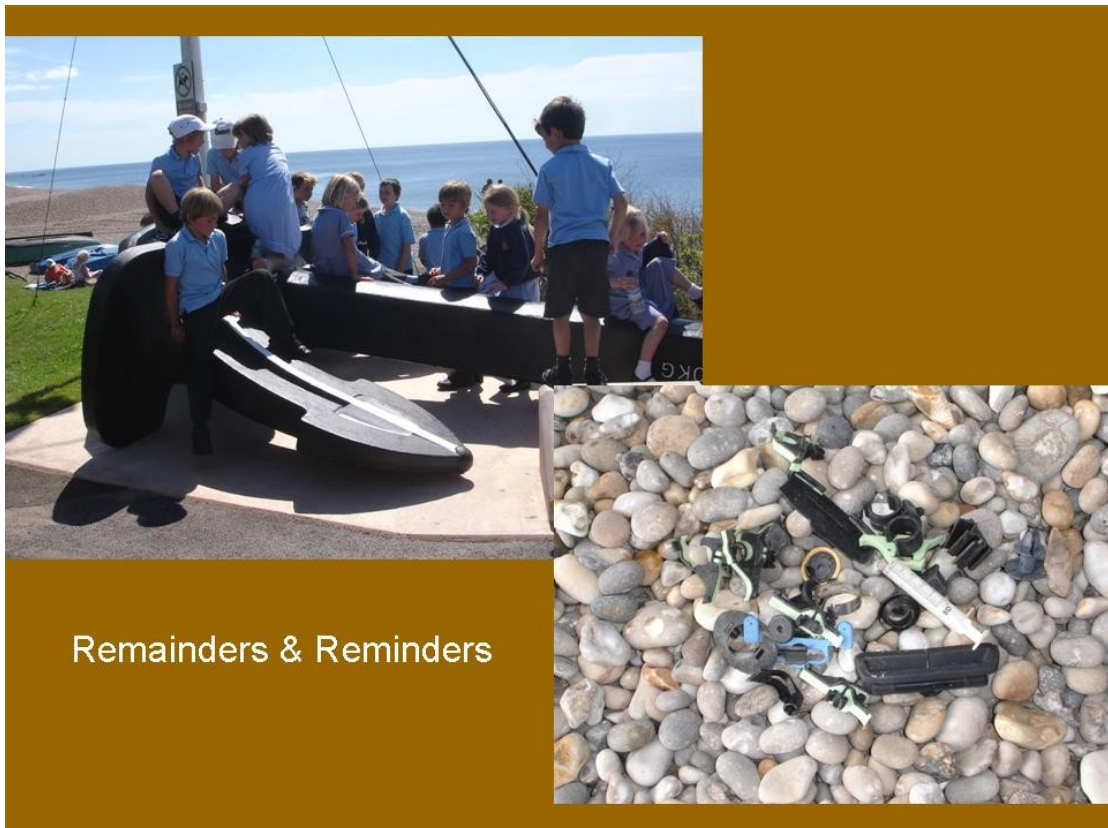


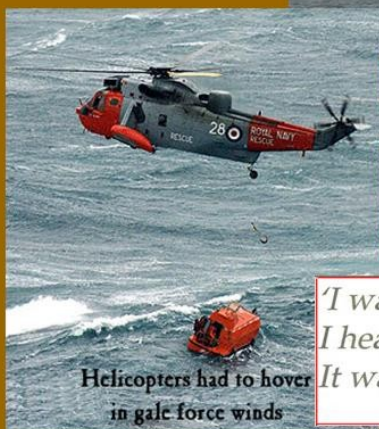
THE WRECK OF THE NAPOLI: WAYS OF TELLING
Barbara Farquharson
talk given on several occasions, in Exmouth, Launceston, &
Ottery St Mary. Updated autumn 2009

It is two and a half years since the Napoli unceremoniously landed at Branscombe; experience and memory are beginning to turn into history. Apart from the huge anchor on the beach in front of the Sea Shanty, and bits of junk that fetch up on the shingle, there's nothing to see.



Since it is beginning to slip away – both in reality and in our minds, I start with a time line – but the question is, where should it begin? Conventionally, the story goes like this:

- January 17th 2007 - horrendous gales in the Channel.
- The container ship, 'The Napoli', making her way from Antwerp to South Africa, begins to crack up off the coast of Brittany.
- The ship is abandoned and a Cornish helicopter manages to winch all the men to safety.



*'I was sleeping in my cabin.
I heard screaming.
It was like the end of the world.'*

FORBES DUTHIE, Scottish officer cadet



- **Robin Middleton, Government adviser, decides the ship should be towed across Lyme Bay to the deep water dock at Portland**
- **Half way across the bay, the ship begins to founder.**
- **He orders that she be rammed into the shore at Branscombe.**

NIGHT OF SATURDAY , JANUARY 20

The ship is listing at a horrendous angle, oil is leaking out.

The gale blows up again, & by the morning 200 containers have been swept overboard

Many of the containers sink to the bottom of the sea



About forty wash up onto Branscombe beach



Sunday morning after the storm





Branscombe is a very beautiful place.



It is part of the World Heritage Jurassic Coast site. It is also AONB, SSSI, SAC, and much of it belongs to the NT – the National Trust. But –

THE WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Welcome to the Dorset and East Devon Coast
This is England's first natural World Heritage Site, and is known as the 'Jurassic Coast'. The Site includes 95 miles (155 km) of unspoilt cliffs and beaches from Exmouth in East Devon, through West Dorset, Weymouth and Portland, to end near Old Harry Rocks in Purbeck.

