

## **Visualising Voices: collecting and animating memories of ss Great Britain's salvage**

### **Text of a paper presented at The Oral History Society Conference at the Victoria & Albert Museum, July 2010**

The subject of this paper is the animated film "The Incredible Journey", commissioned by ss Great Britain Trust and made by the University of the West of England (UWE). The film is one of the strands of the wider Incredible Journey oral history project, which has collected the memories of those involved in the salvage and return of *ss Great Britain* from the Falkland Islands in 1970. Before describing the film and the oral history project of which it is a part, it is necessary to contextualise it with a description of *ss Great Britain's* past life as a working ship, and her present as a museum and visitor attraction.

*ss Great Britain* was built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel between 1839 and 1843 in the Great Western Dockyard, Bristol. She was the first iron-hulled screw-propelled steamship ever built, and at the time was the largest iron ship in the world. She revolutionised ship design, and was the forebear of the great twentieth century liners. Her long and eventful working life included spells sailing to Australia carrying emigrants, acting as a trooping ship for soldiers bound for the Crimean War, and a period sailing to America as a cargo ship. Finally, after a particularly fierce storm off Cape Horn in 1886 damaged her so badly that it was not financially viable to make her seaworthy again, she ended her days as a floating warehouse in the Falkland Islands. In 1970, after a risky and highly dangerous salvage operation, she returned triumphantly to the Bristol dock where she had been built. Since then she has undergone an extensive conservation programme. The *ss Great Britain* site now comprises the ship herself, the Dockyard Museum, and the newly built Brunel Institute for conservation and learning. The site currently welcomes over 150,000 visitors a year, and has won 25 national and international awards, including the Gulbenkian Award for Museum of the Year and Large Visitor Attraction of the Year.

The salvage operation which The Incredible Journey project celebrates began in 1967 when the naval architect Ewan Corlett wrote to The Times saying that it was a disgrace that such a noble and important ship should be "rotting in exile" in the Falkland Islands. Corlett recruited others to his cause, including the millionaire "Union Jack" Hayward, and in 1970 an Anglo-German salvage team arrived in the Falkland Islands. Corlett's survey had shown that *ss Great Britain* was too damaged to float the 8,000 miles home to Bristol. A particular problem was the huge crack in the starboard side of her hull. Unable to float on her own, the only way to bring her back to Bristol was on a giant floating pontoon, of which there was only one in the world, the *Mulus*. The salvage operation was hazardous. First the team removed her masts, as they would make the ship too top-heavy on the pontoon. The crack in the starboard side of the hull was then filled (using mattresses donated by Falkland Islanders) and the water pumped out. Next the pontoon was submerged, *ss Great Britain* floated into position on top of it, and then the water was pumped out of the

pontoon so it rose with the ship positioned on top of it. The pontoon with its load was then hauled back across the Atlantic to Bristol by the tug *Varius*. Once docked at Avonmouth, *ss Great Britain* was patched to enable her to sail up the Avon to Bristol on her own, as the pontoon was too big to navigate the notoriously tricky Horseshoe Bend. The whole salvage operation would have been technically difficult enough without the fierce vagaries of the Falklands weather and the final challenge of an 8,000 mile voyage across the Atlantic. Taking these factors into account it was an epic feat of bravery and ingenuity.

Present day visitors to the *ss Great Britain* site are often intrigued by the story of the salvage, but the technical challenges faced by the salvage team have always proved hard to bring to life using conventional interpretation methods. The Incredible Journey animated film was conceived as a solution, and was also intended to attract new audiences to the ship's story. It also had a marketing role. As an independent museum and charity receiving no funding from local or central government, *ss Great Britain* Trust depends on its paying visitors for survival. The film offered a strong reason for Bristolians to visit the ship in 2010, in celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her return. In order to maximise the film's exposure, and therefore trigger as many visits as possible, it was developed to work on a range of delivery platforms, including web, broadcast and specific installation.

