

HISTORY PROJECT

Interview: PETER MORLEY

Extract from interview: Preparation for the television coverage of Sir Winston Churchill's Funeral

I was asked in 1960, again by John McMillan, who was part of the network committee. ITV decided, corporately if you like, to do an ITV programme which became known as the State Funeral of Sir Winston Churchill and in 1960 I was asked whether I would be the overall director of that and I was thrilled to be asked. To me Churchill was a great hero and to think that by that time I had only been in television five years, to be asked to be responsible for that, which I realised was going to be a tremendously important days in the Country's history. I felt good about that, I felt thrilled about that and I was proud to be asked. I didn't realise what - what was implied really. It was the fact of being asked. I had been, as a young soldier at the end of the war, ended up in Berlin and riding in my tank past Churchill in the Victory Parade. Then I was chosen to be one of his guards at the Potsdam conference. So I had a little close affinity- more than most people had -simply because I had met him there once. I thought that it was terrific to be asked and of course it was the very first program that I was going to do without having a transmission date. it was that in itself which caused a different type of tension for making programmes. And this was going to be ITV's largest outside broadcast and it had to be supported by all the major and some smaller companies largely with ironmongery, with cameras. There were simply not enough around. It also meant that I could never go on holiday without a little transistor radio, I remember the first one I bought in 1960 was in Japan, a little Sony, -Just in case the balloon went up. Because we were told from day one that we would have a minimum of five days between the death of Winston Churchill and the Funeral. It was likely to be more than five days but all the planning one had to do, had to be on the basis that one had five days notice to put this huge operation together. And I was issued from the Lord Chamberlain's office - Norfolk - the Duke of Norfolk, with a huge loose-leaf book. It was very thick indeed and only a few hundred of those were printed and copy number one went to the Monarch and the others went to all the various people taking part and one went to the BBC, to Anthony Craxton who was going to do it for the BBC. And I ended up with the other one which I have proudly held onto ever since. That (book), already, in 1960, prescribed in extremely great detail, and it was known as SCP which stood for State Ceremonial Procedure, and as I said in very great detail exactly what was going to happen on that day. And the route had been decided on and I think it is important to remember that this was going to be the grandest state funeral since and the funeral of the Duke of Wellington. The monarch's funeral is prescribed and is in many ways far less ambitious, in terms of geography, than this amazing special dedication was going to be.

How far ahead did you hear about this?

In 1960 and the broadcast was on 25 January 1965 .So it was some five years really in the planning stage and I think the most difficult part other than the technical side which was enormously complicated and actually the difficulty of doing the programme. And for me personally, I think the most difficult thing was to try and persuade all the other companies who were prepared, some rather reluctantly, at very short notice, some of them to strip studios of cameras, in order to have them out in the street, to make them realise what the mood of the day was going to be.

I was lucky enough, I could project forward to the day whenever it was going to happen, I could sense that this was going to be a really important day in the history of this Island and to try and get that across rather than to say so look on a certain day- I can't give you the dates-I want a director and two scanners and seven and a half cameras or whatever. It was very hard to get that across so that really was a great difficulty. In the end, because all worked extremely well but it was a constant, a constant battle. Now this huge loose-leaf document had all these amazing details in it so that what we did in Television House in Kingsway in the big room on the first floor, which became the SCP room, and I had the graphics department blow-up from London maps from maybe even from the A-Z map. Blow up so that we had going round the wall the actual route all done on the same scale so that it started from the Palace of Westminster to Trafalgar Square then it went then through the Strand and Fleet Street and Ludgate Circus for the service in St Paul's and then the procession went through the City to the Tower of London. Then by river procession to the pier at the Festival Hall and another procession to Waterloo Station and then onto a train and then to a private ceremony at Bladen, near Blenheim. And so this route was a on a map going round the wall and I had graphics do what I suppose is called a yardstick but we could actually, to scale on a large piece wood, exactly the make-up of the procession to scale. So that at anyone point you could put that against the wall and you knew when the head of the Procession had reached, let's say, Trafalgar Square and the Cortège and the gun carriage and the family and that band and the other band- they wanted more bands then added to it, so you knew exactly where they were geographically. Also one knew the timing of it which was done down to the very second. The pace per minute at which the procession moved. So one could do a breakdown that, at a certain time, that particular section of the Procession was going to be at that very point. So that was already laid down in 1960 and had been in the loose-leaf book. Every so often in another confidential 'for your eyes only' envelope arrived and you opened it and it would tell you to tear up certain sheets and replace them with other ones. So that one was able to plan this in very great detail.

