

Site Specific Storytelling

A Case Study – from the Artist's Perspective

Example: La Hougue Bie, Jersey, June 2007.

Client: Jersey Heritage Trust

Project Brief: to devise material for 6 x 45 minute daytime sessions during a weekend special event, suitable for adults and families, focusing on a Neolithic passage grave.

The Site

La Hougue Bie is described as 'one of the finest Neolithic passage graves in Europe'. It was excavated in 1924. It is cruciform in plan and as one enters it one has to crouch very low for the first 15 metres or so. The main chamber is gently illuminated with tiny lights and a small number of adults could stand in there, possibly a dozen, but it would be a squeeze. The ritual passage is covered by a 12 metre high, grass covered earth mound on which stands a 12th century Norman chapel. The site also houses a small purpose built archaeological museum; a medieval well; a reconstructed Neolithic family dwelling; a collection of Quern stones; a German air raid shelter that now contains a war memorial to the WW2 slave workers who died labouring to construct German military installations on Jersey; an administrative block and a gift shop.

Planning materials

The artist was sent a site guidebook three months in advance and had access to the website (<http://www.jerseyheritagetrust.org> & http://www.prehistoricjersey.net/La_Hougue_Bie.shtml).

He was able to telephone and discuss the project in advance with the site curator to gain a clear idea of what they expected from the project. He arrived the day before the event and had access to the site for several hours after the venue had closed to the public. He was given a full guided-tour by a well-informed staff member and then had an hour with the Island's chief curator of archaeology and head curator of the site. He was allowed to browse the reference library and borrow several volumes for the weekend.

The Storytelling Environment

The passage grave has an impressively reconstructed entrance. With the green hill looming above, the chapel profiled against the sky, and the low, dark entrance to the grave itself, beckoning mysteriously below, it offered a perfect storytelling stage – a focus; acoustic support from the stone and enigmatic mystery. The storytelling was planned to take place at the grave entrance. There were benches for the elderly and the fine gravel path was relatively clean and comfortable to sit on. Jersey Heritage Trust had also put a wet weather option in place. They had hired a substantial marquee with seating (capacity 100) and a stage.

The Creative Response

The artist, Ben Haggarty, writes:

"My task is to stimulate the audience's imagination by creating a context in which they will subsequently view an environment or an object with new eyes. I create a site specific performance which is primarily entertaining – but into which a surreptitious pedagogical element can be inserted if deemed necessary. La Hougue Bie was a very rich and rewarding site to be invited to enhance with stories.

I was sent good briefing materials and I was able to access further information on the net. This meant I was able to create the rough outline of a programme in advance and bring to Jersey source materials for a dozen stories from which to choose. I have a good repertoire of *translocatable* stories and have worked many times on prehistoric sites. I was able to bring several conjectural Mesolithic stories; a very good Siberian creation myth that gives the origins of corn and marks the transition from

hunter-gathering societies to agricultural societies; a special interest in Irish mythology gives me access to many mound-dweller tales and I found the image of the chapel on the hill enigmatic.

Once I saw the site I was able to make swift decisions. The passage grave harbours a secret: it has an equinoctial alignment with the rising sun. As at the midwinter solstice in the famous passage grave of Newgrange in the Boyne Valley, Ireland, a probe of sunlight creeps right into the grave touching a stone at the head of the passage and then withdraws. At La Hougue Bie this marvel happens twice a year in the Spring and in the Autumn. The legend of the construction of the chapel involves the killing of a dragon and such stories are generally accepted to be metaphors for the triumph of Christianity over pagan religions. The chapel was dedicated to 'Notre Dame de la Clarté' (Our Lady of the Dawn) and I felt that the dedication cannot have been accidental. Even though the passage grave had been intentionally blocked and covered at least 2,000 years prior to the construction of the church, I suspect that oral tradition must have kept some association between the mound and sunrise alive (and thus the implication that it was a pre-Christian ritual site). There is academic controversy as to whether the builders of the chapel knew of the existence of the grave below; however, either which way, the fact remains that the chapel is exactly in alignment above it.

There are many Megalithic structures in the Channel Islands and often the legends surrounding them refer to the petrification of witches. From books of Jersey folklore borrowed from the centre's reference library, I learned that Jersey has a long history of witchcraft and witch persecution— and that witches are cautiously, even respectfully, referred to as 'Les Dames'. There is an argument that the trefoil head of many passage graves is uterine in form – and therefore that the mound above could represent a pregnant belly, certainly the cyclical penetration of the grave by the sun can be interpreted as phallic and thus regenerative. In addition I learned from the chief archaeologist that, of Neolithic bodies found, female corpses older than mid thirties were rare, whereas male corpses frequently reached much older ages – one possible implication being that death in childbirth could have been very common. Was one of the many rites practiced in such sites to do with protection of pregnant women? Another theory about the use of covered passage graves is that they were 'dream chambers', man-made caves that could be rendered entirely dark, still and silent. All these ideas and facts lead me to focus my programme on the regenerative relationship between the dark feminine, creative mysteries of the womb and the masculine light of the sun.