A partnership was formed with the University of the West of England (UWE)'s School of Animation. While UWE and *ss Great Britain* Trust had individual aims for the film, they also had goals in common. Both were keen to raise their reputations as organisations at the forefront of the development of interdisciplinary methods of interpreting and communicating archive material. There was also a shared desire for the project to explore the relationship between convergent media practice and the museum sector.

As well as the funding secured by *ss Great Britain* Trust from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), UWE secured a grant of £35,000 from the AHRC Knowledge Catalyst programme.

As well as a means for explaining the salvage operation, the film was also a way of making visual the oral history testimonies collected as part of the wider Incredible Journey project, and needs to be understood in that context.

The project is a Heritage Lottery Funded, 18 month-long oral history project to record the memories of those involved in the salvage operation and some of the 150,000 Bristolians who thronged the banks of the Avon to see the ship return. Other components have included inter-generational oral history work, talks on-site by volunteer guides, and an exhibition. The project had a series of aims. Firstly and most importantly there was an urgent need to record the memories of the (now mostly elderly) members of the salvage team. The project's second aim was to create testimony that would not only be used for on-site interpretation, but would also increase the critical mass of archive material about the salvage already held by *ss Great Britain* Trust. Finally, by collecting large numbers of memories from Bristolians, it was hoped to

reinforce the popular sense of the ship as a Bristol icon by presenting her as firmly rooted in the city's DNA.

To obtain the memories of such a range of contributors a hierarchy of collecting methods was used. The testimony of the core members of the salvage team was critical to understanding the technical business of the salvage. They were interviewed by trained volunteers using high-quality recording equipment. Interviews were transcribed and summaries produced. As it was impossible to interview every Bristolian who was a spectator when the ship returned, Memory Collection Boxes and Cards were conceived and placed in libraries, community centres and pubs all over Bristol. Completed cards were harvested regularly and displayed on a Memory Wall in the Dry Dock at ss Great Britain. Nearly 1,000 cards were completed during the Incredible Journey project.

Planning for the animated film started before the oral histories were collected. The decision was taken to make a 12-minute film (the maximum length UWE were confident of delivering), divided into three shorter films. This made sense because the salvage story also split neatly into three parts: the salvage operation in the Falklands; the journey home across the Atlantic; and the homecoming into the Great Western Dock. Each film had a different visual treatment. The first film, showing the ruined hulk of the ship abandoned in the Falklands, was made up of a mixture of painted backgrounds and photographs. The idea for this treatment came from ss Great Britain Trust's existing collection of photographs, which showed the Falklands as a bleak, beautiful, uninhabited wasteland. The oral histories underlined this. It was also felt that the grey, windswept qualities of the first film would create a dramatic contrast with the noisy, peopled final film. The visuals for the second film, dealing with the journey across the Atlantic, were made up of graphics. This was partly expediency, as very few actual images of the ship exist for this section of the salvage operation. Here the oral testimony of the German crew of the tug *Varius* created the narrative thrust of the film. The Oral History Project Officer had interviewed them in Hamburg, and one had mentioned that a milk bottle had somehow found its way onto the pontoon *Mulus*, remaining in place for the whole of the voyage across the Atlantic. UWE incorporated the milk bottle into the film, and it made a homely visual counterpoint to the epic nature of the voyage. The third film, depicting the final leg of the journey from Avonmouth to the Great Western Dock, was illustrated by drawn animation for two reasons. Firstly there were a number of crowd scenes in this film, which were most easily produced by illustration. Secondly, this film provided the dramatic and emotional climax of the three and so needed to connect with the audience in a way that would not have worked using abstract photographic or graphic representations.

As the interviews proceeded and the Memory Cards were collected, the emotional resonance of the memories became clear. For many spectators the memory was clearly linked to a point in their lives, often one with an emotional significance. One respondent, for instance, remembered the day the ship came home particularly because it occurred just after his mother and father had separated and it was his first outing with his father alone. Even those

participants whose involvement had no obviously emotional trigger still showed a deep connection to the ship and several were moved to tears while being interviewed. Others' accounts had a notably elegiac tone. The vividly personal nature of the memories added an emotional resonance to the ostensibly technical nature of the salvage.

