

Churchill Museum

Roger Mann (principal, Casson Mann)

Phil Reed (director, Churchill Museum)

'I am easily satisfied with the very best.'

Winston Churchill

With its unique subject and historic location, deep within London's Cabinet War Rooms, and its radical design approach, the Churchill Museum was always going to be special. The aim of the museum, which covers more than 9,000 square feet, is to represent the life and work of Winston Churchill. But this is no hagiography. From the outset, there was a collective desire to do more than simply tell Churchill's life story; the team wanted to give a real and honest insight into the man himself, revealing both his private and his public personae, his talents and flaws, his triumphs and controversies. This is the first museum in Britain solely dedicated to the life and work of a politician and, as such, had no precedent to help or hinder its progress. The award-winning Churchill Museum was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on 10 February 2005, two years after the project was first mooted.

Casson Mann initially responded to the Imperial War Museum's tender notice in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU). It was one of six design companies invited to take part in a paid pitch before finally winning the tender to design the exhibition. Casson Mann's previous work for both the Science Museum and the V&A, the two projects the museum team visited before making their final decision, was clearly a factor that impressed. 'In design terms we thought their concept was the best-thought-out solution – and we also felt they were a team we could work very well with,' recalls Churchill Museum director Phil Reed.

A strong client-creative relationship can mean the difference between the success and failure of a project but no two relationships are the same and how this strength is achieved differs, not only with each project but also depending on the individuals involved. On this occasion, both sides quickly moved towards a frank and honest relationship founded on mutual respect. 'We had a lot of rigorous conversations and debate about things and we didn't always see eye to eye by any means, but they always had enormous faith in our skills as designers and,

likewise, we had a lot of respect for where they were coming from in terms of the research, the content and the stories,' explains Roger Mann.

'They came up with ideas and if we hated them we told them so absolutely frankly, and vice versa, so we were very flexible together, which made for a great symbiotic relationship,' continues Reed. There was also a lot of give and take. 'I remember one day, there were these red upright steel girders all over the site and Roger decided they wanted to paint them grey. "Over my dead body" was my initial response – so theoretically I should be dead by now because they did and it worked. Sometimes you have to be shown and that's exactly what Roger and his team did.'

When it came to colour-coding the exhibition's different sections, Casson Mann had very specific ideas about what they wanted to achieve but as time marched on, finding a company that could realise this vision proved problematic. On this occasion it was down to Reed to step in. 'In the end, I just had to say look, there isn't time, you've got to ditch this, find an alternative and we've got to make it work – and we did.'

While some designers require a very specific brief detailing exactly what is required of them, Casson Mann were happy and more than able to use their own initiative when required. 'They responded very well to both our brief and, in some ways, our uncertainty,' says Reed. 'A lot of the time either we couldn't find an exhibit, or sometimes, when you're trying to convey a concept or a characteristic, an actual 3-D exhibit is not the best thing. They frequently came up with design solutions, sometimes from the vaguest of discussions, when we were adamant about a subject we wanted to include but couldn't think how to do it.'

Initially, one of the main problems for the design team was the underground site itself, from the low ceilings to the red steel columns that littered the space like a bed of nails. That said, it was this challenge and these very columns that dictated the exhibition's final, hugely successful design. Worried that absorbing the columns into linear walls would look a bit like a 'subterranean branch of Sainsbury's', the designers looked to Churchill's love of maps for inspiration.

Using a similar 'cross-hatch' approach to that often applied to maps, they divided the exhibition into five 'chapters' diagonally within the space. The format is a little like a word search puzzle, deliberately circling the columns and absorbing them into the displays. As the design progressed and these plinths became encrusted with everything from graphic panels to screens to showcases, the

columns slowly began to disappear. The five plinths, one for each 'chapter', were then colour-coded.

