

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2013

Norman Rees - Experiences as an ITN Reporter

At the Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting, village resident Norman Rees gave a fascinating insight to his Experiences as an ITN Reporter, working in many of the world's troublespots.

"News", Norman commented, "is history in the making", and in reporting the news, television plays an important part. He had had a 'ringside seat' at many major world events, and shared these with us using clips from some of his news reports as he covered the 'Breaking News'. Norman began by showing part of a 'tribute' tape produced by his ITN colleagues when he left, in which John Humphrys told us that Norman had started at ITN in 1968 - both Norman and John coming from the Splott area of Cardiff.

Norman spent several years for ITN in Washington. He had been sent there in 1974, in order to cover the Watergate hearings. Although some people had suggested the break-in was a burglary, it became apparent that President Nixon himself had been involved, and this led to him being the first American President to resign from office. Norman reported on that event - getting the reply from Nixon that he "screwed it up and paid the price".

On another occasion, whilst watching television at home in Washington, it was announced that John Lennon had been shot. Driving frantically through the night to arrive in New York just before dawn. He was able to compile his report, and get it sent back to ITN in London from the CBS studios in New York. As he went to leave the building, the television was showing a report on the shooting. The American presenter said they would find out the reaction of people in London to the event, and would go to ITN. So rapid had the communication networks become that he found his own report relayed back for transmission in the USA!

In April 1981, he received a call from the ITN Foreign Editor in London to ask "Is it true?" Not being sure what it was about, he replied "I'm checking it at my end, what does it say at your end?". "President Regan has been shot". He quickly got himself to a television production facility, where he could record the material available - but it had an American commentary. A 'clean' copy (ie one with the location sound without commentary) was obtained just 3 minutes before 'News at Ten' was broadcast, and so his commentary was done live. The cameraman had been filming Regan leaving an event and continued without a break, not daring to pause in case he missed something 'dramatic'. Norman's commentary began with "very soon afterward you will hear the shots" - so viewers could see what happened, as well as the aftermath as the security men apprehended the assailant.

A rather different 'world event' was the visit of Princess Diana to the Far East. Norman clearly had great respect for Diana, who had decided to visit a leprosy unit in Indonesia - against the wishes of her entourage. Norman's report "She touched the untouchable" showed that not only did Diana make the visit, but went out of her way to dispel the myths about leprosy in the 20th century by shaking hands with many of the patients there. He added that Diana was 'fantastic to work with' !

"For a general correspondent, there is nothing worse than being sent to cover a Tory or Labour Party Conference", as the political editors report the major stories. In 1983, Norman was sent to film Labour leader Neil Kinnock before breakfast, but Neil and Glenys decided to go for a stroll on the sea front, where on the beach, the waves knocked Neil Kinnock over. Hoping the media would include more dignified shots, Kinnock said "That sort of thing is not supposed to happen" - but Norman had been 'in the

right place at the right time' for a good story! The world's troublespots Norman had reported on included some in Britain. The miners' strike of 1984 was one such. Many mines were closed prematurely, and Norman was the only reporter allowed down a mine to record its last shift - at Cotgrave in Notts. The effects of pit closures were illustrated by a visit to Grimethorpe a year after that had closed - even the brass band being under threat. Norman's commentary was factual yet thought-provoking. Three-quarters of the sacked miners were still out of work - and in the schools most children saw themselves as 'no-hope pupils' in a 'no-hope village'.

The other British trouble-spot was Ireland, where he spent a lot of time. Both the IRA and the UDF knew who the journalists were, and where they stayed. One particular report was about an Orange Order march through Portree, which had been banned for several days. When the authorities changed their mind and the march took place - with predictable reaction from those who opposed it. Norman's thoughtful closing comment asked if the event was unsafe to allow a few days earlier, what had changed to permit it to then proceed.

Some stories involve more than just 'getting there and writing a story'. One such was the shootings at the school in Dunblane in 1996. No-one, he said, could be prepared for the horrors inside. It is difficult to be able to know how much to cover with such tragedies - to treat those affected with appropriate sensitivity. The memory - even for a journalist who had reported from war-zones - clearly still touched him deeply.

In 1982, whilst at 30,000 feet above the Atlantic, mid-flight to Buenos Aires, invasion of the Falkland Islands was announced. The Argentinians had been brought up to believe the Malvinas belonged to them. Norman was able to report for ITN from Argentina during the war - perhaps surprisingly, they were made welcome by the Argentine people during their stay. When the memorial service for the victims of the war was held in St Paul's Cathedral, and Mrs Thatcher made her visit to Port Stanley after the war, Norman was there for ITN - asking the Prime Minister if to defend the Falklands had been "the most difficult decision of her life". Norman had also spent time in the Middle East, and feels for the population of Syria today, having seen first-hand the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. For much of that period he was in the Lebanon. At the time, Yasser Arafat was in Tripoli, where two rival factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization were fighting each other. They inflicted great harm on civilians, and Norman's reports showed how innocent children were being 'caught in the crossfire of an unnecessary war'. Other reports were made under heavy shellfire, in the midst of the action. Not surprisingly, ITN won the "Best Actuality Coverage" award at the BAFTAs that year for this work.

What became apparent was that the skill of a good reporter was to use a few well-chosen words and let the pictures and the people shown tell the story.

The meeting also provided an opportunity for the Chairman, Peter Halman, to express the Society's thanks to Geoff and Pam Briggs, who are leaving the area. Geoff has used his expertise to benefit the Society in many ways - as a photographer to record the village over time, and restore old images - as a craftsman, to make the display boards (as used at the Historic Wargrave Exhibition), and his creative skills in producing audio visual presentations that had delighted members over many years.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, November 12th, when Elise Fraser will tell us about The Archaeology of Silchester, where she is the Finds Manager for the excavations of the Roman town. This will be followed on Tuesday, December 10th by the Society's Christmas Party, whilst on Tuesday, January 14th, Fred Freeman will tell us about Life as the Village Chemist