While the fulcrum of many memories was a personal moment specific to the individual, there was also a factor common to many: the emotionally powerful concept of "home". This became an important thread running through the film. Framing the salvage as a "homecoming" enabled the reconciling of the geographical breadth of the project, provided a thematic underpinning for all three films, and created a narrative trajectory with an instantly engaging undertow of emotional depth.

While the conceptual framework of The Incredible Journey animation was in place at the start of the oral history project, and formed part of the application to HLF, the precise details of its visual appearance were developed in response to the oral histories themselves. As many of the interviewees had been identified in advance it was possible for ss Great Britain Trust to suggest to UWE those particular parts of the story with potential for detailed animation. When the actual interviews had been completed, ss Great Britain Trust staff working closely with UWE selected the most appropriate clips, and UWE used them to add visual detail to the basic story of the salvage. For instance Lyle Craigie Halkett, one of the divers who stuffed the starboard crack with mattresses, described the ship as being so full of holes that she looked like a postage stamp. This vivid image was a gift to the animators, who created a shot of the hull to go with the voiceover. Several interviewees spoke of the moment the ship floated for the first time, particularly noting that all the team stood for some time admiring "her lovely lines" (Lord Strathcona testimony). Consequently the accompanying shot dwells on the shape of the bow. The UWE team's commitment to the project, and their willingness to engage deeply with the oral history interviews, made the early stage of film development an iterative collaborative process.

The visualisation of the ship herself came from a number of sources. While the oral history testimonies added a gloss, the main sources were ss Great Britain Trust's substantial collection of images of the salvage and the plans taken from the ship during the preliminary salvage survey. The different stages of her life were illustrated using a range of styles. For instance a "ghost ship", taken from the Joseph Walter engraving of the ship's launch in 1843, showing her in her glory days of gilt and shiny paint, was overlaid on top of the animation of the rotting hulk. For the period of the physical salvage she was largely portrayed using computer-generated illustration (CGI) in order to emphasise the technical nature of the operation. The final stage, when she made her stately way up the Avon past cheering crowds, showed her as though she were a photograph in a newspaper, and as she sailed lines of newsprint flowed around her. This change in the way the ship was presented underlined the iconic nature of the final leg of her journey home; many contributors to the project noted particularly the symbolic moment when she

passed under Brunel's other masterpiece, the Clifton Suspension Bridge, for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

This visualisation of the ship felt profoundly satisfying and reflected well her various incarnations. Depicting individual members of the salvage team was more problematic. The camaraderie and Boys Own atmosphere of the small team came over very clearly in the oral history accounts, and it was obvious that without this team spirit the job wouldn't have got done. It was vital therefore to depict individuals somehow. Animated talking heads were dismissed as too cartoon-like. A solution was found that used photos of the team taken at the time, extracted from their original context, and placed as static figures in the film. In contrast the memories taken from the Memory Cards and included in the final film were illustrated by generic hand-drawn figures.

An unforeseen issue, which demonstrated the importance of respecting the primacy of oral history material, arose during the voicing and recording of the memories from the Memory Cards. These had been completed by members of the public, and therefore were not associated with key individuals as were the interviews. The memories created a vibrant picture of the last leg of the ship's journey home and were a key source for the film, but as they existed as text rather than recordings they needed to be read out loud and recorded for use in the film. UWE arranged for students from the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School to read the memories. It wasn't until the animatic<sup>2</sup> of the final film was viewed that it became clear that this wouldn't work. Not only were the voices too young (to remember 1970 one would have to be at least 42 now), the sound was too clean; the contrast between the authentic oral history recordings, made in the interviewees' homes, and the studio-recorded memories, made the latter feel synthetic. Moreover, they also felt too staged, and clearly sounded scripted. This was partly due to the fact that they originated as pieces of writing and were therefore considered and constructed in a way that spontaneous speech, with its stops and starts and idiosyncratic phrasing, is not.