The Dorset and East Devon Coast is beautiful, but the main reason for its inscription on the World Heritage List is its unique insight into the Earth Sciences. The rocks record 185 million years of the Earth's history. The Site's unique value creates a 'walk through time' that includes the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous Periods. The varied geology also provides a spectacular laboratory of coastal change, and

supports rare and important plants and animals. It is a place to be enjoyed, learnt from and looked after for future generations.

About this guide
This guide has been designed to help you explore the Jurassic Coast and learn about the places and features that make up the globally important World Heritage story.



All the acronyms in the world – WHS, AONB, SSSI, SAC, NT ...





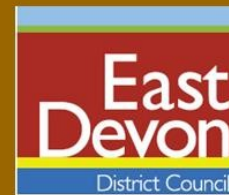

Branscombe



not to mention all the Agencies involved - SOSPREP, MCA, EA, HPA, CEFAS, DCC, EDCC - could save Branscombe from becoming the site of a potential disaster ...



Acronyms on stage in Branscombe village Hall



The acronyms couldn't stop what happened happening, but at least it meant that the story hit the media big time, and required urgent government attention. The owners and insurers were in the spotlight and the Napoli became the second most expensive salvage operation in the world (second only to the Exxon Valdez) – the insurers have paid out more than 140 million dollars. Think about how different it would have been if the container ship had run aground off some small Pacific island, some 'undeveloped' bit of the world.

Despite undoubted incompetence – underlined in the recent findings of the Devon County Council Inquiry - there was an astonishing degree of cooperation. We heard amazing stories of how, in order to speed things up, *millions* of pounds of salvage work were agreed on the shake of a hand.

That's the initial story line, but was that the right place to start?

You could see the Napoli story as just another event, another accident, or as

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

- **Not just about a ship, or a gale, but**

about global economies, international commodity exchange, an incredible array of things and people on the move ...

- *And about national governance & local involvement*

You could see the story as cradled in a particular moment in time – now, for example, with the recession, the seas are much quieter, the ships are fewer. Or you could see how it operates at many different scales: it's about *international* commodity exchange, and *national* governance, and *local* involvement ...

Moreover, it might be helpful to think of it as more of a *process* than an event - it doesn't stay still. It itself, the thing happening, is

always changing. It is also a process in the sense that it's experienced and understood in many different ways.



There is no one story, no one entry point or vantage point. And that, really, is what this talk is about.

We were in London when the Napoli grounded on Saturday, January 20th, and it was someone in London who saw it on the tv news and rang us to tell us what was happening in the village. Twenty-four hours later, driving home, it slowly dawned on us that we were going to have to get out the camcorder and start recording, start talking with people in the village, finding out what had happened to them, and how they felt about it ...

Why, you might well ask? After all, there was massive media coverage, why should we get involved? The answer, because the Branscombe Project was already so involved in oral history and

memory work, was obvious – we needed to suss out what an event like this meant to local people.

Some people think oral history is not very important -

Some people think that:

**ORAL HISTORY is selective, parochial,
and inaccurate ...**

**But 'REAL' HISTORY is also selective, has a
'viewpoint', and is (usually) written by those
with authority ...**

**We need 'Real' history,
and we need Oral history
to 'work against the grain' ...**



Same event –
different experiences,
different reactions,
different ways of
'seeing' ...

Everyone has their own take ...

OLDER PEOPLE – SOME OF THEM ...

YOUNGER PEOPLE – SOMETIMES ...

SHOP-KEEPERS & INN KEEPERS – BUT THEY
CHANGED THEIR MINDS

THE SALVAGE MAN
LOCAL POLICEMAN
THE NATIONAL TRUST MAN
MAN AT THE TOP

AND SO ON ..

Many of the older people – but not all – were quite scared by the ‘invasion’ of what became known as the ‘undesirables’. On the other hand, some of the younger people (but not all) were very excited about being part of the scene, part of ‘history’, or saw it as like something on telly. They loved talking about how they knew the footpaths, how they’d evaded capture, how they’d featured in the media, and so on. Then there were people with small businesses, who had varied and changing perceptions. Some of them hated what was happening and didn’t want to have anything to do with it, didn’t want to cash in. Others saw it as a great opportunity –



‘Napoli on the Rocks’ or ‘Wrecker-burgers and chips £9-99’! There was Steve Speariett, the local policeman – who was dumped in it and who had to watch whilst people higher up the hierarchy played it by the book and made a complete mess of it. There was Stuart

Britton, the on-the-ground National Trust man, and Martin Quickfall, the man who directed the salvage operation on the beach. They all ‘saw’ the event in different ways.



Talking to people, we occasionally went beyond the local. We interviewed Dave Duffield, the man who'd acted as go-between with the insurers and all the salvage people; a man so tightly wound up in the action that he talked non-stop for four hours!

And as the first year went by, and as the containers were lifted off the beach or dredged from the sea, as the oil was drained off, as unsuccessful attempts were made to refloat the boat, and to break it up with resultant oil spillage ... we went on talking with people. The National media had long packed their bags but it seemed important to understand how people changed their minds.

Different experiences,
and also, as things developed,
changing experiences.

