio and Hawkwind in the other. Joe Strummer recorded here last December and met up with Dave Edmunds and Robert Plant shortly before his death. In the converted feed store that now serves as the studio office, he points to the far wall. 'In the corner over there. That's where Freddie Mercury wrote Bohemian Rhapsody, using a clapped out old piano and surrounded by foodbins, saddles and cobwebs. I couldn't believe it. He sat in there for ages while the other boys played frisbee outside.'

The business remains very much a family concern, with Kingsley's daughter Lisa handling the bookings and his wife Anne helping out in administration. 'It's like a village really,' he says. 'For an operation like this to work it's very important to have people you like and who in turn like you. It's when you get people bringing engineers down from London and creating havoc that you run into trouble!'

And does he have any regrets; would he have done it any other way? 'It's been a fantastic story in so many respects. My one classic mistake was when we refurbished the Coach House and put the VR desk in. I got rid of 30 years of graffiti on the walls — all those famous names. Some have suggested the place should be closed and turned into a rock 'n' roll shrine, some sort of hall of fame. We've never made a fortune out of the studios and never will. At present we're doing fine, thank you very much. We don't want everyone to follow us, but if they do, we're not bothered. If it all ends tomorrow, we've had the fun and not a little glory — and it's been suggested we've sold more records than most of the other residential studios put together.' ■

Rockfield Roll of Honour



In its earliest days, starting as a small demo studio in the farmhouse attic, it was essentially a vehicle for the recordings of Kingsley and Charles Ward's rock combo and other local aspiring groups.

In 1965, accommodation was added and the studio was officially christened Rockfield after the nearby village of the same name at the suggestion of Dave Edmunds. Groups who started their careers at Rockfield in the 1960s included Andy Fairweather Low (Amen Corner) and The Silence, later to become Mott The Hoople. The studio's first number one single was Dave Edmunds version of Smiley Lewis' I Hear You Knocking. 'That was a major turning point for us,' says Kingsley. 'Up until then everyone had been saying studios couldn't possibly work outside London. I think we and others have proved otherwise.'

Through the years, those who have recorded at Rockfield include Rush (A Farewell To Kings, Hemispheres), Queen (A Night At The Opera, Bohemian Rhapsody, Sheer Heart Attack), Iggy Pop (Soldiers), Robert Plant (Pictures At Eleven), Simple Minds, Oasis (What's The Story...), Julian Lennon, Paul Weller, and many others.

During a 12-month spell in 1996/97, Rockfield had five number one albums — Oasis, Ash, Black Grape, The Charlatans and The Boo Radleys. Among recent and current visitors have been Super Furry Animals, Supergrass, Teenage Fanclub, Spiritualized and Eagle Eye Cherry.

In the New Year, Rockfield is planning to launch a record label as a vehicle for in-house productions and local artists — back where it all began. It also offers luxury bed and breakfast facilities to the general public when the studios aren't too busy. The brochure cautions: 'Rockfield is a working studio, you may occasionally hear sounds of recordings in progress.'

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