

A Dubious Distinction

*An account of my small part in the success of
the London Olympic Games 2012
Opening and Closing Ceremonies*

By Peter Hawker

INTRODUCTION

At my cycling club 2011 Christmas lunch members were invited to entertain the very receptive festive company. I'm a quite recent amateur drummer and a fellow cyclist, a guitarist Shadows fan had asked me to accompany him in a short programme. We called ourselves "The Old Boy's Band" and we were surprisingly well received. Another member asked me afterwards if I was playing at the Olympics. I was puzzled – I didn't know that there was a competitive drumming category in the Games. No, she replied, at the Opening Ceremony, and gave me an email address. And that's where it all began.

In my eightieth year I'd gone on a solo cycle camping trip from Lands End to John O'Groats and a few weeks later cycled up Mt. Ventoux, the highest peak in Provence, a Tour de France classic. This Olympic temptation might be my last adventure. I had never been interested in high level competitive sport and was dubious about national sport. The intense competition and pressure put me off those activities. I'm more into creative activities – I revere musicians and writers- But I used to watch the Tour de France – I was a cyclist after all and couldn't resist that demanding event.

So, I thought I'd give this new invitation a go and completed an application form, ticking dancing and drumming as activities of interest to me. One of the last questions on the form was "age". Answering that was as far as I expected to get. The management couldn't be expected to assume responsibility for an 83 year old buffer collapsing in the arena.

But after 9 weeks had elapsed and I'd forgotten about it, I was surprised to receive an invitation to an audition, accompanied by a Volunteer Performer's Agreement which signed away all my reproduction rights. No more children for me then. So in the middle of February on a cold wet day I joined a long queue in the open courtyard of 3Mills Studios, Bromley by Bow. It tested our resolve. I was put in the preliminary dance group. Afterwards I asked if I could change to drumming – the dancing was too advanced for me - and was told that *if* I passed the

audition it might be arranged. Many weeks later I was invited to the second interview ... in the dance section again. I switched over to the drummers after some negotiation and passed that one. During both auditions eagle-eyed women with clipboards circulated, looking at the large bib numbers on our chests and making notes of performances. Offputting.

PREPARATION

Some weeks later came the first of many demanding rehearsals, initially at those 3Mills Studios, in groups of 200 on 5 consecutive days of the week, then at a huge ex-Ford carpark in Dagenham, hired because it was a similar area to the stadium and could accommodate all 1,000 of us. But awkward to get to. Train to London Bridge. Down, down down to the Jubilee Line and on to West Ham. District Line to Dagenham East. Then 10mins. walk to queue for a 'bendy bus' to for a twenty minute ride to the site. It became known as "bloody Dagenham". One and a half to two hours journey, depending on my luck with the trains. Sunday trains were very unreliable – engineering works for the Olympics! Queue to register. collect radios and sit down and wait. And wait, until the day's programme was announced, then onto the "field of play" for rehearsals – rain or shine, drumming, simple dancing. At the first rollcall I was interested to learn that about a quarter of the intake were professional drummers, mostly rock and pop, about half amateur and the rest chosen because they had rhythm. Of all shapes and sizes, approx. half male and female and of varying ages. I heard that the intention was to recruit a typical cross section of the public who showed potential. I believe I represented the 'wrinklies'.

The first session started with a pep talk from our overall boss Steve Boyd, an American professional stadium mass movement consultant who had masterminded several previous Olympic ceremonies. He was held in awe by his supporting staff; most of them were paid, the majority were volunteers. There was a passing reference to fittings for three costumes. Three costumes? Then, just as casually, that we would be marshalling during the two ceremonies. Marshalling? This was the first we'd heard about it. But we didn't question this new function. All in a good cause. We were introduced to our drum director, Mike Dolbear, a renowned session man and teacher. And our music supremo, Rick Smith. He's a partner in "Underworld", a techno-rock outfit who performed in sound tracks of some of artistic director Danny Boyle's films. And finally, dance tutor Natasha. So that was the trio who we would get to know so well in the coming weeks.

I eavesdropped on conversations between young professional drummers. Fascinating. Some played in up to four bands and were frequently consulting their iPhones, arranging gigs and rehearsals. A chaotic life compared to my well-ordered existence. I wouldn't have lasted a month. Not well paid. They're in the entertainment profession. Ok at the top but a struggle for most. Exhilarating though, doing what they loved. Some were a little arrogant – "bands can get by

without a guitarist, base, keyboards, but without a drummer they're dead". Had they heard about drum machines I wondered. Many kept the wolf from the door by teaching. Another world.

