

Ruth Meech speaks to The Great Escape enthusiast Don Whistance about his love of the iconic film and its locations

HE was the king of cool and it was one of the most iconic movies of all time.

When Steve McQueen signed up for *The Great Escape*, it seemed a match dreamed up in heaven and in the 50 years since the film was made in 1962, neither man nor movie have lost any of their cult status.

The film, directed by John Sturges and which has a heavyweight cast including Richard Attenborough, Gordon Jackson, Charles Bronson, David McCullum and James Coburn – is based on the true-life tale of a group of Allied POWs who escaped from Stalag Luft III.

More than 70 got out but only three were successful – the rest being either recaptured or shot by their pursuers. Weymouth teacher Don Whistance is so taken by both McQueen and the film that he has built a website – the greatestescape.com – devoted to the area in Bavaria where the movie was made.

Don, a sports teacher at Conifers Primary School in Weymouth, has scoured the area around the towns of Fussen, Deining where the McQueen family lived while shooting and Pfonten where McQueen was filmed doing many of the motorbike stunts in the film.

He also visited the Munich film studio where the ‘prison camp’ was built and compiled the film’s timeline and history online.

Next month Don and a number of *Great Escape* devotees who have contacted him via the website are travelling to Bavaria to visit the locations and meet residents who can still remember the filming.

Don, who has made the pilgrimage two times before, said: “I think that sometimes you need to step out of your own reality and do something different.

■ Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*



King of McQueen

“I have always read about Steve McQueen – I don’t think he’s a god but it is one of those times when you think: ‘If only I had gone down a different avenue in life’.

“It is a wonderful thing to be able to walk the walk and tread where he has been.”

Among the people travelling with Don are a Canadian film-maker who is hoping to make a documentary about the trip as well as several long-time fans who follow the website. The places they will visit include the street where Gordon Jackson’s character MacDonald is duped by a Gestapo agent who wishes him ‘good luck’, the station where David McCullum’s character sacrifices his life for others and the road where an escaped Virgil Hilts (Steve McQueen) rigs a wire trap for approaching soldiers.

Don is also interested in returning to the town of Deining where Steve

McQueen stayed with his wife Neile and their two children.

He said: “The first time I went I couldn’t find the place where they lived in Deining so I stopped at a garage on the off-chance that someone would know and a woman said that when she was eight she would sometimes play with the McQueen children.

“She took me down the road and showed me the villa they stayed in, which was amazing. I now know what it was like for him when he got home from filming and saw his family.

“It was a glimpse of the private man away from the rest of the world. He would go home, go down to the village garage and tinker with his car – he was a great tinkerer.”

Don added: “I’m a teacher but for a time in the summer I can put that behind me, come to Bavaria with like-minded people and do something I really want to do.”