

# The Wonderful Isles of Wonder

by Camera Supervisor Barrie Dodd

*With characteristic British scepticism, many were doubtful whether this country would be able to carry off the Olympics with anything like the efficiency and panache of recent success stories like the Beijing and Sydney Games. The first test of how it might all go would be the Opening Ceremony on 27 July. We all know now that the brilliant and quirky 'Isles of Wonder' opening spectacular, so expertly televised, was a massive hit, drawing the biggest TV audience of the year. This success then segued seamlessly into a wonderful Games, broadcast throughout with consummate skill. As a piece of TV, the Opening Ceremony was a production on a massive scale, and at the very heart of its camera coverage was GTC member, camera supervisor and multi-award winner Barrie Dodd. Here Barrie reveals what went on behind the scenes. Quite rightly, the camerawork on the Isles of Wonder sequence has been nominated for an Award for Excellence in this year's GTC Awards.*

My involvement began with a meeting at LOCOG (the London Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games) to discuss the live coverage of the opening of the London 2012 Olympics. Danny Boyle's artistic production, the 'Isles of Wonder' section was to begin and end the three-and-a-half hour ceremony. In between, OBS (the Olympic Broadcasting Service) would take over to cover the 'protocol section', which would comprise the entrance of the world's athletes and flags, plus the official welcoming speeches.

The scale of the whole thing was immediately apparent from the storyboard. The concept was brilliant and complex with approximately 100 scenes and cameos, all needing to be logged and camera-plotted. The live cultural plot was to be directed by Hamish Hamilton (from production company Done and Dusty) and this would be technically planned and executed for TV by Bill Morris of CTV. An embryonic camera plan based on our discussion and the storyboard began to take shape.

## Understanding the plot

The first thing to understand was how the various areas of the stadium had been divided up. The main centre of the arena had been dubbed the 'Field of Play' (a huge carefully domed elevated area), while the perimeter track was appropriately nicknamed the 'M25'. The area between the M25 and where the audience seating began was designated 'Back Stage' as not all the props could be brought backwards and forwards through the six vomitories (tunnels). This holding area allowed the efficient timing of the event.

From the very beginning, much thought was given to the opening shot of the live coverage. For the starter, a high shot of the whole stadium was envisaged. Then, to achieve a perspective change, there would be a fast descent to the ground followed by a move through the tunnel and into the stadium.

*Photos – Clockwise from central picture: Pandemonium scene (the Cineflex stabilised head from Cammotion is visible top right); Steadicam silhouetted during the Akram Khan dance sequence; The pastoral village set (a Towercam can just be spotted extending from the ground in front of the hill); Bradley Wiggins rings the specially forged bell to open the evening (a well disguised Towercam can just be seen behind Sir Bradley and another is poking up from the music stage below); The production team on the Tor hill; Scene from the British popular music section.*







station and yet, quite remarkably, in what can only be described as an outbreak of 'mass consensual trust', the whole thing was kept completely secret. Perhaps this was because of the enormity of the show itself but I suspect it was more that no individual wanted to let down the very hands-on and daily approachable Danny Boyle as he put together what was clearly going to be an amazing spectacle.

At Dagenham, the camera team worked meticulously through the various scenes with Hamish and 1st AD Manique Rathner, to fine-tune moves and angles and, crucially, the timings, and a small team of 5D and EX3 operators recorded a rough ground camera plan, which was edited to complement the storyboard. This later transposed to our live camera positions on the Field of Play, for which four handheld and four Steadicams had been allocated.

Not surprisingly, bearing in mind the summer we had, it rained a lot during these rehearsals but we were constantly inspired by the hard work, enthusiasm and dedication of the volunteer cast who were constantly on hand to move acres of wet turf back and forth in order to help us time the transition from 'green and pleasant land' to Pandemonium (the Industrial Revolution). Watching and listening to 1000 drummers time their moves as one was both moving and uplifting, and seeing 350 hospital beds hit their marks with dancing nurses and doctors during a rainstorm was just plain surreal!

