

Channel vision



– an island
base full of
opportunities

GTC member **Tracey Cahill** is in the increasingly rare position of having held staff roles throughout her 14-year career as a news/current affairs camerawoman. While most of her work has been based in the very small and some might imagine limited region of the Channel Islands, this has proved to offer an enviable range of opportunities. And if this wasn't enough, she spends much of her spare time filming the mind-boggling exploits of her partner, who has to have a decent claim to be the 'most adventurous man in Britain'!

This year marks 14 years since I began my career in TV on an island somewhere in the Channel between France and England... and, more than a decade later, I'm still here. Which makes me think I haven't progressed much, but in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

I graduated with a degree in Communications in 2003 and jumped straight into the glamorous world of Hollywood (only it was set in Ireland). Disney was making a film called *King Arthur*, starring Keira Knightley and Ray Winstone, in Wicklow and – because I had a car – I got a job as a runner. After about a week of chatting to camera assistants on the crew who had been 10 years in the industry but had yet to shoot anything themselves, I realised I didn't have the patience for film and packed my bags for Jersey!

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Moving to the Channel Islands

An unusual destination I grant you, but my sister was living there at the time and told me the local paper was always carrying adverts from the BBC and Channel TV looking for local staff. Given that 2003 was the hottest summer in recent history, I thought this wouldn't be too bad a place to wait until a job with either television station came up. Sure enough, within three months a position for an assistant transmission controller was advertised at Channel TV. I applied, was interviewed and didn't get it. I was gutted. However, a month later there was a call from the manager, who told me he had made the wrong decision. The person they'd employed was not up to scratch and they'd let him go. This was testament to how high the standard was at the place I ended up learning my trade. One of the last independent ITV regions, in the 1980s Channel had travelled to California to trial Sony's new ENG cameras and subsequently became the first company in the whole of Europe to have them. For this reason Channel was contracted to make high-end documentaries for broadcasters all over the continent. Luckily for me, some of the cameramen who had worked there in the 80s were still there when I joined, and would teach me how to shoot on everything from old Sony Beta SP cameras to Panasonic DVCPros and DigiBetas. Being a small team we were truly multiskilled, so I also learned to edit, record location sound, vision-mix, do all kinds of studio setups – and all within the first year or so.

The decision to harness my career behind the camera was quite clear-cut though. One of the perks of working in the Channel Islands is that your pictures are mostly bathed in blue skies and sunshine, which reflects magnificently when working on the water, so is always satisfying. Early in my career, however, I was the sound operator on a two-camera shoot covering fishing for sea bass with one of Jersey's Michelin star chefs. This meant looking down at my analogue dials as we filmed on a fishing boat. It was a beautiful calm day on the sea... so, to my huge embarrassment, the only waves crashing against the side of the boat were those coming back up from my stomach! The UK-based producer

we were working with that day said she could hardly contain herself watching me carefully take off all the kit, vomit (very quietly), then go back to the kit to confirm that everything was still at the correct levels.

I vowed from that point on to look at the horizon through a viewfinder rather than looking down, as that is what makes you sick on boats. That said, when you're filming swimmers, canoeists or other subjects 'from' the boat, looking down can be hard to avoid. However, boat to boat or filming fishermen on the boat can give great shots, and a glassy reflective surface will inevitably give you images that make all the effort and occasional queasiness worth it. To add into the mix, if fish are your subject, the smell can be your main enemy!

A small channel offering big opportunities

This may be a small region but it offers some great opportunities. In my first four years, I cut my teeth filming out of biplanes, from the back of yachts, covering royal visits, abseiling with the camera, doing live radio-camera on location, covering the Island Games (where 4000 athletes from islands all around the world compete in multisport events on a different island every two years), as well as – my favourite of all – operating on-stage camera at music festivals. And this was all in the name of local news output!

On top of this, national broadcasters would contact Channel to hire a crew when they were coming to the islands to film. This benefited them in two ways – they automatically secured fixers as we know all the best locations for filming, plus they didn't have to pay out excess baggage to transport



Tracey filming the land-side action of two local divers by the clear waters of Bouley Bay in Jersey



Channel's first camerawoman Ros Henry, whose varied work over three decades became an inspiration to Tracey and other camerawomen in the Channel Islands

kit. The benefit for me was that I got to work on national programmes for the BBC, ITV and Channel 4, as well as some international broadcasters. I honestly didn't appreciate how lucky I was to have such a range of great experiences, nor did I realise how brilliantly this was adding to my CV.

The gender question

Any issues resulting from being a woman working in the industry have rarely come to the fore. This was helped greatly when I started by the reputation of a female predecessor in Guernsey, Ros Henry. Standing at a proud 4ft 10in, Ros claims to have probably been Europe's first ENG camerawoman. She would race about in her 1970s soft-top with the kit piled in the back to grab amazing pictures of the annual powerboat event. A photo of her filming out of the side of a helicopter was proudly displayed on the Channel TV office walls!

There is only one occasion when I can recall my gender being particularly troublesome. We had been tasked with selling our multicamera footage of a time-trial leg of the Tour de Bretagne cycling race. I was due to cover a static position feeding into a makeshift OB truck. However, the previous day our crewing had to switch around and the 16-stone camera operator who was due to be on a crane with the 180 angle at the centre of the course was switched into the vision-mixer's chair and I was put in his place. Unfortunately someone in charge of the budget heard about this and booked a smaller crane for me – since I was a woman and, as they thought, considerably smaller than my colleague. Imagine the crew's horror when we realised there wasn't enough width on the deck of the crane for the tripod or for me to see the viewfinder as I panned the 180 degrees. I also had to reveal to everyone that I was a meaty 10 stone at the time, rather than half the size of my colleague as they had assumed! I spent the entire afternoon blindly operating the shots on my right with

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my calm director guiding my follow-through in my ear. This was the only blip in an otherwise glorious time of working at Channel TV. I was still there when they were bought out by ITV in 2011.