The one accessory that was indispensable was our radios. Without that stream of 'in ear' directions the whole show would've ground to a halt. Every performer had one and there were a lot of us. Each supporting technician was identified by letters on the back of their waistcoats. The vital communications personnel had COMMS so inscribed and they often looked a little worried, as well they might. Quite a responsibility.

After many sessions at Dagenham and 3Mills came the first rehearsal at the stadium. How exciting. At last, this was the real thing. To emerge from the holding area into that enormous enclosure was so exciting. We made a spectacular impact. Our drum director distributed us around the perimeter, in the circulation space between the upper and lower banks of seats, hidden in the shadows. Below us, in the arena were the many different groups, also rehearsing their various acts. We were given the signal for a "bosh", a loud single drumbeat on a thousand drums which ricoched around the stadium, causing confusion amongst those volunteers beavering below. They wondered what had hit them. We'd made an impressive introduction to that hard working company in which we were thereafter held in high regard. We were very proud to be drummers.

And so the weeks went by and our performance improved, as it should've with the hours we put in. As the opening ceremony approached I was asked by the local paper if I would be interviewed, as they'd heard that I was the oldest Olympic drummer. The editor was disappointed when I told her that Danny Boyle our Artistic Director had sworn us to secrecy about our activities. Keep it a surprise, he asked. Ok, she said, just tell me about you and how you came to be involved, to which I agreed. She'd send Jo, their photographer around. Jo arrived, an attractive blonde. "My editor tells me you came into this through your cycling club. Is there any prop that could indicate the connection?" I suggested wearing my multicoloured lycra club top. "Put it on", she ordered. So I did as I was told and invited her upstairs . . . to my drumkit. Then outside to be taken, with drumsticks waving, on my bicycle. An unfamiliar experience.

Then came another claim to fame. Walking back through the dark Olympic park from the stadium after ducking out of the last half hour of a late rehearsal (worried about catching the train) I caught up with a young woman and started chatting. She asked me what I did and I asked her what she did. She was one of Danny Boyle's assistants and her boyfriend Ian was a presenter on LBC radio. If I could confirm that I *was* the oldest drummer he might want to interview me during the evening following the Opening Ceremony, when volunteers would be invited to tell their stories. And so his producer called me in that early evening to confirm that I was happy to be interviewed and said he'd phone later. The call came – "you're on in ten

minutes!". I was very nervous when the time arrived and was invited to speak, but it all came flowing out in a surprisingly coherent stream.

Ian was a good interviewer and hardly interrupted. On the few occasions that he did I kept on talking, like a machine on which no one could find stop button. The producer told me afterwards that I was a good broadcaster, but I'm sure he says that to all the phone-ins.

...and so from those two unique occasions came the title of this article: "A Dubious Distinction".

OO51VOLS oo51vols@london2012ceremonies.com. That was the email heading of dozens of directives from our co-ordinators, sometimes one a day, informing of all aspects of our activities, principally last minute changes to rehearsal times and locations, often received the evening before. They were our essential connection with the management, Team H, sent to all drummers and marshals, one thousand of us, so no replies could be entertained. They'd be swamped. But the writers, Haith and Hannah were there at all rehearsals and we could take up any unresolved issues with them. There were usually lots and they were often surrounded by puzzled participants. They worked hard to keep us on the straight and narrow. We were appreciative of their help and bought them choccies and flowers before the last performance. An emotional presentation. Our drum master Mike Dolbear and music director Rick Smith signed autographs on that occasion, on bibs very often. I am proud to display a photo I took of Mike wearing my drum hat which I wore at some rehearsals. It was popular with the drummers, many of whom had their pictures taken in it. I used a standard Games cap with my logo "Drummin' for Britain" superimposed on the message "Team GB". If the Olympic Committee get to hear of that desecration I'll be drummed out (ouch!).

In the middle of the rehearsal schedule I was invited to fittings for my three costumes. I was impressed by the skill of the professional fitters, each of whom looked me up and down and chose a costume from racks stretching the length of the studio. They all fitted perfectly, except for one pair of shoes which were too small by a size. My name and bib number were written on tags and went back on the racks. I didn't see them again for a few weeks. Also stretching the length of the studio was a curtain providing token privacy between the sexes. It had numerous gaps through which were plainly visible women in various stages of undress, seemingly unconcerned about their exposure. They were part of the entertainment industry now, where modesty was not a priority.