Now I had very good luck. Graham Watts who was another director at Rediffusion, he teamed up with me so that he became as it were – calling him an assistant director isn't really the right word but he became an assistant to the whole directing effort for the Churchill Funeral and he was very much involved with the finding camera positions. In the end we ended up with 45 cameras of which I think I had 2 as captain cameras in studio nine but all the rest were on the route and they had to be got from somewhere and this is where the various company had to be asked to provide crews and directors and equipment. Very early on I became aware of something which I found at first irritating and then later on extremely disagreeable. Because it dawned on me that every time that we had an idea that the ought to have a camera up here or down or build some scaffolding and stick it out somebody's window in the Strand etcetera. The moment you asked for permission to do that. It had to be done then through the Ministry of Works who were responsible for allocating camera positions That would have been quite easy had it not been for this discovery that I had made, that we were in direct competition to the BBC. And that I found extremely difficult because the BBC had much more experience about this type of broadcast and this type of operation. The BBC had clout and ITV did not have clout and I remembered a very early meeting which the Duke of Norfolk called in some big office in Northumberland Avenue. An ACP meeting where the broadcasters were to be represented, just television not radio and it was a huge room with a huge board table, we could hardly see the person at the other end. From ITV I think the people who were present if I recall, myself and Graham Watts and Basil Bultitude who was the controlling engineer and one other administrator. There were maybe four possibly five of us and when the Duke of Norfolk came in, he had a very dry sense of humour, the first thing he said 'Everybody here from the BBC

please put their hands up' and fifty hands shot up what seemed like fifty and everyone here representing ITV and up came five hands. He just fell about laughing but he made no comment. But that has already told you a great deal of what we were up against and it meant really that every time that we found a camera position, and Graham Watts was much involved in this, with the engineers, by the time we had asked The Ministry of Works for permission, the next day the BBC would be in that position but six inches higher. Because Peter Dimmock and all his staff who were hugely experienced at this, just simply walked through our arrangements. It came to fairly disagreeable arguments. I found that very distasteful when all I could think about was that day when we were actually paying farewell to Winston and I found that you I'm talking really throughout this five-year period and by that time that the GPO had to build ducts for cables. At that time London was cabled up underneath by the GPO and certainly the BBC or ITV network had to pay great rental charges because you know we had five days notice, we did not know transmission dates so the ducts had to be built and there were cables and lines were on permanent hire.

While I was in charge of 'This Week' when I did all the studio direction, every time I would go in the studio (Studio 9) every month yet another row of monitors would appear, put in for this great day. The studio itself being re-equipped in order to control the broadcast from the studio 9. So this was slowly developing and didn't stop all the other programs I was making. These were some extramural activities but they were very tough and very demanding, there came a point in 1964 when and I said to John McMillan that I find it quite intolerable that we should be in dire competition with the BBC and seen to be in dire competition the BBC on a day when I felt very strongly that British broadcasting ought to speak with one voice and there shouldn't be two competing networks doing this. John agreed and he said it may mean, what you saying Peter, that you may have to give up doing this. I said, well I thought about a great deal. If it turns out to be a better broadcast and it is a joint effort than I be prepared to give up, but with four years of preparation something I dearly ideally wanted to do. And he called a meeting at Television House to put this proposition to the BBC. Stuart Hood was then in charge of BBC television -Controller -he was in charge this was 1964. He came to Television House with Peter Dimmock and I forget the names I think it might have been Harry Middleton -I can't remember- anyway a small BBC contingent. I had been briefed to put the case out for trying to our call an end to this rivalry and so I made my little speech about that about our speaking with one voice and I said as does to me seems not merely ridiculous but somehow against the spirit of what should be happening on that day for us to be seen to be competing and I turned to Anthony Claxton and I said look I've got plans here, 45 cameras, all the crew and all the equipment and we are prepared to hand all over to you. You can use them - you can use any positions that you think are better than yours you can have all this at your disposal.

