

Three Rivers Talking Newspaper

Twenty-one years old:

The story so far

Friday, June 21st, 1991, was the day the first edition of the Three Rivers Talking Newspaper was produced on cassette tapes and dispatched by post to the homes of 87 blind or partially-sighted people living on the Suffolk and Norfolk sides of the Waveney Valley.

The three rivers in the title reflected the district from which news would be covered by the new TN -- the Waveney at Beccles, Bungay and Harleston, the Blyth at Halesworth and Southwold and the Chet at Loddon. This is the circulation area of the Beccles and Bungay Journal from which permission was obtained to record its contents for distribution to our listeners.

Why did it happen? Sound East, the TN for the Lowestoft area, had received complaints that its news coverage did not extend to the Beccles, Bungay, Loddon and Halesworth district. As a result, Sound East decided to assist with the setting-up of a new talking newspaper in this area. and organised a number of meetings at various venues, including one in the Village Hall at St James South Elmham, during the latter part of 1990, to publicise the project and confirm the interest in and demand for such a service.

Consequently, Sound East called a meeting at Beccles in February, 1991, and a steering committee was born. It consisted of David Wuyts chairman, Kath Bird secretary, Joan Wuyts treasurer, John Pickett co-ordinator, Tony Clarke publicity and Gillian Wright fund-raising. In due course we had four teams of seven volunteers ready to start training by members of Sound East. The teams were named A, B, C and D.

The committee was also busy in finding a home. Bungay High School offered us the exclusive use of its Community Wing on Friday evenings and it remained our headquarters for the next 15 years.

To get started, Sound East provided us with second-hand recording equipment valued at £3500, including a bank of cassette copiers, tape eraser, control units and microphones. We had to find funds of about £500 to buy postal pouches, tapes and cards, etc.

We were given a flying start by the Rotary Clubs of Beccles and Bungay, both Inner Wheel Clubs, The Lions, Bungay Town Trust Fund and both councils, along with several firms in the two towns.

Car boot sales

We also ran stalls at car boot sales and were given the profits from Wrentham Village Hall sales weekends, plus a table to sell items donated to us. One offshoot was a book collection that lasted over several years and raised hundreds of pounds.

The great day arrived on June 21st 1991 when we dispatched 87 tapes to blind and partially-sighted people in the area, courtesy of Royal Mail which provides talking newspapers with a free postal service.

On October 18th, 1991, we held our first AGM when the original steering group were re-elected. Sound East handed over to us and we were joined on the committee by John Stimpson, Sybil Sayer and Mr W. Beard. We were on our own and serious funding was needed.

The committee worked extremely hard and were very well supported by many individuals and organisations. In addition to Rotary, Inner Wheel, Lions and Town Trust, funding was also received from local golf, football and Young Farmers' clubs, fetes and more car boot sales. Even our listeners gave donations at Christmas.

One development in particular should be mentioned – it became our biggest fund-raising effort. It started at the Parish Church at St James South Elmham where a local clergy group, Jonny and the Canticles, and well-known musicians held “Magic of Music” concerts in aid of Three Rivers funds.

Concerts

The organiser was St James resident Peter Warren, one of the original members of the B Team, who then embarked on a new series of concerts — by gifted amateurs, semi-professionals and professionals — starting at St James but then branching out to churches in a wide area of North Suffolk and South Norfolk. The proceeds were shared between the host churches and Three Rivers. Similar concerts were also held at Beccles Public Hall.

Among those who took part regularly in Peter's concerts over the next decade were Waveney Valley Brass, soloists from Beccles Choral Society, musicians from the Suffolk Youth Orchestra and pianist Andrew Giller, of Raveningham and the Old Granary Studio, Toft Monks.

As a result, thousands of pounds were raised to support the costing of what is an expensive business, especially the recording and tape copying machines that had to be renewed after ten years. The concerts were professionally recorded free of charge by John Whitehouse, of Merlin Audio, Norwich, and the tapes and CDs passed to Robin Limmer, editor of the B Team, for quarterly concert tapes to be sent to our listeners.

Production

Our talking newspaper teams consist of editor, recordist, four readers and two office workers, and the production begins on a Friday morning when —

1 The editor takes two copies of the Beccles and Bungay Journal and cuts them into separate stories which are pinned or pasted on to foolscap pages in four piles. Each reader will be given one of the piles when the team assembles at the studio later in the day.

2 Readers – preferably two women and two men – grouped round the table, will in turn read into the microphone the prepared items of news.

3 The recordist is the producer of the master tape (or USB memory stick from August, 2009, when Three Rivers “went digital” – more about that later). After checking that each of the four mikes are “live,” he/she then switches from one reader to another until, in the old days, a 90-minute tape was full, or, in the case of the new digital memory stick, the duration of the recording is optional, but we try to contain it approximately to the traditional 90 minutes.

4 Office workers: Their first task is to take out the yellow pouches from the large postal bag which the Royal Mail has delivered free that morning and then remove each memory stick. These are checked and recorded in a large book to indicate the incomings and outgoings. All listeners are listed on three address cards which slot into the pouches and which are reversible to enable the listener to return the memory stick to us. Having updated the records, the admin staff later receive the master memory stick from the recordist and place it in the copying machine which produces a dozen copies in less than a minute.