### Higher angles

With the basic camera coverage coming together, it was time to work on the middle and higher camera positions. As always with large stadium shows, a mixture of intimate storytelling shots alongside huge-scale and geography-setting angles was required. We looked into the possibility of a four-point Spidercam, but in the end it proved unrealistic to try and weave this in amongst the already complicated overhead catenary, so a two-point Spidercam rig running north to south on the west side of the stadium was agreed upon.

One of many surprise moments of the ceremony was to be the arrival of the 'dove bikes', 75 bikes manned by winged people in an original take on the tradition of releasing doves into the stadium, introduced at the end of the First World War. To cover the entrance of the dove bikes an exact position was found above the north end of the stadium from which a Cineflex stabilised head could operate. This was for a high symmetrical overhead view of the processional crossover at the north end of the stadium, also allowing the flight of the final dove bike to wing its way from the ground to exit the stadium. The Cineflex was attached to the inner cable ring on its own 'T' piece truss and separate motors were rigged to allow it to be lowered for maintenance and cleaning. During the dove bike sequence a segway Steadicam was also skillfully steered amongst the bikes.

Meanwhile at the south-east end of the stadium, a 30-metre

**Photos:** A head for heights essential – Steadicam operators John Clarke and Dominic Jackson were both required to 'fly' over the action on wires, John for the opening sequence and Dominic in the Dementor sequence; in the back picture, a fearless rigger from Unusual Rigging is seen releasing the Cammotion Cineflex camera and control cables so that the camera could be lowered.

This would in turn lead into a fast ascent to once again reveal the entire 'Field of Play', at this point representing 'England's green and pleasant land', which had been constructed with 7346 square metres of imported turf including crops, complete with live animals, a model of Glastonbury Tor, a cottage, a water-wheel, and actors portraying villagers at work or playing football and cricket.

Various ideas came up. One was to drop down from a helicopter with a Steadicam and then ground release to allow a transition through the tunnel and into the stadium. Once there, this could be hooked onto a Strada crane and elevated high above the arena. This was entirely possible and workable, however it would be very tricky to time in a live situation and public area.

Then we considered and experimented with the clever and very flexible, waterproof Chapman Hydrascope crane. To link from the pre-opening 'Countdown' sequence, which featured a journey along the Thames from its source and through the countryside, ending at the River Lea tributary close to the stadium, perhaps our live camera could crane up and out of the water, travel into the stadium and then elevate once inside to reveal the Field of Play. Again, timing this would be very tricky.

With these ideas (and their potentially risky timing issues) having been shelved, the solution eventually decided upon also involved a Steadicam, only in this version the operator, wearing a harness, would enter the stadium through the tunnel, seated on the front of an ETV (battery-powered buggy). As the camera arrived in the stadium, the operator would jump off the buggy and both cameraman and Steadicam would be attached to a vertical cable and lifted from the ground to 30 metres high over a few seconds (passing a foreground cloud on the way) to achieve the iconic opening shot we had been striving for.

*The Steadicams and handheld cameras were right in on the action covering the forging of the Olympic ring, their operators decked out in fireproof costumes to blend in with the cast*

### Keeping a secret

The main rehearsals for the event were held on a huge open site at Dagenham in Essex. Two open arenas had been marked out to the actual size so that simultaneous sections could be blocked out. Thousands of volunteers were bused in and out from Dagenham East

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vertical Camcat was rigged to cover wide shots that could include the huge specially cast brass Olympic bell (the largest harmonically tuned bell in the world), which Bradley Wiggins struck at the very start of the ceremony. The Camcat could also offer tighter shots of action on the music stage and dramatic moving shots. An 85ft Panavision Strada crane was positioned at the northeast end of the M25 perimeter track, its main job being to show the scale and geography of the Field of Play.

**The Olympic ring is lifted**

Of course, quite a few complex rigging issues arose during the quest to do justice to the elaborate story that had been dreamt up by Danny Boyle and writer Frank Cottrell Boyce, not least of which involved the coverage of the highly symbolic moment when the newly smelted central Olympic ring would be lifted up to join the four other rings already suspended on wires and moving to their final position high up in the stadium.