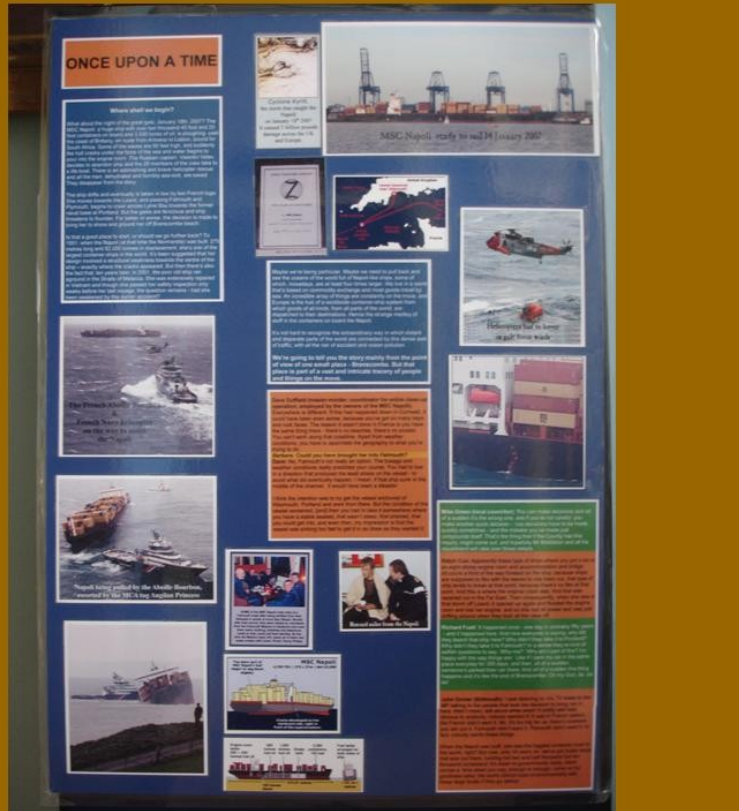
Newspapers record events,
but what about *process*?



... We started recording in January and, knowing that we would mount a Napoli exhibition in the Autumn we developed a loose set of themes that we could ask people about. NOTE: we could, undoubtedly have asked different questions, and got different responses! Then again, new questions and ideas emerged as we went along ...

I'm going to touch on some of the topics that we addressed, which then became the story-boards – the story line – for the exhibition and the DVD. ...

ONCE UPON A TIME ...

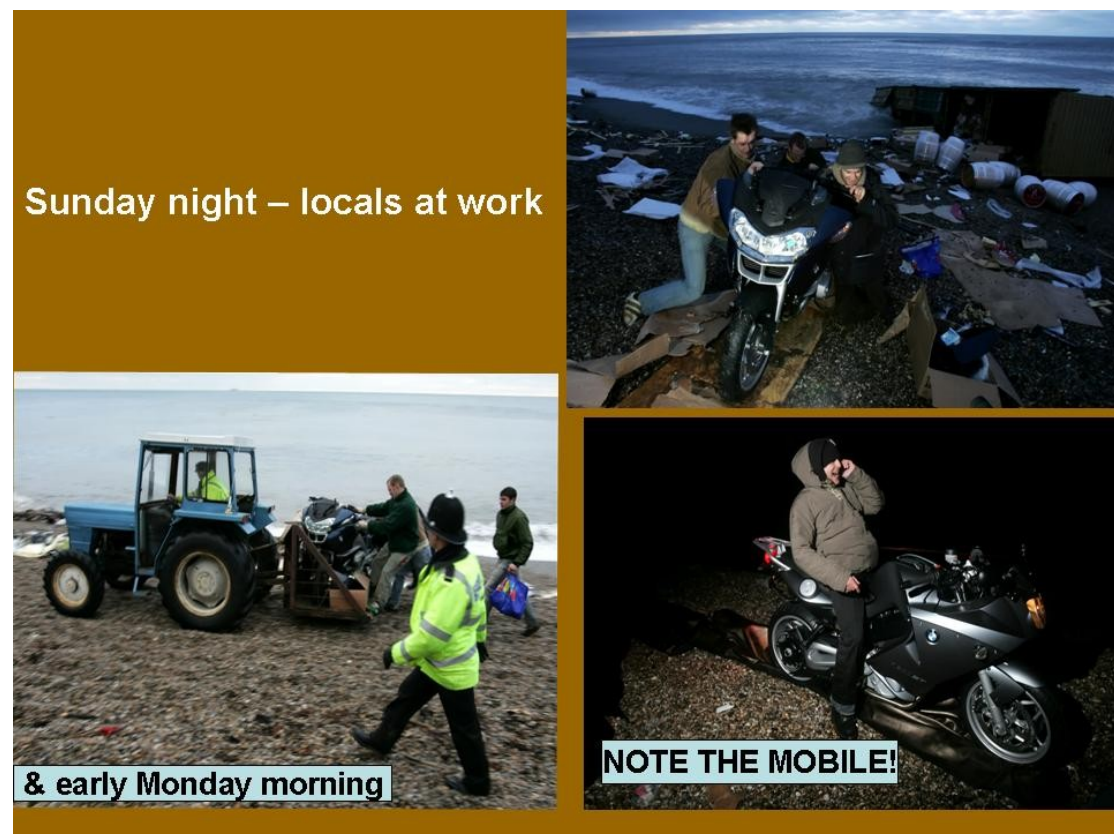


We began, as I began tonight, with a bit about the background on the beaching, and we asked the question: Where do you begin? How far back must you go? What about the history of the ship? What about the recruitment of crew? What about *what* was being shipped and to *where*, and *why*? The Napoli is a bit player in a game of global capital. In the end we all set arbitrary boundaries to our stories. ...

We went on to detail all the acronyms – the players involved ... And then we moved into a fairly straight account of the first day and night. ... from the Saturday lunch-time when the ship is beached, through the night of the gale when the containers are washed ashore ... to the tranquil, surreal Sunday morning.

The police put up cordons in case the containers contain dangerous substances ... the police – on orders from above – took down the cordons. The law of salvage meant that it was OK for the locals to take a souvenir or two or three ...