I decided to use a simple 'broad brush' chronological history from the Mesolithic to the post-reformation Protestant conversion of the Island as the frame tale for the programme. Into this gently pedagogical narrative, I placed five stories.

The events

Sadly, the weather forecast was very bleak; so we chose from the outset that the Marquee would become the main venue. The centre's education department had a number of well reconstructed stone, flint and bronze axes as well as various beakers, so I used them to dress the stage along with baskets and a bench, hemp sackcloth, animal hides, wild grasses in seed, wild barley and flints.

The Programme

The audiences were summoned by the staff tolling a bell (reminiscent of a church bell) and myself blowing an ancient mountain goat horn.

Frame Narrative (4 mins)

The session began with the history of the formation of the Island of Britain and the Channel Islands, talk of ice ages and ice retreat and subsequent sea level rises. I stopped the tale at circa 8,000 BCE, during the pre-insular period known as the 'Mesolithic'. I described a conjectural, west European hunter-gather culture living in winter camps, dispersing to hunt through the spring and summer. I spoke about flora and fauna, food sources and the seasonal migration of beasts, birds and water life.

Story 1: Urga (7 mins) Derived from the widespread, archaic, international horror story of the 'innocent' abandoned baby found in the forest (or carved from wood) who, when brought into the

community, becomes terrifyingly huge, cannibalistic and all consuming. In this 'Mesolithic' translocation, it is a story of three brothers; hunters who find an abandoned baby. The youngest, against the wishes of his brothers (who cite a taboo) brings it to a couple whose newborn child has recently died. The child refuses breast milk and is put to sleep in their hide and rush covered winter hut. In the night the husband hears screams – they aren't coming from outside, they are coming from within the baby! He quietly wakes the whole winter camp and everyone flees in the night. The baby wakes and starts to swell. As he swells, he sucks everything into his mouth. He sees the terrified camp dwellers sheltering in the trees and the two older brothers urge the younger brother to right his wrong. The youngest brother allows himself to be swallowed and, using his flint blades, kills the monster from within. The story has a codicil; that there is a cave in which countless other 'Urga' babies sleep – and when one dreams that a brother has been killed, he wakes and crawls to a human community and there whimpers pathetically at the edge of the nearby woods... *'and that's not the end of the story...'*

Incorporated Site links: This story establishes the life of a pre-Neolithic hunting world; that there are patterns of behaviour that need to be followed; that the breaking of taboo leads to downfall; introduces the power of dawn and daylight after nightmares in the dark – and introduces the idea of a cave in the heart of a hill, somehow associated with death.

Dramatic effect on Programme structure: This story makes a satisfactorily scary start!

Frame Narrative (3 mins): I then spoke about the rising sea levels and the making of Islands. And then arboriculture, the cultivation of fruit crops and the arrival of grain from the East.

Story 2: The Coming of Corn (7 mins) Derived from a Siberian source, this story speaks of two brothers with different natures: the older hunts, the younger gathers. The older brother mocks the younger one – but when a seasonal migrating food source fails to arrive, he is forced to beg his brother for food. He tastes honey for the first time and wants more. He goes to the (secret) hollow tree and, not showing appropriate respect to the Queen of the hive, he steals far too much. As a result of his greed, he is stung to death. The younger brother finds his older brother dead, surrounded by hundreds of dead bees. In a dream, the golden Queen Bee instructs him to bury the brother – and likewise clear forest ground and bury the bees. The bees grow as golden corn, each head containing bee-like grains. The aetiological story also speaks of the coming of cattle and mice.

Incorporated Site links: The stone axes are demonstrated; the idea of landscape transformation and tree clearing/deforestation is introduced; quern grinding is introduced; the idea of seasons, planting and harvest is introduced, and also, along with it, the need to mark time – and thus the idea of calendrical solar markers (of which La Hougue Bie is one). The story speaks of the transformation of the dead into living forms and of a matriarchal, feeding deity represented by the Queen Bee at the heart of her hive. The story links honey to the sun via the colour of gold. This is another story that implies communications from the 'otherworld' via dreams.

Dramatic Structure: Though tragic, the tale ends with a hearty laugh.

Frame Narrative (3 mins): I spoke about the transformation of an island through agriculture, the arrival of field systems, the siting of calendar stones. The migrations of peoples and races by boat and the arrival of metals – specifically Bronze.

Story 3: The Palace in the Mound (5 mins) A Bronze Age fragment derived from common Irish stories of bands of hunter/warriors making island hopping journeys. Seven warriors are invited into a beautiful palace, which turns out to be illusory: it is in fact a house of the dead and they are trapped inside a burial mound...