The solution to this problem came from UWE. The animation team recorded members of their administrative staff reading the memories. The resulting recordings harmonised better; the voices were older and the accents often properly Bristolian. Less happily, some of the readers had altered odd words in the memories, supplying their own instead or subtly rephrasing. In all but one of the cases it was decided to leave these in, as the inherent meaning wasn't altered and the original wording from the cards was retained in ss Great Britain's archive of the project. In one instance, however, it was felt that the meaning was changed to an unacceptable degree. The memory stated that on the day the ship returned there was a "carnival atmosphere", whereas the reader recorded it as "an atmosphere like a circus". The memory was re-recorded.

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<sup>1</sup> Though Brunel designed the Bridge before he built ss Great Britain, it was not built when the ship was launched in 1843.

<sup>2</sup> A series of still images and rough sound track edited together and displayed in sequence.

In conclusion, it's possible now to look back on the project and make an assessment of lessons learned, perceived risks that didn't materialise, and what might have been done differently. At the start of the project a number of risks were identified by ss Great Britain Trust. The Trust's staff team had no knowledge of animation techniques, making it essential for them to learn quickly about the stages and processes involved. In fact this turned out not to be a problem; the team were very clear that they wanted the film to have a fresh, modern appearance inspired by the existing visual sources, and UWE proved adept at interpreting their views.

A further risk was that ss Great Britain Trust had never carried out oral history work before, with the author (Director of Museum & Educational Services) the only staff member with expertise in this area. The project would have to rely extensively on volunteers; HLF funded a Project Officer and Volunteer Co-ordinator post, but all recording and transcribing was to be carried out by volunteers. Again, this risk was mitigated by the Project Officer and volunteers' wholehearted commitment to the project and their willingness to absorb and abide by the principles of oral history.

A further risk was that the Trust was moving into a pressured project-delivery phase, with the Brunel Institute for conservation and learning due to open in autumn 2010. Luckily most of the development stage of the film was finished before the pressure began to build in earnest.

There was also the issue of managing expectations of staff, volunteers and trustees of ss Great Britain Trust. The solution to this was regular updates, for instance the UWE project manager gave a presentation at a staff and volunteer training day, and volunteer meetings were used for further news.

A number of lessons have been learned from the project. ss Great Britain Trust massively underestimated the amount of input needed from staff during the film's development stage. This input was vital to ensure the film met the project's aims, and also used the primary documentary and oral sources in a way that was both rigorous and sympathetic.

It has also become clear that it's vital to have a very clear aim for a project such as this. The Trust was totally focussed on the primary aim, that of interpreting the salvage operation in an accessible and visually exciting way. This focus, known and shared throughout the Trust as well as with UWE, guided every decision on the film.

The benefits for the Trust from the project have been significant. Capacity has been increased amongst the staff and volunteer teams, and the project has generated substantial amounts of publicity. A Twitter campaign ran from March to July 2010, using extracts from the oral history interviews. This successful experiment with Web 2.0 has prompted the Trust to develop a strategy for harnessing Web 2.0 for interpretation.

Finally, the collaboration with UWE has been deeply rewarding. Working on an emerging project proved a learning experience for ss Great Britain Trust,

and not knowing what the results would be was exhilarating, if a little like being aboard a runaway train. Excellent relationships between both project teams, and regular formal and informal updates, meant that both organisations were happy to live with a measure of uncertainty. It was also exciting for ss Great Britain Trust to find the UWE team so enthused by the salvage story, and the iterative process of film development gave the Trust a new view of the epic tale of the ship's rescue – in Shakespeare's words "still telling what is told". Finally, the Trust has a film which makes creative and exciting use of a whole range of primary sources, and which will bring the story of ss *Great Britain's* voyage home to a whole new audience.

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