Sunday night the local policeman and coastguards went home, and the younger locals really got to work. They jemmied open any containers that hadn't already broken up and took away everything of value, including the (in)famous motor bikes.



You may well not approve – but the way they saw it was a time of intense excitement and intense camaraderie, people helping each other, working together – like a beehive, one of them said. It was also, they said, incredibly hard work – getting the stuff off the shingly beach ... Note the mobile ... everyone talked about the media putting the word around – but the mobile was just as

important! (Ironically, mobile reception is terrible in the village – but fine on the beach!)

By Monday morning the beach was looking rough.



We move from the story to the intervention of the national media. By Monday morning the media was on the scent, and, for the villagers, they became the villains of the piece.

Intervention of the national media

For most villagers they're the villains





... 'x marks the spot'

For a brief moment – about twenty four hours, through Monday night and Tuesday thousands of people arrived. Perhaps 5000. From all over England, and even further afield (Scotland, Belgium). They were often quite well organised with their 4 wheel drives and white vans. Some had a sort of relay – one lot on the beach, one lot bringing the stuff to the van, one load guarding the 'loot'. They were very determined, and some were quite tough and rapacious! For people in the village, it was scary – the shouting, the sound of barrels endlessly being rolled along the streets, the mess.

Monday night was freezingly cold; people burnt many of the washed up barrels (destined for the South African wine trade!) on the beach. Small kids hung around while their parents rifled through the containers.



Monday night –
'undesirables' at
work ...

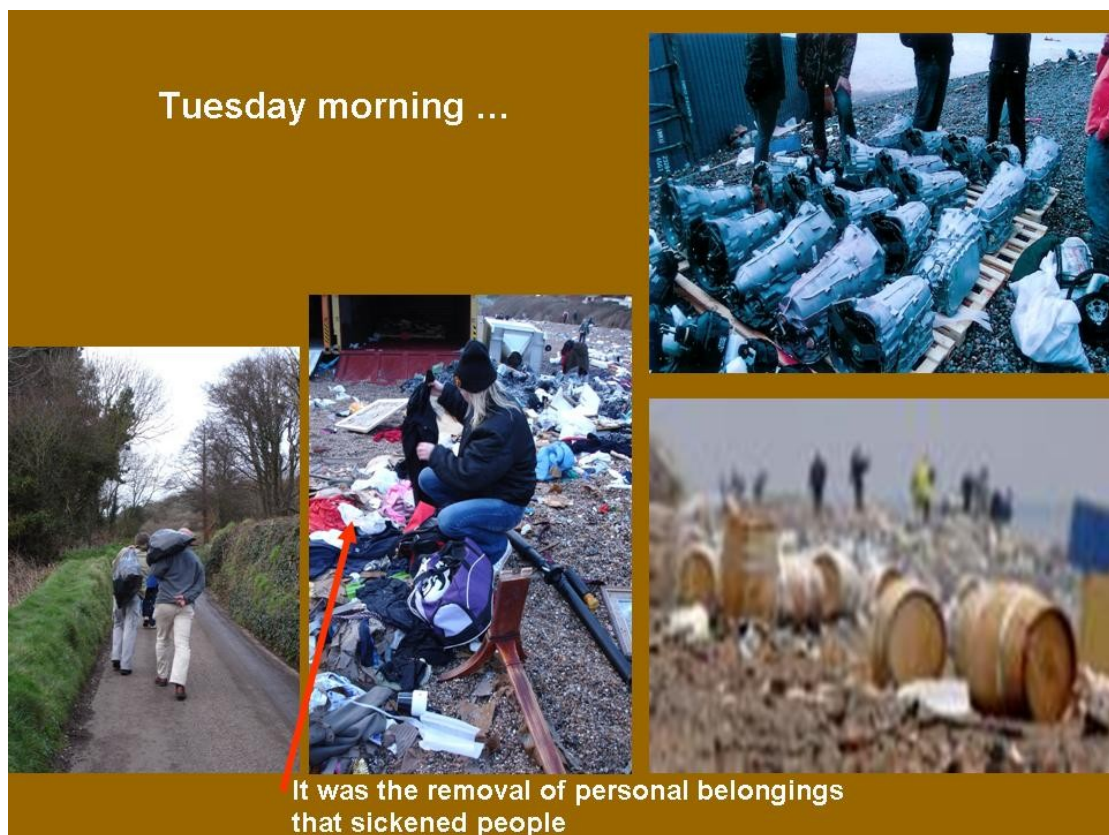


Freezing cold –
burn the barrels



The village was gridlocked, and the police when they finally arrived found themselves on the outside looking in. Meanwhile the solitary local policeman had to try and control things ...

There's no doubt, the power of tv, newspaper & mobile is extraordinary. People away from Branscombe, on holiday, suddenly saw *their* village. People with possessions in the containers suddenly saw *their* possessions.



The media want a good story, and so it was the *human* stories that got highlighted – the ‘scavengers’, the fires on the beach, the forlorn personal items. What got lost in the excitement were the more sober, long term environmental dangers. As it happened, the biggest oil leak occurred just when people started pouring into the village. 9 tonnes of oil leaked out on Tuesday Jan 23rd – and it hardly got a mention.