For this important sequence, a Towercam would be positioned underneath the Field of Play; it was only really possible to work out the logistics of this after seeing and plotting the rehearsals in situ. This Towercam, with its remote head having been fully fire- and waterproofed ready for the coverage of the incandescent Olympic ring, spent most of the time buried 12 feet under the thatched cottage, sheep, geese and turf of the 'green and pleasant land'. Once all this had been cleared away to make way for the Industrial Revolution (Pandemonium sequence), a trapdoor opened to allow the Towercam to pop out and deliver its unique shot looking up at the five Olympic Rings as they came together, before retracting to allow the trapdoor to close again so that the 500 or so dancers could perform safely for the remaining sequences.

The point loading of the amazing structure, the Field of Play, on which this whole sequence was based (remember it had carthorses on it as well) was about 3 to 4 tons. Underneath (as well as the two Towercams) it hid seven mighty 80-foot chimneys plus dozens of props and machinery worthy of H.G. Wells, not to mention hundreds of miners who would ascend through the Tor once the symbolic oak tree had been uprooted. So it was with some trepidation that I approached the expert who had built it to ask if he would mind cutting a few holes in it and then re-enforcing them with trapdoors! By a fortunate coincidence (once we had recognised each other through our safety hard hats, goggles, etc) we realised that we had worked together 12 years previously (on a job when I had also asked him to cut a few holes in his set!) So, no problem.

Meanwhile, the Steadicams and handheld cameras had been right in on the action covering the forging of the ring, their operators decked out in fireproof costumes to blend in with the cast. Twelve sets of this protective gear (comprising boiler suits and snoods for the head) were needed for the operators, assistants and focus-pullers. Prior to the event some quite extensive testing of the gear to see what it

would be like to operate in had already taken place, and once again the timing of stripping off this cumbersome gear to be ready for operating on the rest of the sequences all had to be worked out and rehearsed.

For the moment when the newly forged centre ring joined the others, a specially conceived one-off 'super dolly trolley-cam' was added into the web of flying cables. This was a remote R/F camera with pan and tilt head which trolled out to give an overhead symmetrical shot just of this moment.

**More towers, jibs and dollies**

A second Towercam hidden underground popped up for Kenneth Branagh's 'Brunel speech' at the north Tor end. In addition, two other Towercams were in use at the south end, one behind the Olympic bell and the other at stage level to cover music. Also in area of the bell was a 22-foot jib on track and this could offer stunning south to north shots. A further jib was situated at ground level, once again to cover solo artists on the music stage and a huge variety of other shots in this area.

To obtain close-ups on the music stage we had an 86x lens mounted on an (appropriately named) Olympian (Chapman) tracking



dolly. This manoeuvrable vehicle allowed us to reposition back and forth around the M25 with a variable lens height up to 19 feet high. The other four 86x lenses were positioned around the middle balcony of the stadium, to give height and the ability to look into the constant action and activity going on all around the Field of Play.

Other high points of the proceedings were the Mary Poppins and Harry Potter Dementor sequences, when the Steadicam operator once again took to the air to integrate with the aerial action with a flying Steadicam.

To complete the camera line-up, on two of the twelve outer stadium structural masts we positioned SMARTheads, one on the east side and the other on the west. These were again to look down on the complex dance sequences and patterns.

Above all of this the obligatory helicopter and blimp were hovering to give an array of fantastic live precision shots to fully reflect the scale of the event.

When I was asked to write this article I immediately thought of the vast number of truly amazing people who had been involved and who all contributed in their different ways to making the Opening such a success. Just think: production, lighting, flying, rigging, sound, vision, choreographers, volunteer cast, each section bringing to it their own story of complexity. So, this personal recollection for Zerb is about the multi-camera coverage part of the whole, of which it was a great honour to be a part. If truth be told, the whole event was made possible by an incredible team with wonderful expertise working together under great leadership. That seems to be a winning recipe!

