

# Use of Reconstruction in British TV Programmes

**The article presents three different programmes, which used historical reconstruction, broadcast in the UK in 2005.**

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In Britain, historical reconstruction is exploited in a wide range of programmes from historical dramas to specialised school programmes which show life in various periods. From the rich and various offers of 2005 I have chosen three programmes aimed at the wider public but from the educational site of the spectrum.

## Stonehenge Live. The Ultimate Experiment

I would like to start with 'Stonehenge Live. The Ultimate Experiment' prepared and broadcast live in two instalments by Channel Five. The production company working for Channel Five employed 'Crawley Creatures', a firm specialising in film and TV special effects to recreate Stonehenge as it was 4000 years ago at the time of its greatest extent. Using current archaeological knowledge they built a replica of the famous monument from polystyrene, painstakingly recreating all the stones including their surface details and colours as accurately as possible. In the live broadcast from the site of the replica, two professional presenters interviewed archaeologists, asked them questions texted and mailed to the programme by the public, introduced short pre-recorded reports and followed events on the site.

## Reconstruction

The first of the two evenings was dedicated to the building of both Stonehenge and Foamhenge, as the replica was immediately dubbed, with re-

ports showing the excavation of a prehistoric quarry in the Preseli Mountains in Wales from where the blue stones could have originated and the testing of theory on the working of the hard sarsens with stone nodules. From the site came interviews with archaeologists, live experiments and the placing of the last 'stone'. The live broadcast format meant the interviews often suffered with abrupt cuts of: "Back over to..." so that some ideas were not taken to conclusions. The live experiments were carried out by volunteers hired for the programme and suffered problems of co-ordination. Overall it was interesting viewing which brought fresh ideas.

## Re-enactment

The second evening was dedicated to the use of the monument. Thanks to a dynamic camera work the best possibility of experiencing the recreated monument was during the druidic blessing. I was disappointed though with the production wasting the great work by Mike Pitts and the 'Crawley Creatures'. The model was outstanding and should have been the centrepiece of the show. Instead it was used only as a background while various participants struggled to express their emotions. There could have been much more exploration of various sights of view or experimenting with the positioning of some of the problematic stones. Instead we were presented with a very solemn procession accompanied by supposedly Bronze Age music.

And what happened to the model after the broadcast? It was offered on e-bay and the North Wiltshire District Council overcame financial, planning and organisation problems to purchase it and place it in the Rural Life

museum at Wilshire College Lackham where it was to have been used for educational purposes and as a tourist attraction. Unfortunately, the model was stored under a tarpaulin in a field where it was seriously damaged and the efforts of the builders was wasted.

## What the Ancients Did for us

The second series to be considered was prepared as a co-production of BBC History and the Open University. Nine one hour programmes called 'What the Ancients Did for us' skipped through the ancient worlds civilisations to reveal, slightly chaotically, an astonishing array of ideas, inventions and innovations which had existed long before they reappeared in the modern industrial age. While the accompanying book follows the various civilisations from ancients Britons up to Mesoamericans in a chronological order, the TV series started on the 16th of February 2005 with 'The Islamic World' as a timely reminder of the preservation of ancient knowledge and advances which Western world owes to the Muslim culture. Then came 'The Chinese', 'The Aztecs, Maya and Incas', 'The Romans', 'The Indians', 'The Mesopotamians', 'The Egyptians', 'The Greeks' and the series finished with a sketchy history of developments in the British Isles from the Palaeolithic to the Roman Invasion. As the series covered such uneven segments of time and space the content of the single episodes varied from presenting historical development to showing a few chosen inventions. In all the episodes the presenting team headed by Adam Hart-Davis, well known in Britain for presenting science programmes, combined visits to sites and museums with the use of drawing reconstructions, models, often simplified or

scaled down, and demonstrations to show how things were built and worked. Usually the demonstrations were showed by the presenters themselves but in the case of the episode on Ancient Britain which I would like to use to outline the format, they were joined by guest specialists.

## Wood, Stone and Metal

'The Britons' covered the largest time scale and presented elements of prehistoric culture interconnected with an outline of the historical background and development. It started out with the find of the oldest complete hand axe in Northern Europe – the Stone Age "Swiss army knife" and flint-knapper John Lord showed work with the hand axe and how it was made. Then, from exploring the intricate details in the preserved buildings of the Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae in Orkneys, the programme skipped to the end of the Neolithic and beginning of the Bronze Age to experience ancient monuments. Instead of the traditional Stonehenge it visited Woodhenge and showed drawings of various possible reconstructions. Agriculture was presented by the making bread step by step from making a furrow to baking the dough in an oven. In the Peat Moors Centre in Somerset we could follow the building of a round house while some construction aspects were explored by simple experiments on models. Next steps lead to Ireland to the gold collection in the Dublin museum and a little gold panning. The sewn plank Dover boat represented sea navigation and contacts with the Continent. The beginning of the Iron Age was marked by one of the most entertaining moments when the programme pitted two stunt swordsmen against each other, one with a replica of a bronze

leaf shaped sword and the other with a replica of an early Iron Age Sword. Everybody expected the bronze sword to be beaten easily but during the check over it was shown that the iron sword had suffered more damage, showing that the early iron swords, which copied shapes of the previous Bronze Age ones, did not fully utilise the possibilities of the new material. The final item of the programme was a chariot. The making of a chariot involved a number of crafts: metal work, carpentry, elaborate strapping and knot fitting and the complexity of the skills necessary was demonstrated in making a wheel with rim bent from one piece of wood and fitted with an iron tyre.