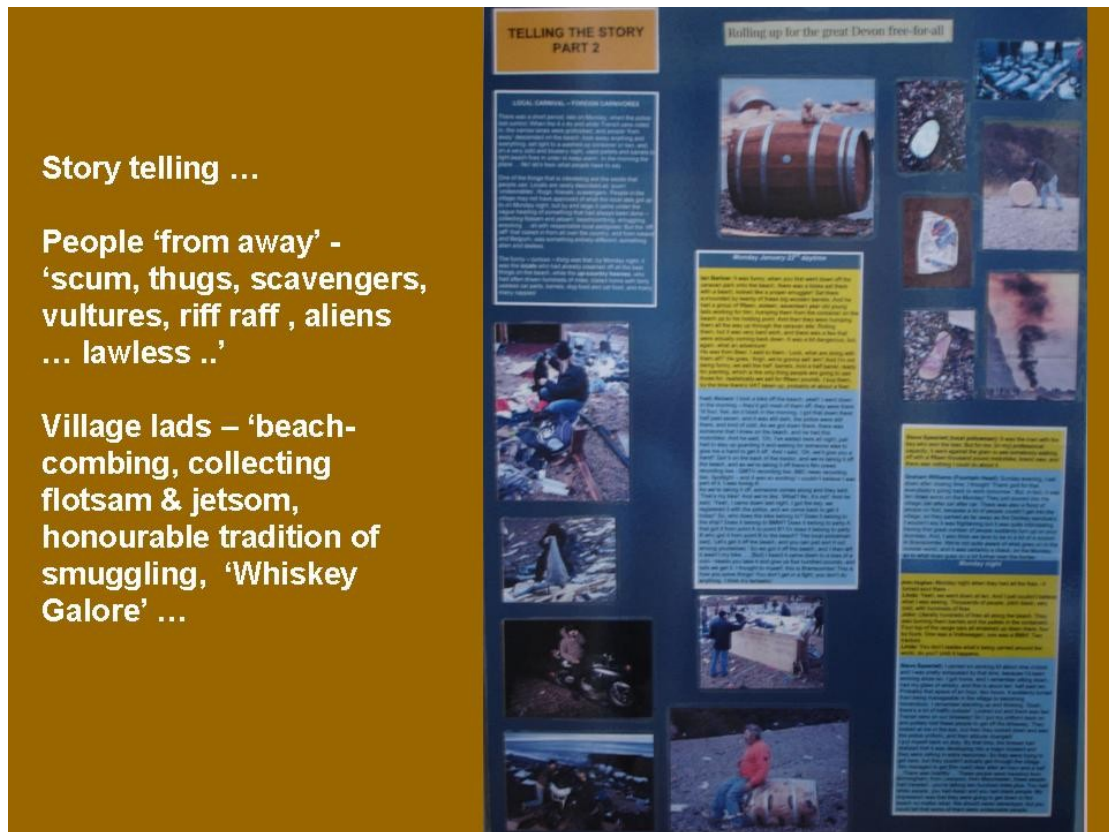
THE POWER OF THE IMAGE

THE POWER OF THE HUMAN STORIES

**OTHER, LONGER TERM
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES
GOT LOST IN THE
EXCITEMENT**



So after the boards on the media, came others describing people's reaction to the 'invasion'. Story-telling at its best!



What is interesting is that whilst the local lads had, in fact, creamed off all the best things, leaving the heavies to return home with empty barrels, fairly useless car parts, dog biscuits, and vast numbers of nappies, it was the outsiders that got called the names – ‘scum’, ‘thugs’, ‘thieves’, ‘scavengers’, ‘vultures’, ‘riff-raff’. They were the lawless ones, the aliens. What the locals did was perceived as something different – it was about collecting flotsam and jetsam, beachcombing, smuggling. All with respectable local pedigrees since Branscombe had been an important smuggling centre in eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It was seen (by some) as a sort of updated *Whiskey Galore!*

We tried to get behind some of these opinions – looking at issues of *Legality* and *Morality*.

LEGALITY ...

the beach as
liminal space –
neither land nor
sea ...
and the strange
laws of salvage



Legally, there's this strong sense of the beach as betwixt and between, something on the border. Not quite sea, not quite land. The Marine Coast Guards know about the sea; the National Trust know about the land. But the beach falls between the two. First the beach is off bounds because of the fear of toxic substances, then it's within bounds because of the little understood law of salvage, and the police have to stand around helping people to get stuff off the beach at the same time as they exhort them to fill in forms. There was the possibility of using the Public Order Act, but for some reason it wasn't invoked, and it was only when the salvage team arrived that the beach was cordoned off because now they, the salvage team, could assert control over the area.

Even more interesting were the *moral* issues, and the way in which the village divided.

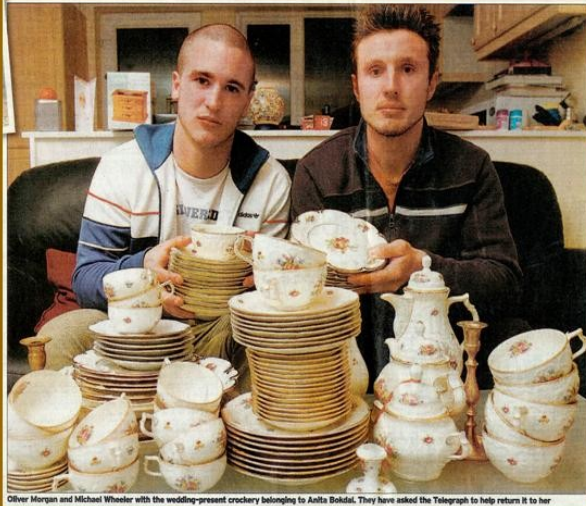
MORALITY

'It's immoral to take even sixpence '

'wouldn't you pick up a ten pound note? '

'It's immoral to take people 's personal
possessions '

'The sea was going to smash open the
containers and demolish the contents, so
what's the harm? '



Oliver Morgan and Michael Wheeler with the wedding-present crockery belonging to Anita Bokdal. They have asked the Telegraph to help return it to her

MORALITY
 The story of the Bokdals' personal possessions hit the media – and a lot of the stuff was returned



The men use bolt cutters – later stolen – to get into the crate

With hindsight I wish we had not done it, but everyone got caught up in the moment. If it hadn't been us, someone else would have taken it



Jan and Anita Bokdal say they accept the men's apology

The arguments became so heated that one young man who had been given front page exposure in the national press was spat on in the pub. This same man told another story with a moral. He was helping a friend to push a motor-bike off the beach on Tuesday morning. Just as they got off the shingle, another man came up and said that it was his. He had 'found' it, he had filled in the papers, and – crucially – he had the key! There was a stand-off, and then they tossed for it! The winner to give the loser £500. This, said our man, shows you local 'law and order' at its best – it wouldn't have happened once the 'outsiders' arrived! The local policeman who had to stand by and watch this scene, told the story differently! 'Diabolical,' he said.