'We wanted to give some definition through the use of materials and orientation and light and so on to each area so people would sense they were in a chapter as they were loosely exploring it,' says Mann. 'We were also conscious that the experience of going around the Cabinet War Rooms themselves was a very prescribed, linear corridor route so we didn't want to give people another corridor experience.'

At the outset, the museum didn't have a large collection of objects. Of course, there are an infinite number of Churchill-related items in existence but the museum team wasn't interested in filling the space with 'stuff'. Rather, they wanted a succinct collection of items, many of which belonged to private collections and were only just beginning to be identified at this stage, to tell the story *they* wanted to tell. It would take a further two years of research to complete the collection process. So, rather than starting with an object list, as is the case with most exhibition design, the creative team began with only the basic storyline and initial chapter divisions, which Reed and his team had already established internally.

'To start with, we sat down and just listened to the curator James Taylor talk about Churchill,' recalls Mann, 'because at that stage we knew what most people know about him, but that was all.' After a number of these sessions, once a basic diagram for the exhibition layout had been created, together they set about placing the story.

Rather than beginning with Churchill's birth and ending with his death, Casson Mann suggested starting the exhibition in 1940. 'We used the analogy that you might meet someone halfway through their life when they're famous and follow them from that point on, often not learning about their early years until later on,' Mann continues. 'When people think of Churchill, they think of the V-signs, the cigars, the beginning of WWII – so why not start from that point?' This also enabled the exhibition to end on a high, as Churchill became Prime Minister.

As various sub-themes developed, Mann and his team once again sat down with the museum's curator and research team and began looking at what was available to tell each story. Was there film footage, were there letters or documents, was there any sound or speeches? They started to map out the content in more detail by dropping the various elements onto the exhibition plan.

It quickly became obvious where software could help; for example, when there wasn't a great collection of objects but there was still a fantastic story to be told. The creative team had the Churchill Papers at its disposal: a vast archive consisting of an estimated million individual documents, ranging from Churchill's first childhood letters to his great war-time speeches to his final writings. Purchased for the nation in April 1995 with grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the John Paul Getty Foundation, this was already a public resource, but the sheer size of this awesome collection made it virtually inaccessible to Joe Public. Part of the museum's brief, and one of the main design challenges of the project, was to bring this fantastic wealth of information to life. The idea for the Lifeline, a huge virtual archive housed in an 18-metre long interactive table that stretches down the centre of the space and forms the backbone of the exhibition, was proposed, albeit in conceptual form, fairly early on. As an organisational device, the table was a very useful way of making a proportion of the Churchill Papers accessible through all the documents contained in it, and it also became a repository for hard chronology: if you wanted to know what happened on a particular date, you could go to the table and find out. This also meant that, although underpinned by chronology, the rest of the exhibition could be designed as an intuitive rather than a guided experience. 'The space is designed so that you can pick and choose. As long as you roughly follow the chapters – and the Lifeline dictates that you go up the left-hand side and down the right, which ensures this – it doesn't matter how you view each chapter,' says Reed.

For Casson Mann, working on the Churchill Museum was also an exercise in project management on a much larger scale than they had dealt with previously. As lead consultants, the brief dictated that any external services be sub-contracted through Casson Mann. Mann had worked with software designers on previous projects for both the V&A and the Science Museum, with varying degrees of input, but this was the first time he had been asked to take control of the entire process. Having done the research, called in various showreels and collated a list of potential creatives to work on the project, the next task was to write the creative brief. Again, this was a collaborative process. The museum team contributed the content, Casson Mann added their thoughts on how this element would develop, and a graphic designer contributed to a style guide.

‘Although we worked closely with the curatorial and research teams at this stage, the ideas as to how this would all be realised – the ideas for the table, for the funeral – all came from us,’ says Mann. This document was then tailored to the type of software required, with film-editing briefs, software briefs, sound briefs and so on, and sent to a shortlist of design companies. ‘Then we had great fun interviewing them all with their ideas and proposals and picked the best ones. In the end, we went with six or seven companies doing three or four each and we had some really great people working on it. I absolutely loved it.’