### An inventive past

It can be said that many of the discoveries or inventions presented are well known and that the programme used stereotypes. It could also be said that the presentation was trivialised somewhat. It would be also possible to dispute some of the choices especially in the Near East/ Mediterranean regions. However the series gave a fairly good overview of development without overlooking Asia and America in an accessible and enjoyable way. The inventions were clearly explained, the models worked and if simplified this was only to show the action clearly. The authors' aim was to arouse an interest in history and science and although the abbreviated histories sometimes made me cringe I enjoyed watching the series and think the programme fulfilled its task well. Who would not like to set fire to an 'invading Roman fleet' with an Archimedes' mirror?

### Tales from the Green Valley

The creators of the third series I have chosen decided to capitalise on the popularity of 'reality' shows. But instead of choosing participants to create conflict, they chose them on

the basis of their knowledge and abilities. 'Tales from the Green Valley' ran on BBC 2 from August 2005, the 12 half an hour episodes corresponded to the calendar months and presented a team of two historians and three archaeologists running a small farm as it would have been run in the 1620's. The fact that the programme took place on a farm which had been reconstructed over the previous 17 years and the project lasted for a full year from September to August allowed for continuity and the seasonality of agriculture work to be represented. The participants dressed in period clothing, did everything by hand using tools and materials available in the 1620's and cooked and ate appropriately to the era. They tended cows, sheep, pigs, horses and poultry. They ploughed, sowed (although only in autumn), harvested corn, picked and stored fruit and grew vegetables. They opened up a new field, maintained hedges, dry stone walls, coppiced wood and harvested hay. They thatched outbuildings and gave the farm house a good spring cleaning. Over all, while they did not carry out all the work which would have been done on the farm of that size, the programme showed the range of skills necessary and the seasonality of both the work and diet and the restrictions of the period clothing. It showed the importance of practise and use of the right techniques. My only criticism concerned the introductory words at the beginning of each episode which were misleading. They had not did "turned the clock back and rediscovered a way of life". Partly because although they worked the farm on daily basis, they did not sleep there due to health and safety reasons. The programme portrayed work but very little else. The farm was not run with a farmer's family and labourers or contacts with outside world and any sense of a wider community could have been hardly recreated. There was very little

on the celebrating holidays, no visits to church and the relationships between the participants reflected the 21st, not the 17th century.

### Conclusions

All three series sought to connect entertainment and education. The 'Stonehenge Live' creators bet on an interest in spiritual life and their programme built up to a 'reconstruction' of a Bronze Age procession. In the words of one of the present archaeologists, Mike Parker-Pearson, the ceremony was "a little bit quiet. We are used to have a very solemn sort of services. But again in many parts of the world these kinds of moments are very noisy, there are drums beating, there are people arguing and shouting and even fighting. And I think (we) are perhaps a little too tame in the way we project into the past and give it almost a Church of England solemnity" (sic). The procession failed to stir interest and so a project based on an interesting idea finished as an anticlimax. The 'Ancients' bet on the 'wow factor'. It needed a presenter of Adam Hart-Davis calibre to make a rotary quern 'wow' but it worked. It was an entertaining, even if not completely accurate, taster of ancient civilisations and I can see it making children and young people want to find out more. 'Tales from the Green Valley' were for those already interested in history. Despite the misleading marketing it was well made, well presented and was, in my opinion, the best historical programme of the year.

**Stonehenge Live! The Ultimate Experiment.** Channel Five, the 20th and 21st of June 2005

**What the Ancients did for us,** 9x 1 hour programmes made as a co-production of BBC History and the Open University, first broadcast on BBC 2 from the 16th of February 2005.

The series was accompanied by a book, **What the Past did for us** by Adam Hart-Davis,

published by BBC Books, 2004, ISBN 0 563 52207 0.

**Tales from the Green Valley,** 12x 30 minutes programmes made by Lion TV Production for BBC Wales, first broadcast on BBC 2 from the 19th of August 2005.

The series is available on VHS (ASIN: B000BND0A8) and DVD (ASIN: B000BND09Y), released in December 2005.

### Summary

#### Zur Nutzung von Rekonstruktion im britischen Fernsehprogramm

Der Artikel stellt drei verschiedene Fernsehprogramme vor, die historische Rekonstruktionen nutzen, die im Jahr 2005 in Großbritannien gezeigt wurden und die sich an eine größere Öffentlichkeit richten. In der Sendung „Stonehenge Live“ wurde das berühmte Denkmal zur Zeit seiner größten Ausdehnung vorgestellt. Die Serie „Was die Alten für uns taten“ springt förmlich durch die antiken Zivilisationen der Welt, um eine beeindruckende Sammlung an Ideen, Erfindungen und Innovationen vorzustellen, die lange vor ihrer Wiederentdeckung im modernen Industriezeitalter bereits bekannt waren. „Die Erzählungen aus dem Grünen Tal“ schließlich zeigen ein aus zwei Historikern und drei Archäologen bestehendes Team, das einen kleinen Bauernhof so betreibt wie er in den 1620er Jahren bestanden haben könnte; sie zeigen in dieser Dokumentation ein vollständiges Arbeitsjahr auf dem Bauernhof.

#### Utilisation de la reconstitution dans le film documentaire britannique

L'article présente trois différents documentaires utilisant la reconstitution historique qui visent un grand public et dont les premières ont eu lieu en 2005. „Stonehenge Live“ reconstitue le monument reconnu au moment de son apogée. La série „What the Ancients Did for Us“ fait un tour du monde de civilisations anciennes et fait découvrir des idées innombrables, des découverts et innovations qui existaient bien avant qu'ils ne resurgissent à l'époque industrielle. Enfin, „Tales from the Green Valley“ présentent une équipe de deux historiens et trois archéologues qui, tout au cours d'une année, ont tenu une petite exploitation rurale en sorte qu'il le soit dans les années 20 du 17e siècle.