THE OPENING CEREMONY

What excitement. After twenty three rehearsals, the great day at last. The dressers fussed about us for the last time – we had to pass between a couple of them for scrutiny as we left the changing rooms. Found our drum groups and filed to holding positions around the perimeter of the stadium, up in the circulation area. Listened for the umpteenth time to Underworld's music and performed those very familiar introductory 'grooves' which preceded the march down the stairs between the seats, down to stadium level. That was the trickiest part of our routine, not looking down, not falling down, one step per bar and keeping time. Thankful to descend with no casualties, we wheeled to face our audience who occupied our complete field of view, and quite close. A sea of faces, top to bottom, side to side. As our drum captain had told us, "the biggest gig you'll ever play for". 8,500 live spectators, over a billion television viewers. Wow! It was exhilarating, inspiring us to play like crazy with Rick Smith's encouragement ringing in our earpieces. "Fantastic! Marvellous!!" He asked for "Attitude, bags of attitude, heads up, backs straight". He has a mild Welsh accent and lapses into the Gaelic in times of excitement. This was one of them. So we did our stuff, providing percussion accompaniment to the Industrial Revolution sequence, which followed the opening Green and Pleasant Land introduction to the Ceremony. We were dressed in "dark satanic mills" costumes – mill workers. We finished as the factory chimeys descended into the bowels of the earth, from whence they'd risen at the beginning of the scene. Very dramatic. To conclude, we turned to the arena, acknowledging the cast and back to the audience, clicking our sticks in appreciation of their contribution. They applauded enthusiastically. "Well done! Now get off, quickly! It's a quick change into your marshall's costumes. Hurry!!" came our instructions. But that "quickly" was easier to say than do. As we tried to run back up the stairs the more impressionable members of the audience left their seats and blocked way up, trying to clap us on the back and shake our hands. We had to be quite brusque and brush them aside – "no time, gotta get off!" we pleaded. And get off we did, heads severely swollen.

The performers got a very fragmented impression of the Ceremony. It never came together for me and I was doubtful about its reception by the public. But when I saw it on BBC iplayer the next evening and heard the response from the worldwide television coverage I knew that Danny had a big hit. It must've been similar to his reaction when the many awards for "Slum Dog Millionaire" were announced. He could now pick and take from the offers that must come in. I'd have loved to have been a fly on the wall during the meetings at which his appointment was debated. A very imaginative and potentially risky selection, but how it paid off.

THE CLOSING CEREMONY

Rehearsals continued apace during the Games, seven of them, at 'Bloody Dagenham' and at 3Mills Studios. The most dramatic moment for me was at Dagenham when we were marshalling a few celebrities. Three Rolls Royces swept into the arena carrying Tinie Tempah, Taio Cruz and Jessie J. Drove up and down the ramps, to and from the podium, having a great time, the stars waving the while, they performed tight turns and stopped line abreast in front of the mock-up for the royal box from which Steve Boyd was directing us. After pausing for a moment to acknowledge the cheers, they reversed, stopping very close to our line of marshals. So close that I had to sidestep to avoid being hit. Imagine the headline-"Elderly Olympic marshal clobbered by Jessie J's Rolls". Fame at last! Such a super voice – hers, not mine.

At last, on the final day we processed from our changing rooms to the stadium, a half hour traipse. How lucky we'd been during the Opening Ceremony rehearsals, when we changed next door . As we walked across a bridge over a major road, traffic slowed and horns sounded. They couldn't have known who we were, but that mass of blue costumes with the lights on bowler hats attracted their attention. So we'd managed a last rehearsal at the stadium, during the early afternoon of the Closing Ceremony. When the last javelin of the Games had finished quivering the previous evening, preparations had begun. A daunting amount of work, converting a Field and Track venue into a show arena for the performanc at 8.30pm the next day. When we arrived mid morning we were doubtful that the work would be finished in time. So much to do. The stadium was swarming with contractors and we waited until all was safe to descend for a final run-through. In costume. Last minute adjustments were still being made to the procedures. The producers always believe that things can be improved. We, at the sharp end, were inclined to leave well alone.

On this occasion we were responsible for directing the athletes from their Parade into the many different segments allocated to them, and keeping them there. Our 'in-ears' directed us to get them in faster, we were two minutes behind the sacred schedule. Again,easier said than done. They were the heroes and were enjoying their success, strolling and laughing and taking photos, quite unconcerned by our pleas. Our line was behind the standard bearers who formed a visual barrier between us and the Royal Box, so I was able to take a blessed few minutes to sit on my 'life-saver', my lovely lightweight folding seat, without which I would never have survived those long, long waits during rehearsals and now, the real thing.