That was talked about for a bit and I think the BBC was rather taken aback at this, then they said to me well why don't you put on your own narrator we would just give you feed of all the pictures and I was against that because the way I could see, the way I want to do the programme, it was very important for me to be very close to my main narrator. Because the way I was going to do this was rather different than the straight OB. I said I think for us to work on a feed, not knowing what was coming up next, it didn't seem right. Why don't you do it on behalf of British broadcasting. Richard Dimbleby who will do a superb job on it. Why don't we do that -the rest of the world's can see it and here's British television paying its last tribute in on Winston's sort of great exit. They went away and said they would think about and let us know. Well the whole thing became an absolute lemon. In the end, because the BBC's attitude was that if they did that and took up this notion of doing the whole thing, speaking with one voice, then at the next state occasion, ITV might claim it is ITV's turn and the BBC, seeing itself

as the national broadcasting organisation, could not forfeit the right to do it. So it all that came to nothing and the rivalry I'm afraid remained right to the end about this.

Question

Have you by now thought of using actors like Olivier and Paul Schofield?

Well what I wanted to do, and this was not in order to be different from the BBC, because I have never seen - I think I saw the Coronation so many years before I forgot what that was like. I did have enormous respect Richard Dimbleby, as he was absolutely past-master at it but it wasn't that I wanted to be different from the BBC, but I suppose it is really with the sort of documentary background, that my whole approach to it was rather different and I felt that here was an opportunity while the live pictures were unfolding in front of the screen, in front of our eyes, while they are and to try and impose on this and a sort of the slights of documentary flavour, basically to remind those people who had forgotten and the generations which did not know what Churchill stood for and what indeed we were celebrating on that day. We were celebrating the end of an amazing life of somebody who's served this country and the most amazing way and it was important I think to remind people of really what Churchill stood for and what his era if you like stood for. And that is when I got researchers to find – first of all I wanted to collect a lot of Churchill's speeches and writings and broadcasts. I got someone to research for the prologue and the epilogue - I wanted some of this poetry to be spoken by someone What I thought I would do, I would illustrate Churchill's life by using the words that he'd either spoken or written and I would get those spoken by people who could speak well and who would themselves add a little bit to the occasion of that day and that is why I we approached the Laurence Olivier to do the actual Churchill quotes. For the prologue to the whole programme I got Paul Schofield to read that and I pre-recorded that with him. In fact I would pre-record all these things with these people

Question - What kind of words were in the Prologue?

The prologue really they were written by Jimmy Cameron. I ought to tell you here that I was very keen for Jimmy Cameron to do it, to speak it. The ITA wouldn't allow that, because in certain circles, and it caused me a huge heartache and it almost caused me to resign from the whole thing, because of his so-called left-wing views. The ITV network said they will happily accept his words, they were utterly brilliant, but they wouldn't allow him to speak it. I had to do some great heart searching. I've always felt very ambivalent about whether I should've chucked it all in or not, but for me in the end the occasion won over that. You know you take a decision and it is with enormous regret which I've never ceased to redress and I had to say -we want your words but I'm not allowed to use you. He was awfully good about it. I think it always always hurt him deeply but he was a great pro as you know and he was very good about it. Because he did some marvellous work, I was working with him on 'This Week' for us. He became a great hero -he was such a brilliant journalist -a brilliant writer, so I found that very, very hurtful and it is always and I have never really come to terms with it.

So it was merely using -I'm quite sure that Richard Dimbleby wrote, prepared (his words) in advance but I just wanted that journalistic approach and Jimmy had a great, great sense of history.