Finally, the filled pouches are divided into three bags, according to destination, and then posted by members at the relevant post offices in the Three Rivers area.

The whole procedure used to take about 3½ hours (excluding the editor’s preparatory work in the mornings), but thanks to the wonders of digital technology it has been reduced by about an hour.

In the early days, at about 10pm on a Friday evening, one of the volunteers would take all the cassette pouches from Bungay to the Norwich GPO Sorting Office for delivery by first post the next morning. However, from November, 1992, Royal Mail extended this service to its main post offices in our area.

Students' team

For the first 18 months of 'Three Rivers' existence there were four production teams. Throughout that time we also received help from some of the sixth-formers at Bungay High School, part of the arrangement when we were given use of the school premises being that there should be some student involvement. Usually it would mean one student per team helping with general duties or occasionally sitting in as a news reader.

This worked well, the students were keen and helpful and so it was decided to form a fifth production team — the E Team — consisting almost entirely of students, to be responsible, under the guidance of Peter Warren as editor, for a complete edition every fifth week.

It proved a valuable experience for these young people and gave them the opportunity to undertake voluntary work within the community. In addition to students from Bungay High School, others from Beccles Sir John Leman High and Hobart High at Loddon also took part in this bold development.

After three years, with increasing personnel changes as students left to continue their careers, it became difficult to maintain a regular input, and so the fifth team evolved into an all-adult group, but it had been an interesting, successful and worthwhile project, and it was believed that Three Rivers was the only talking newspaper in the country to have organised such a venture.

The magazine—Valley Sound

For some time it had been hoped that our talking newspaper could run its own equivalent to a colour supplement – in other words, a Talking Magazine. Chairman David Wuyts asked B Team editor Robin Limmer to become its editor and, as a result, Valley Sound was launched on August 20th, 1993, in the form of a 90-minute quarterly miscellany of interviews, stories, songs, poetry and prose, reflecting life in the area. Robin recruited the services of an old Bungay Grammar School friend, the Norfolk naturalist Rex Hancy, and gardening expert and conservationist Catriona Hodge, both of whom are still contributing to Valley Sound nearly two decades later.

***'Oh, I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside'* — on Norwich Cathedral organ!**

Three of the Valley Sound highlights during Robin's editorship were interviews with astronomer Patrick Moore in Hawaii, bandleader/drummer Jack Parnell and a recording of his quintet in aid of Three Rivers funds, and an interview with Norwich Cathedral organist Neil Taylor, who not only gave a mini-recital but also played specially for Three Rivers on this mighty instrument '*Oh, I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside*'!

Robin says: “Only four people were in the cathedral on the evening of November 23rd, 1995. Peter Warren and I had joined our professional recordist John Whitehouse for the interview with Neil Taylor and the resulting tape went out as a special edition of Valley Sound.

“Neil explained the intricacies of the organ and illustrated it with extracts from works by J.S. Bach, John Stanley and Cesar Franck, but if people had been passing the cathedral that night and heard the strains of ‘*Oh, I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside*,’ they would not have believed their ears!”

Patrick Moore interviewed in Hawaii

The Patrick Moore interview was conducted by Peter Warren when they were both on an astronomical tour in the United States, including Arizona and Hawaii, where Patrick willingly agreed to talk specially to Three Rivers listeners for half an hour at the renowned Meteor Crater Observatory.

Peter, John and Robin visited the Red Lion Inn jazz session at Thorpe, on the outskirts of Norwich, in February, 1997, where John recorded the Jack Parnell Quintet, plus Peter’s interview, and with Jack’s permission, the resulting boxed CD was sold in aid of Three Rivers funds. A year or so later, when Robin visited the new jazz venue at the Green Man Inn, Rackheath, Jack told him that John’s recording was the best one ever made of his quintet.

After four years at the helm and having completed 17 editions, Robin handed over the editorial chair of Valley Sound to David Wuyts in the autumn of 1997 and now in the spring of 2012 David has reached edition No 76.

By paddle steamer to London

David says: “We have had a wonderful collection of interviews and people to meet. I could go on for ever about them, as could Robin. One rather memorable occasion was the first paddle steamer to call at Southwold pier since the 1930s. We stayed with her to London, as did several of our listeners. The war-time feature in Valley Sound was taken by BBC Radio Suffolk for their archives.”

In January, 2002, David was elected president of Three Rivers TN, having been chairman from its inception in 1991. He was succeeded by our technical officer, Vaughan Shea, who has combined the two roles for the past 10½ years.

The concert tape

On July 21st, 1995, while still editing Valley Sound magazine, Robin launched the first of the quarterly music tapes, consisting of excerpts from Peter’s concerts recorded specially for Three Rivers, together with CDs by local artists who had given permission for their use.

Now in digital memory-stick form, the final edition went out to our listeners in February, 2012. It was *final* because the Performing Rights Society has now banned the use of music on talking newspaper productions unless complex and rigid regulations are met which, sadly, we find impossible to do. And so, after a run of 17 years, the popular quarterly concert programme is no more.