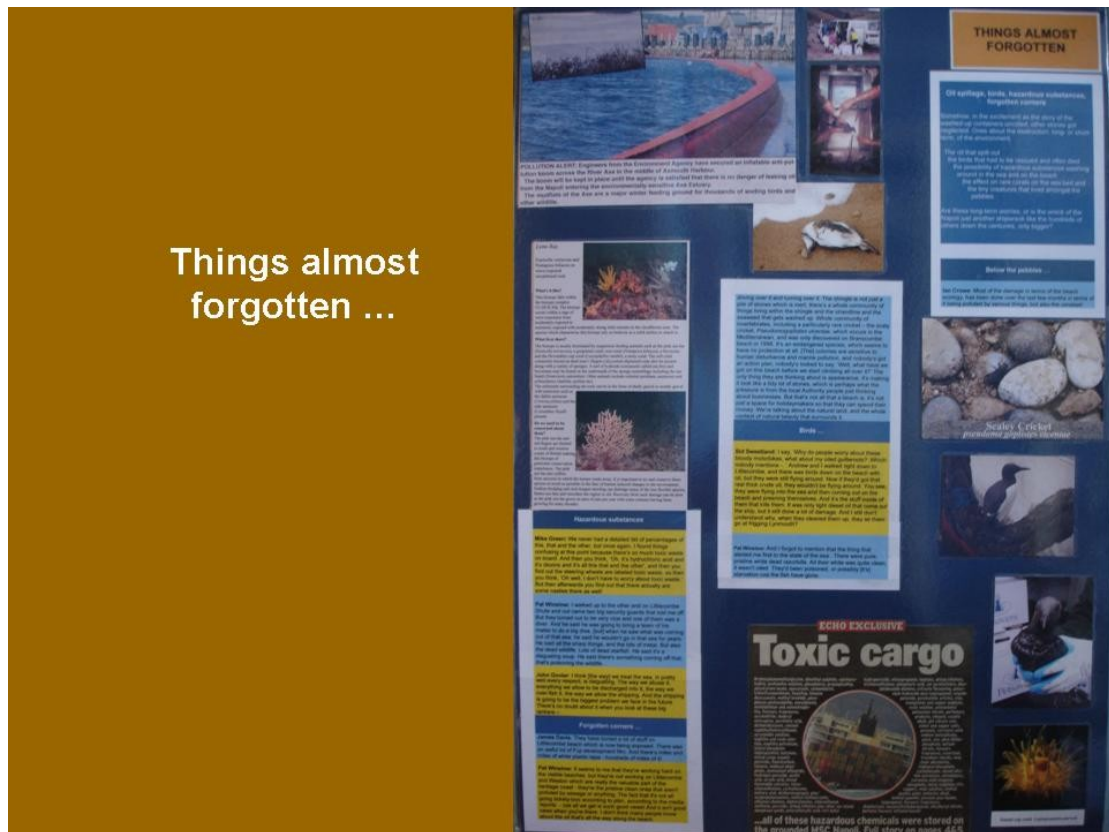
So - where would you place yourselves??

Where would you draw the moral line?
Is it OK to take -

- ... something washed up on the beach?
- ... something in a sealed container?
- ... something that has spilt out of a container?
- ... something on the beach because someone has jemmied open a container?
- ... something made for sale by a big company which won't want it back?
- ... something personal that belongs to someone?

The exhibition story then moved on to discuss how it was that, with this massive media coverage and the insatiable demand for 'human' stories, the more environmental issues, things that often mattered very much to a lot of local people - like the effect of oil and other forms of pollution on birdlife, sea life, beach life, got side-lined.

Things almost forgotten ...



Some people remarked on how the salvage operation focussed on the visible – but what about the less visible things – horrible things happening on the sea-bed, or small, often rare, species that lived in the interstices of the beach and were being crushed by the heavy machinery? (Retrospectively – such small beings seem remarkably resilient – the fugitive scaly cricket survived!)

Things in the sea,
on or under the beach



Scaley Cricket
pseudomogoplistes vicentae

We moved on to talk about how the local and global fed off each other. ... Polish workers doing much of the salvage work ...

Polish workers
clearing the oil-
polluted beach



.... the truly bizarre mix of commodities that they removed -



Pictures by Mel Jackson

- car parts
- chefs' knives
- cosmetics
- family snaps
- Xhosa bibles
- frozen Peking duck
- dog biscuits
- hypodermic needles
- wine barrels
- motor bikes
- nappies
- nickel
- spools of thread
- poor quality chocolate biscuits

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN TERMS OF PRODUCTION, ASSEMBLY, TRANSPORT, CONSUMPTION?... HOW DOES IT CRISS-CROSS DIFFERENT CULTURES AND ECONOMIES ... ?

It is astonishing to think of the way in which so many people are caught up in the process. Not to mention the knock-on effect of the loss of containers – car workers laid off in South Africa, wine growers unable to store their wine ...