Even though there were a number of companies working on different elements, it was vital that everything in the exhibition felt like part of the Churchill Museum. In order to achieve this the design team worked very closely with graphic designer Nick Bell, who was responsible for establishing the museum’s graphic language. Bell also designed the graphic interface for the Lifeline table. It had been decided early on that, although the exhibition was filled with 21st-century technology, to style it as such would sit uneasily with the subject matter. ‘If you go round the Cabinet War Rooms, all the desks are covered in files and manila folders and letters and documents and rubber stamps,’ explains Mann. ‘It’s a very analogue, tactile world and we wanted our on-screen experience to work in a similar way, albeit as a virtual version. That’s why the table is covered in folders and letters that you open almost by sliding the paper around, so you’re doing a virtual version of what is instinctively a real thing to do. And to a greater or lesser extent, this idea ran through a lot of the other pieces.’

Working with Bell, they developed the idea of the Lifeline table, containing a folder for every day of Churchill’s life. In the absence of a personal diary, this set the museum’s research team the ultimate challenge of finding out what he did on every day of his life. ‘We knew about all the big things but we also wanted to include the kind of anecdotal details you would find in a personal diary so that, for instance, people could use the table to find out what Churchill was doing the day they were born.’ The resulting thousands of virtual artifacts are presented as a virtual filing cabinet, complete with manila-style ‘folders’. Touching a strip at either edge of the Lifeline, which can be accessed by up to 26 people at any one time, brings up data, documents, films, photographs and even soundtracks that relate to Churchill’s life. Key events from world history are also brought to life through a series of animations. For example, selecting 6 August 1945, the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, results in the whole display flashing

white and the sound of a huge explosion. The Lifeline software was developed by Small Design Firm Inc of Cambridge MA and includes 4,600 pages, 200,000 words, 1,100 documents, 1,150 images and 206 animations. Thirteen networked computers provide the imaging, while a further computer provides the accompanying multi-channel audio soundscape.

The task of securing adequate funding for the museum fell to its director, Phil Reed. 'At the Imperial War Museum you can't proceed with a project unless the funding is in place. We set up a Gantt chart that would allow us to park the project at various stages if we didn't have funding, so we were constantly aware that we had to be ahead of the costs for each stage,' he explains. 'Of course, the team worried about it constantly, but I was managing it and had every confidence we would do it, which we did. In fact, we were ahead throughout and the whole project actually came in just under budget, which is virtually unheard of for any IWM project – or any other project for that matter.' This, says Reed, was largely thanks to the project's 'brilliant' cost controllers. 'We had cost meetings every week or fortnight so that at any one time we knew exactly where we were, what cost changes were taking place and what the implications of such changes were.'

From the curators and researchers at the museum to the design team at Casson Mann to the external project managers and cost consultants, it would not have been possible to complete a project of this scale and complexity successfully without good teamwork. By being open, honest and organised, creative and client were able to work together as equals to build a strong working relationship very early on. This enabled both to focus on the creative journey ahead – and enjoy it. Working towards a common goal, both sides were able to challenge and be challenged, resulting in a strong, healthy dialogue and an award-winning end product. 'Casson Mann were incredibly responsive. They managed well, they worked incredibly hard and it was great to have someone senior there, in the guise of Roger, nearly all the time,' concludes Reed. 'Of course, there were some difficult times and some difficult decisions to make, and there were some disagreements, but it was also a huge amount of fun. I can honestly say I could not have been happier with them.'

Read a good biography and you feel as though you've made a connection; that you have been touched by the experience. To recreate such an intimate experience via an exhibition, where audience time is often limited to less than an hour, is more

difficult. Through a combination of innovative design solutions, cutting-edge technology and great teamwork, the Churchill Museum has achieved this – and more.

Churchill Museum, Clive Steps, King Charles Street, London SW1, 020 7930 6961, <http://churchillmuseum.iwm.org.uk>