Digital milestone

With recording equipment breaking down more frequently and tapes becoming scarce, chairman and technical officer Vaughan Shea persuaded the committee in 2009 that Three Rivers should “go digital” and dispense with the cassette tape system.

It was a bold move, one which “leapfrogged” the CD procedure adopted by some talking newspapers in the UK.

Once again, we obtained the advice and experience of our original mentors, Sound East at Lowestoft. We visited their studio to see how they had successfully come to terms with the digital age and the USB memory stick, the tiny item on which an indeterminate amount of information can be stored and then played back through either a computer or the “boomboxes” which we would later issue to all our listeners.

Our D Day, when we went digital, was August 19th, 2009, and the vastly improved quality and clarity was appreciated by listeners and it also meant for us a much quicker, though more expensive, production.

Our studios

We have had three homes in our first 21 years. For the first 15 we used the Community Wing of Bungay High School, but when the premises were required for additional classrooms our headquarters were moved across the county border in 2006 to All Hallows Convent, Ditchingham.

There we had the luxury of our own two rooms and thus the recording equipment could be left permanently set up as a studio, instead of being packed away in cupboards as was necessitated at our previous base.

After 4½ years at the All Hallows Convent studio, we were given three months’ notice at the end of 2010 because the vast complex of little-used buildings, of which our two rooms were a small part, were to be acquired by the homeless charity and self-supporting community, the Emmaus Project..

Following an intensive search for new headquarters, we moved on March 26th, 2011, to Earsham where we were grateful to the Rector and Parochial Church Council to be able to use the Church Rooms behind the Parish Church. The facilities were excellent but it did mean that our recording and

copying equipment had to be set up and dismantled each week because of the premises' other requirements.

However, six months later we were on the move again, thanks to the generosity of Mr Tim Nursey, who provided, free of charge, two rooms behind his business premises in Bungay, enabling us, once more, to have our very own studio.

A further generous gesture came from the Beehive Nursery, meeting the cost of electricity! A great saving, as we are continually watching our finances.

Finance — an ever-present requisite

Finance is an ever-present requisite in case of equipment failure and replacement and in this age of electronics it means four figures – plus the supply to our listeners of the boombox players costing £25 each and memory sticks at about £3.

The majority of new listeners have no equipment to use the digital memory sticks, so we provide them with the boomboxes. Under European law these cannot be loaned unless tested annually for safety. It would necessitate collecting them, paying test fees, and then returning them, having deprived the user of an essential facility for at least a week. Therefore, we *give* our listeners the boomboxes, to be returned when no longer needed.

Dartmoor trek

Over the years, Three Rivers funds have benefited from the efforts of a number of individuals and companies. In the early days, B Team member Sybil Sayer organised a sponsored walk along the Bigod Way, led by her husband John. In 1999 Robin Limmer undertook a 40-mile sponsored trek across Dartmoor, with two friends, and the £1000 raised enabled the quarterly concert tapes to “go stereo” soon afterwards.

And when Heather Wright was Ladies' Captain of Bungay Golf Club she gave the whole of her year's fund-raising project – a four-figure sum – to Three Rivers.

Bungay Golf Club Bridge Club and two Bungay charities have also given to us generously. Peter and Pam Martin, of the A Team, held a very successful fund-raising lunch at their Worlingham home in 2010, and the Beccles Friends in Harmony choir also boosted our funds with concerts in 2007 and 2011. We recorded the concerts for distribution later to our listeners.

We continue to raise money via our annual cake stall, also to collect used stamps in aid of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

Each year since inauguration we have competed for the shield in the inter-talking newspaper quiz against Lowestoft Sound East and Yarmouth Grapevine, and

sometimes we, as the minnows, actually win it!
Each of the three TNs hosts the quiz successively every third year.

Brand-new B Team!

In September, 2011, notice was given to the committee that the whole of the B Team would be retiring nine months later after a total of 93 years' service. No animosity or disagreements – simply that Robin would have completed 20 years as editor by June 1st, 2012, and two of his colleagues, founder members Peter Warren and Gill Martinez, would each have served 21 years.

In fact, Peter and Gill plus Jill Hooton (17 years' service) had planned to retire years before this but had loyally agreed to stay on until Robin stood down. Jessie Ibbott had been the recordist for eight years and Rosie Owen was leaving the district after being with us for six.

Following David's Press appeal, a new B Team was assembled under the editorship of Ruth Lewis-Smith, and after a few months of training with all five teams, they took over from the outgoing group during the second half of the weekly talking newspaper production on June 1st.

The future

In 2012 the number of TN pouches being posted to our listeners is only slightly less than the 87 we sent out on June 21st, 1991.

Midway, the total peaked to about 130 but, encouragingly, the reduction is partly attributed to the number of successful eye operations which have taken place in recent years.

However, while there are still blind and partially-sighted people and others who have difficulty in holding a newspaper, the work of Three Rivers and other talking newspapers throughout the world will, of course, continue.

**David Wuyts and Robin Limmer
June, 2012**