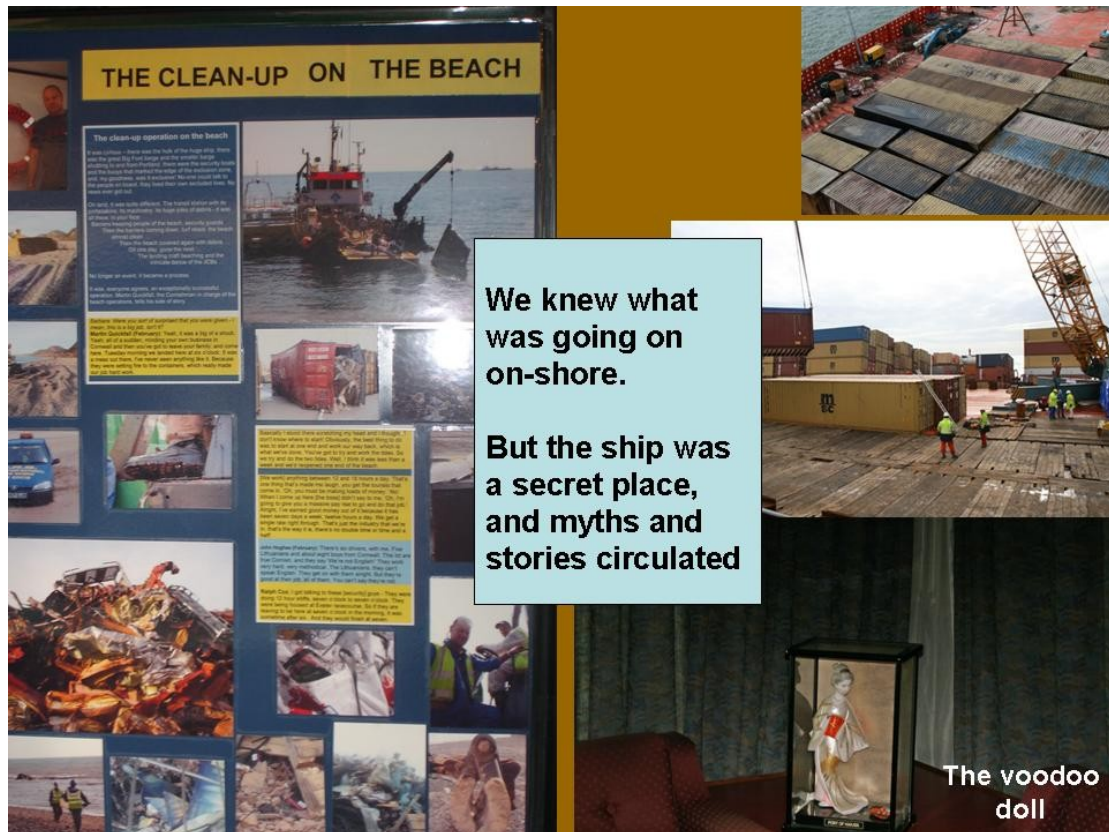
We looked at *local* businesses – the up-side and the down, and how, perhaps not surprisingly, in a place like Branscombe, business is often as much about way of life as about maximising profits.



We highlighted some of the important local figures. John Hughes, the one remaining fisherman, who played a wonderfully ambiguous role –he used his tractor to help the young men get the motor bikes off the beach, helped the fire-men and marine guard, and became a sort of information nerve centre - high and low reported to him and asked his advice. He lost his fishing for a while, but,

instead, ferried the journalists and tourists out to see the wreck. He also, on one famous occasion, shipped a barrel of local Branoc ale out to the 'dry' Dutch salvage boat to celebrate the Dutch Queen's birthday!

We talked about 'Secrecy and Myth'.



Whilst Martin Quickfall the salvage man on the beach was very open and liked talking to us, Smit, the Dutch operators working on the ship had a policy of complete secrecy – we could get absolutely nothing out of them. As a result, myths and stories began to circulate – about the toxic substances on the boat, about the nickel in the hold – the amount of which fluctuated alarmingly (one report maintained that the amount was so great that its loss threatened the total world supply!) - , about illegal vodka, even about illegal stowaways! We were slipped a picture of a 'voodoo

doll' that was in the ship's wardroom and was, apparently, an object of great fear!