Incorporated Site links: The mystery of what is in the hill? The museum houses numerous Bronze age spear and axe heads, as well as fabulous golden torques. The story speaks of connections between two worlds.

Dramatic Structure: The fragment opens the mystery of what is in the hill, and because the tale is unfinished leaves the audience tantalised.

Frame Narrative (3 mins): I spoke of the coming of Iron, sea faring, the Vikings following the Celts, Norman occupation and the birth of the middle ages.

Story 4: Childe Roland (12 mins) A famous tale, translocated and stripped of its (Victorian) cod-Arthurian references. Very specifically located in La Hougue Bie and the nearby villages and told as a “true” tale (*‘There’s truth in it!’*). A younger sister throws a golden ball high over the church that stands on the hill, she runs round the hill ‘widdershins’ – breaking a taboo – and vanishes. Her three older brothers, each armed with one of their dead father’s swords, set off in turn to find her, following the strange and fierce instructions of an old ‘Dame’ (witch) that if people start helping them, they should cut off their heads! After an increasingly curious journey, the youngest son finally arrives at a Dark Hill, which he enters having been instructed not to eat or drink anything. He finds his sister there, unblinking and strange, offering him (sacramental) sweet cakes and wine; seeing his brothers both turned into stone, he refuses. The Dark Demon of the Hill approaches him ‘Fi, Fi, Fo , Fum...’ There is a fight. The Demon King is slain and at his death, the youngest sister blinks and the two older brothers come back to life. She retrieves the golden ball from the dead Demon’s hand and the hall in the hill fills with sunlight. They all four wake up outside the hill, back where they started. Was it a dream? No, time has passed...

Incorporated Site Links: This church on this hill – has a widdershins (counter clockwise) path up it. The Jersey Dames are introduced as being keepers of the knowledge of hill – and the youngest sister is the one who is stolen away. The golden ball has become the sun that enters the heart of the hill, the force that ultimately defeats the Demon King.

Dramatic Structure: This story, following a classic wonder-tale pattern, is full of play and participation, sword fights and chants. Fun and triumph (...over Uрга and their kind?)

Narrative Frame: A round up of mysteries. I spoke about the turning seasons, the Equinoctial dawn and the secret of the sun entering the hill in Spring and Autumn...and of the enigmatic dedication of the chapel to Notre Dame de La Clarté.

At this point the programme ended in four of the six sessions, where the audience had consisted largely of children under seven. The other two sessions had considerably older audiences, so I extended the sessions with one more story.

Narrative Frame: I spoke about the protestant suppression of ritual and the increased reporting of witchcraft.

Story 5: The 12 Spinning Witches: a story based on Breton, Welsh and Irish folklore, translocated to a nearby farmhouse. One winter’s night in the late 19th century, a woman is supplementing the family income by knitting jerseys. She’s up alone, working late, when a woman comes to the door, forces her way in and demands use of the spinning wheel. Once she’s started, eleven others enter; all bringing wool, to card, spin and knit. The wool is green... The householder is no longer mistress of her legs and whatever the witches order her to do, she has to do. They give her the impossible task of fetching water from the well with a sieve. While she’s gone they do terrible things to the sleeping family, however the voice of a forgotten Saint at the Holy Well gives the woman instructions of how to undo the harm and protect the family. (She is also told the Mesolithic secret of how to carry water in a basket!) She tricks the witches into thinking their home, the hill of Hougue Bie, is on fire. They flee. With the witches gone, the woman then protects the house, barring all entrances with charms. The witches cannot re-enter and are dispersed by the dawn, never to be seen again. The woman is left with a great green woollen cape that can still be seen in the house across the road – if you’re brave enough to knock at the door...(!)

Incorporated Site Links: The well and the geography of the site, fields and farm; oblique references to the female power of good in the forgotten patron of the well; the power of sunrise, and the persistent hint of the existence of something strange in the hill.

Dramatic Structure: This was really an extension to an already complete cycle of stories, but it is a dramatic tale bringing the pre-historic past to the nearer present and representative of the sort of tales the great grandparent generation would have heard in the Jersey, 'Veillés' – evenings of storytelling and song. Hopefully, by acknowledging the power of storytelling, at this ending of the session invites audience members to seek out more stories of the region and elsewhere.

Conclusion

It was a stimulating site which offered me, as a creative artist plenty of themes to play with. As the sessions progressed I was able to see more and more opportunities to make them resonate back and forth between the stories, the world of the imagination and the tangible, visible evidence of the site.

The attendances of the event were hampered by the poor weather, and there was a larger proportion of under six year olds than had been anticipated (so I had to dilute the medicine a little) but I believe everyone who managed to get there, had a good time and that their subsequent tour around the site was greatly enhanced by the narrative contexts that were offered.”

Ben Haggarty 2007