Changing channels and going national

Four years ago a job came up at BBC Channel Islands and, fancying a change, I applied and crossed the floor. Around a year later another position with the BBC came up as a Network multiskilled operator, predominantly based in Wales. Again I applied and got it. Despite working on national programmes intermittently, this was my first time working at that level on a daily basis and it was fantastic.

The main difference in working at national level was the access to equipment and budget. No distance was too far to travel for a shot and any ideas I had about bringing tracks, a jib or slider on a 'news' job were always welcomed. If an idea involved cost it would be considered, whereas at regional level cost can be an instant conversation killer.

Working in Wales also allowed me to watch closely the reports shot by Dai Baker, who was nominated for RTS



Working on an OB for the BBC News at Six in 2015

Camera Operator of the Year 2017. My fancy title in fact just meant I was a shoot/edit who provided my own live facility on the VSAT. I worked with a great team and the correspondent Hywel Griffith was just a joy to be around – although even he was bemused when his biggest public plaudits came not due to one of our reports having a high placement on the Six O'clock running order, but because the news item was featured on Channel 4's Gogglebox!

Coming from the Channel Islands, where almost every week involved a trip to one of the other islands, loading up for a foreign trip was second nature to me and I managed to get some foreign trips in to my new work. I was kept on to help cover the 2015 General Election and in the run-up to this was involved in a programme for which Huw Edwards was anchoring both the Six and Ten O'Clock News from Cardiff Castle. Again, this was extremely heartening since the shows had such high production values. A studio director had come up with the truck from London. We had three cameras, a jib, external lighting team and – for me, the most important addition – a sound man! Production values may be gradually increasing at the national level but at the regional level the move towards mobile journalism and iPhones to gather set interviews is gaining momentum.

Since working for the Six and Ten O'Clock News I have now returned to the BBC in the Channel Islands, although last year I was lucky enough to get a place on a flight to Rio, working for BBC Nations and Regions at the Paralympics. I had taken a year out in 2008 to do a world tour, which included Rio de Janeiro for a meagre four days and it had always been



Ready to go for a live into BBC London News at the Rio Paralympics in September 2016

my ambition to go back again to soak up the atmosphere of that amazing city. What better time to do it than at the Paralympics? It was such an interesting experience, partly because of the huge medal haul of the GB team, who were constantly a joy to interview, but also because the BBC were not the rights holders, which made it quite a challenge at times, but brilliant all the same.

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Always on duty – even at home

One thing I've learned over the years is that a cameraperson never actually switches off – even at home. Thankfully I haven't had anyone ask me to film a wedding yet... but I do have a partner who is the only Briton to have both climbed Everest and swum the English Channel (only seven people worldwide have achieved this to date, all of them men) – and he is constantly asking me to film his swims! Last Easter we travelled to Gibraltar so that he could swim from Spain to Morocco. This is a tough ask for me since he is also an experienced TV professional and, back in 1997, self-reported his own Everest climb as a video journalist. Having now completed climbing the Seven Summits (the highest peak on each continent), his current ambition is to become the first person in the world to have done the Seven Summits plus the Oceans Seven challenge. The Oceans Seven is becoming an increasingly popular challenge meaning swimmers must cross the Cook Strait (New Zealand), Tsugaru Strait (Japan), Catalina Channel (California), Hawaii Strait, Strait of Gibraltar, English Channel and – the hardest of them – the North Channel between Scotland and Ireland. The availability of spaces is just as difficult as raising the funds to pay for the support boat. We have filmed lots of footage and, although this has provided news footage for ITV, Channel TV and BBC Channel Islands, we haven't yet done much with it ourselves. Making swimming videos has become extremely popular though (testament to this being its inclusion in the extreme sports film festivals held annually in Sheffield and Kendal), so hopefully an opportunity will arise before too long.

Technology moves so fast we have resorted to renting kit to film the swims. A couple of years ago we spent £200 on a pair of HD diving goggles for a POV shot but it was awful

(like something straight out of the *Blair Witch Project*), plus, as the goggles were first edition, the AAA batteries only lasted 15 minutes. We can't afford to keep purchasing kit like this, so we now hire the latest Go Pro or OSMO, and borrow whatever camera we can get our hands on for the main footage.

Undoubtedly there have been opportunities for me to apply for attachments elsewhere in national news. But for the moment, for life reasons as much as work considerations, I am very happy to be based in the Channel Islands. We are slowly developing the creative side of BBC Channel Islands by introducing better technology and using crews more wisely after many years as a VJ-only operation. And, as for current excitement, I'm preparing to go to the Swedish island of Gotland to cover the Island Games this June!



Fact File

Tracey Cahill is an Irish news camera operator who has been based in the Channel Islands since 2003. She's worked for BBC National News at the Rio Paralympics, RBS Six Nations and the 2015 UK Election. Past programmes worked on are *Location, Location, Location*, *This Morning* and *Antiques Roadshow*. Tracey is used to working in news, sport and music programmes.
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