Late middle age has a few compensations. One is a diminishing regard for what people think of you. That very portable seat, for instance. Many of my colleagues commented on what a good idea it was. But none bought one. It drew considerable attention to me, which they wouldn't have welcomed. "You're not going to use that during the Ceremonies are you", I was asked. "Just watch me", I replied. Another symptom, for me anyway, is a proof against celebrity adulation. My colleagues were going nuts when the likes of George Michael, Fatboy Slim, Russell Brand, Brian May and Roger Taylor came by. I was interested to see these, and other 'stars' close-to, but not overwhelmed as many were. With the decline in traditional religion the worship of God has been transferred to Celebrities perhaps.

I ducked out when the partying began at the long awaited end of the performance, concerned about getting home in the small hours. Last train times didn't reflect the comparable popularity of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies. But as I quickly started the long walk back to the changing rooms I was accosted by fans who insisted on having their photos taken with me. Preferably wearing my bowler with the light on top. Despite my protestations, they wouldn't be put off. They were determined that their part in the unique occasion should be recorded. Eventually I managed the quickest change ever and fled with my costume, which we were allowed to keep, to the tube station and collapsed onto a seat. What a relief. Relative peace after all of the razzmatazz.

CONCLUSION

During rehearsals I was asked if I would marshal during the Paralympics. I regretfully declined. It was a good cause but I felt I'd done enough. If there'd been drumming I'd have succumbed to those requests, but I'd done enough marshalling and I was impatient to resume normal life – many activities had been put on hold during those eventful months. Sally, the intrepid woman in my cycling club who'd introduced me to all of this sent me an unusually long email of her experience in the Para Opening Ceremony. It was not flattering to the establishment. Inadequate rehearsals, costume fitting and direction. I didn't regret my decision to duck out of that invitation. But she did remark on the friendliness of the athletes. Very inspiring, she reported. What a trooper, working in both the Olympics. Comendable stamina and dedication.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to such a successful enterprise. Impressed by the professionals concerned, particularly those who taught us so expertly and patiently. Happy to have been associated with all of those Volunteers, who ensured we would be well dressed and equipped; those who administered in so many capacities, all determined we would give of our best. And all of the many, many very different people I met and chatted to. I've never talked so much – there was plenty of time during those long waits. As I was elderly I sometimes felt that I was from another planet. There's a greater difference between the generations now than ever before I felt, but we communicated remarkably well. Everyone with enormous spirit, recruited for a unique enterprise and working hard to make it a such a success. The many memories of that occasion will be with me for ever. It might've have been my last real challenge, which certainly pushed me to my limits at times.



I have my momentos. The drum hat I made that was in such demand at rehearsals, the Closing costume, the Opening millworker's boots, which will be used when riding my scooter (I didn't keep the rest of the costume), the swish patent leather Closing ceremony boots, the glossy programmes - works of art and very informative of the management structure which I was very interested to read. And my photos of course.

I made *three* media appearances I'll have you know. That elusive Fame at last! Two I've described, in the local paper and the LBC Radio interview. The final appearance was another interview for the Talking Newspaper, produced for the blind and partially sighted in the Bromley area, for which I sub-edit.

The next Olympics will be in Rio. Plenty of potential there, lots of music – those street samba bands really send me, a rhythm nut. But will the best people be appointed for all of those demanding jobs I wonder. That was the key to the success of the London Olympics, getting the very best for all of those specialist positions. I won't be there, but we shall see.



ENVOI

One of the reservations that's since exercised my mind is the delicate question of boredom, firstly with the Parade of Flags, which went on and on - I've never been so glad to see the

Zambian emblem appear, alphabetically the last. And then the Parade of Athletes, which the participants thoroughly enjoyed – the show was for them after all – but which strained the viewers attention span - we're told it's reducing year by year. That's a difficult balance to decide in future Games.

In retrospect there's only one regret I have after those Ceremonies, which was only to be expected. Although my cycling didn't suffer so much – less concentration required- the neglect of my drum practice has set the next Grade exam back from around Christmas to next Spring. But it was worth it. Grades will go on for ever. . . well, until Grade 8, which is for ever as far as I'm concerned , but those 2012 Olympics were a memorable one-off which made it all worthwhile.

And finally, if you're *really* interested in the drumming , go to:

<http://mikedolbear.com/story.asp?StoryID=3252> http

That gives a very good impression of it all from three aspects : Mike Dolbear the Drum Master, one of his Drum Captains (most are pupils of his, teachers) and one of the volunteers.