We also talked about the power of the sea -



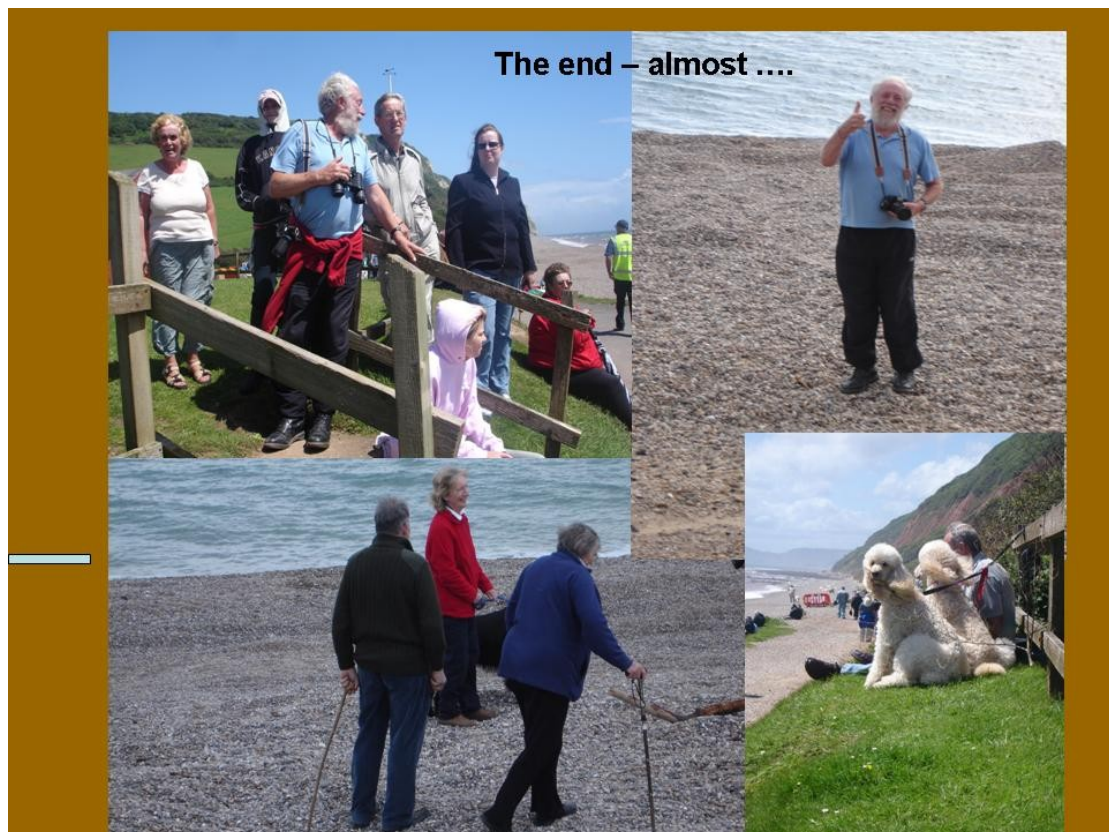
There had been an enormous stress on *human* stories, *human* ingenuity, *human* success. And it was true – it was a very successful clean-up operation. But, and it is a very big but, we were extraordinarily fortunate because after the original gales had blown themselves out, there were *months* of calm weather. If the weather had been different, if, for example, the weather had been like it has been this winter and spring (2009), the story would also have been very different. So we wanted to emphasize the *power* of the elements – the weather, the sea, the tides. The way in which the sea swept the containers off the deck and pounded them open; the way currents and tides swept the material onto and then off the

beaches; the effect – often beneficial – of the sea on the oil ... the salvage men ended up shovelling the oily pebbles back into the sea and letting the wave-action do the work of washing them! Talking to Martin Quickfall, the salvage man, who was Cornish and had lived by the sea all his life, he said that this job had taught him to have a huge respect for the sea ...



Slowly the village story wound down – the villagers watched as the salvage men tried to blow the ship apart and finally managed to tow half the ship away to Belfast; they were angry when, once again, oil spilt out onto the beach, and joyful, when, in the autumn

of 2007, they reclaimed the beach ...



Eventually the Devon County Council Inquiry chaired by Professor Mercer published its findings. The findings lambasted the ineffectiveness of the early response, laid the responsibility with the police, and insisted that public order takes precedence over everything else.

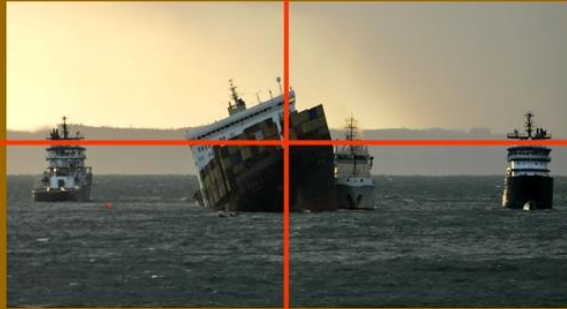
THE INQUIRY

Mainly concerned with law and order issues – the cordoning off of beach and village ... creation of a police supremo ...

Recognition of the importance of local knowledge – but how would it translate into action ... ?

What about the bigger issues around beaching a ship on a World Heritage site? Global trade in ever larger container ships? Ocean pollution ... ?

When you think about it, the creation of *World* Heritage Sites are part of a *global* phenomenon involving the creation of iconic places that are both physical and cultural. So in a curious way the beaching of the Napoli hits the cross-wire between global cultural *and* environmental *and* economic *and* political issues. Perhaps it's not surprising that Professor Mercer kept his head down and focussed on a rather narrow set of local authority concerns!



The Napoli in the cross-wire of *global* political, environmental, cultural, and economic issues ...

I've told the story of the Napoli as we told it in the village hall exhibition in the Autumn of 2007. And the exhibition itself, like everything else about the Napoli, had its own, and unexpected

dynamic.



It was a lot of work getting it together – because so many people became involved. There were the exhibition boards, copies of everyone's accounts of what happened, photo albums of pictures taken by a great number of local people ([click on Napoli](#)), and copies of all the media coverage. The National Trust loaned us a huge mock-up of one of the Napoli containers, and a DVD of the Napoli story put together by Leigh Rodgers played inside it. We had collected a load of Napoli debris and an artist made an

installation. And then, when people saw it, they hurried home to get *their* debris to add to the pile!

We hadn't expected – though maybe we should have - that something that had been a weight on the community, that had caused a lot of grief, would turn into a celebration. Hundreds of people came, and then came back again.

Shortly before the exhibition went up, we discovered that people had been writing songs about the Napoli. And so, on the first day of the exhibition, there was a grand song fest. Here's the chorus of the song written and sung by our local councillor, Mike Green –



And all night long they rolled
the barrels on,
Branscombe lost tranquillity,
and as far as the eye could see
there was rubbish and debris
lost from the wreck of the Napoli

GOOD-BYE!