

A Report of the MEMO Micro Festival, Portland, 13 - 22 May 2008

The three main aims of the Festival were realized - to introduce the MEMO Project to Portlanders and to invite their responses and comments; to provide an opportunity to test the Project's proposed activities on a small scale and; to make an occasion for collecting imagery in stone and on film for future use in seeking sponsors and raising funds.

A series of lectures, a play, stone-carving to do as well as watch, and bell-casting and tolling offered scope for visitors to listen and learn, to observe and enjoy taking part in activities designed to inform and warn of the extinction of biodiversity and to show how geologically and historically MEMO would be uniquely sited on Portland.

The first, the public consultation component, was an unqualified success. Some 400-500 people visited the site over the period, one-half of whom were from Portland. All comment was approving and enthusiastic and two visitors who had formerly been outspoken in their criticism of the Project came forth to say that their opinions had changed. One has become an active supporter.

Included among those who registered their support and enthusiasm for the MEMO Project are officials from the Young Offenders Institute, from the media department at Weymouth College and from the Town Council. The general opinion expressed was that MEMO was good for Portland. Following the lecture by Professor Prance a member of the audience wrote, "Congratulations on a wonderful and inspiring lecture and also the possibilities of the whole project" which he deemed "brilliant - an epic event" and recommended an annual festival.

One hundred people of all ages, from 8 to 80, participated in carving the floorpiece of Unique Tessellations designed by sculptor Peter Randall-Page and were delighted to carve their initials in finished pieces. One piece was carved by three generations of the same family and another by a young boy who persevered over both days despite having an especially hard stone to work. Throughout supervision was provided voluntarily by professional stone-carvers.

The casting by Andy Griffiths from the West Wakes School of Art of the bell designed by sculptor Marcus Vergette also proved to be a fascination for the visitors who braved delays, errors and inclement weather to watch and be there when the mould was broken.

Three superb carvings were created Harry Brockway, Tim Lees and Joanna Szuwalska. The West African Black Rhino, the Gastric Brooding Frog and the Hawaian Ha-Ha Tree will go on exhibition alongside that of the Great Auk carved by Sebastian Brooke. Many of the visitors were fascinated by the process as well as the art and craft of making sculpture from Portland's Jurassic limestone which revealed its geology through sight and - to the surprise of most - smell.

It was not possible to film the entire festival but hundreds of photographs, many taken by visitors, provide a rich source of imagery. Unexpectedly, a narrative emerged too, out of the unscripted demands on the audience and the participants of continuous activity over four days. Audience participation occurred when it was not anticipated particularly during the casting of the bell when the assembled crowd were invited to toss their (zinc-rich) coppers into the crucible to act as a 'flux'. When the bronze was finally poured late on Sunday morning, slight damage was caused to the edge of the mold. The result, strangely appropriate, is a bell to be tolled for extinct species - with a piece missing.

Audience numbers varied for the lecture series. Those lectures with local content attracted the larger numbers; 40 people came to hear Stuart Morris, speaking about 'The history of quarrying on Portland' and as many to hear Professor Torrens on 'Was Dorset the birthplace of environmental geology?' Poorer attendance at the two excellent lectures treating extinction and biodiversity loss (by Professor Ghilleen Prance and Dr. Sam Turvey) highlight the need for extra thought and effort in publicizing future talks.

More than a hundred people came to the two performances of 'Hanging Hooke' which like the lectures was held in the hall of the Royal Manor Arts College. In telling and acting the story of Robert Hooke and his science in such a way as to render each exciting and sympathetic, the work of author Siobhan Nicholas and actor Chris Barnes perfectly complimented the ambitions of the MEMO Project. And did some good for science teaching too. A senior teacher at the school was overheard to say that it was the first time he had understood gravity!

The bell which had cast a mesmerizing spell over onlookers during its production and which had involved them in enthusiastically supplying some elements necessary for its successful firing (zinc) and later hanging (rope) signalled the close of the Festival on Portland when at 8.00 on the morning of 22nd May, United Nations International Day of Biodiversity, it was tolled for extinct species for the first time, in the presence of some 40 islanders.

Tolled again, six hours later, by Robert Hooke (aka Chris Barnes) on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the MEMO Bell brought the Festival to a formal close even as its message resounded.

Summary

The Festival was a success in almost every important aspect: one hundred per cent support was given to the project by the hundreds of people who attended, most local to the area and half from Portland. More than approval the Project generated tremendous goodwill and enthusiasm among the public providing a solid base from which to apply for planning permission and funding to take the project further. It was achieved at a cost of £13,125 through the generosity of the sponsors, though the value of the many generous gifts in kind and voluntary labour is estimated to have amounted to at least as much again.

Media publicity was given in sympathetic coverage on Wessex FM, articles by Hilda Swinney in the Dorset Echo (15 and 19.05.08) and by Charles Clover, Environment Editor of the Daily Telegraph (23.05.08).

Carving in public and public carving excited and captured peoples' interest in the subject matter as well as the process, and proved itself an effective way of explaining facts and developing public awareness. Personal involvement was the critical factor in enlisting engagement. Commitment follows. The MEMO Micro Festival can stand as a model for future activities in support of the Project.

The idea of MEMO has been tested on Portland in this pilot project and has not been found wanting: Portlanders have shown their enthusiasm for it, leading scientists and authors have endorsed it and the United Nations has recognized its power.

It remains only to bring it about.

Participants

The Festival was organized by the MEMO team, Sebastian Brooke, Mike Kelly, Margaret Culley, John Culley and Maryann Woodrow.

It could not have taken place without the assistance and generosity of many on Portland, in Dorset and beyond, in particular Stone Firms Ltd. and including Dorset County Council, the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Team, The Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's, Lomand Homes, Jurassic Coast Trust, and Southwell Business Park. Services in kind were generously provided by Weymouth College, Royal Manor Arts College, Richard Paisley, Weymouth and Portland Borough Council, Weymouth and Portland Partnership, Eden Project, Real World, the MEMO Portland Supporters Group, MEMO's trustees, patrons and supporters nationally.

Nor could success have been achieved without the thoroughly professional and skilled contributions of the lecturers, artists, carvers and actors who informed and entertained the public throughout many of whom worked on a voluntary basis.

Chris Barnes actor
Harry Brockway stone carver
Anthony Denman stone carver
Gillian Forbes stone carver
Andy Griffiths bell founder
Tim Lees stone carver
Paul Lister stone carver
Stuart Morris author and historian
Siobhan Nicholas author and actress
Matt O'Donovan stone carver
Ghilleen Prance botanist
Peter Randall-Page sculptor

Joanna Szuwalska stone carver
Hugh Torrens geologist
Sam Turvey zoologist
Marcus Vergette sculptor

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