**Camera Kit**

- 4x handheld cameras (3x RF and 1x cabled)
- 5x 86:1 lens cameras
- 5x Steadicams (2x with flying harnesses and 1x Segway)
- 4x Towercams (Alan Wells)
- 1x Strada crane (Panavision)
- 1x Spidercam
- 1x Camcat
- 2x Jimmy jibs
- 1x Cineflex (Cammotion)
- 2x SMARTheads (ACS)
- 1x Chapman Olympian dolly
- 1x Chapman ETV tracking vehicle
- 1x Super Trolley RF
- 1x helicopter
- 1x blimp

Photos clockwise from top left: Olympic bell as night fell – the 22ft jib on tracks can be seen silhouetted; As the winged doves rode on bikes around the stadium Steadicam operator Curtis Dunne was skilfully moving through them on a Segway; When the fifth Olympic ring was forged, camera operators and assistants were dressed in costume and fireproof gear so that they could merge in with the cast (camera assistant Nicki Graves is seen here in the 'snood' outfit).



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## Isles of Wonder Camera Crew

### Camera Operators

- Barrie Dodd – Cineflex gyro head/ SMARThead
- John Dibley – 86:1 lens camera
- Nick Kauffman – 86:1 lens camera
- Harriet Sheard – 86:1 lens camera
- Rob Sargent – 86:1 lens camera
- Chris Chatfield – 86:1 lens camera
- Curtis Dunne – Steadicam (plus Segway)
- Martyn Porter – Steadicam
- Jim Littlehayes – Steadicam
- Dominic Jackson – Steadicam (plus flying rig)
- John Clarke – Steadicam (plus flying rig)
- Rob Mansfield – RF handheld
- Martin Schlote – RF handheld
- Prav Shetty – RF handheld
- Nat Hill – Handheld
- Marcus Petersell – Camcat
- Andy Watt – SMARThead
- Kevin French – Strada crane
- Dave Emery – Jimmy jib
- Tim Normington – Jimmy jib
- Frank Stutzke- Spidercam
- Ben Frewin – Towercams 1 and 2
- Alan Wells – Towercam 3
- Shaun Willis – Towercam 4
- Derek Pennell – Chapman Olympian dolly
- Peter Johnson – Super Trolley RF camera
- John Marzano – Helicopter operator

### 5D, GoPro, EX3 Operators

- Joseph Myerscough
- Aaron O’Sullivan
- Nick Rose
- James Williams

### Focus-Pullers

- Warren Buckingham
- James Knight
- Rebecca McDonald
- Svetlana Miko
- Joe Oliver
- Chris Robertson

### Camera Assistants

- Nicki Graves
- Guiseppi Ingrao
- Carl Veckranges
- John Wright
- Louise Elliot

### CTV Camera Guarantees

- Sam Bogear
- Tim Deacan

### Cable Bashers

- Matt Ford
- Sarah Morris
- Laura Romback

### Towercam Assistants

- Dan Besley
- Peter Childs
- Matt Cowley
- James Woods

### Jimmy Jib Assistants

- Louis Blair
- Dave Coomber
- Giles Mallard

### Grips

- Ken Ashley Johnson (Strada)
- Colin Brown (Strada)
- Stacey Hancock (Strada)
- Clive Tocher (Strada)
- Paul Birchard

### Camera Technician

- Mike Wright (Cammotion Cineflex)

### Vision Mixer

- Rod Wardell

### Vision Supervisor

- Luke Chantrel

### Floor Managers

- Michael Matheson
- Roger Dempster



Photos – Above: Team effort – the whole camera crew does the “Lightning Bolt” in front of the Olympic Stadium (look carefully and you’ll realise they’re doing it with the wrong arm – typical cameramen who can’t tell left from right!); Top right: Director Hamish Hamilton celebrates the successful broadcast; Right: Barrie with a well-earned chocolate gold medal!

## Fact File

Barrie Dodd is a founder GTC member. He is freelance with many years’ facility experience in all areas of live and multicamera coverage.

With thanks to LOCOG, Mark Bushkes of Magic Bean Studio and various crew members for the photographs.