

Filming a Street Party

I was using a Panasonic Full-HD camera recording AVCHD onto a 16GB Class 6 SDHC card, and Pinnacle Studio v14.

1. Primary Objective.

Who will see it? Will it be for sale? Will it be shown on a big screen? Will it be contributed to an archive?

Get involved from the start, possibly on the organising committee - it's fun! Make sure on the street newsletters sent round before the event that people know that cameras will be in use, and if they have any objections they should let the organisers know in good time. All residents but one were on-line and happily gave me their email address, but many don't look at their 'In-box' for a week or more! Distribute all newsletters as printed documents through their letterboxes. Try not to get involved with other activities like food preparation which will stop you filming. Make sure that you are aware of the programme of events so you don't miss anything. Try to make sure that there is something for all ages. We had three different quiz sheets, and they certainly got people talking; one was a test of observation (like I-spy) with some oblique questions, another presented some previously-gathered personal facts and you had to name the person, a third was a photo quiz with portrait pictures taken many years before.

Ensure that you comply with Council requirements; if you're going to close the road, you will need to apply some time in advance. There is a website (www.streetparty.org.uk/residents) with advice on running street parties. As a legal requirement, a responsible person will be required to be a single contact for the council. You can request that the road is swept before the party to minimise the risk of danger from objects in the gutter etc., but check that there is no charge for this. You will need to set a small charge for residents to cover some costs, say £5 per adult and £1 per child. This helps to pay for the newsletters informing residents of progress, banners, prizes, and drinks for the bar.

Organise a time when residents gather round to recall happenings or characters in the street. This was very popular, and a record that can never be repeated as people come and go. Bear in mind that due to our differing lifestyles, it's likely that a lot of people have never met before, and probably aren't even aware of the number of children in the street - we weren't, and were very surprised to find 20! Think of it as social History, and consider lodging a copy of the finished video with the local Record Office. We all like watching old films of local activities, and one day others will want to watch what we got up to; there may be a request to enforce an embargo on public access for a time.

2. Things to bear in mind when filming.

Image - Fill the frame with people! Hold the shots - when watching, they will want to recognise themselves and others. Use a good tripod whenever possible, but if your camera has stabilising built in, switch it off when on a tripod as otherwise you may get judder when panning as it tries to hold the frame. Don't forget to film some cut-aways. Try to make sure that everyone has been included in at least some of your shots, not just the group photo. Babies and youngsters being carried by their mums and dads make nice close-ups, as do the older generation being introduced to them. You may find that although you framed your shots nicely during filming and it was fine when editing, after burning to DVD the edges may have been cropped, so leave a safe margin when filming. And note any background action, which can be at least as interesting as the foreground! If anything of

interest is handed round at the Residents Recall meeting, make sure you get shots of them for use as inserts when editing before they get lost or misplaced.

Sound – A small directional mic will perform surprisingly well, but don't strive for clear speech when filming groups of people; you are capturing an atmosphere, the essence of the day. You will almost certainly benefit from using a wind muff. If a radio mic is being used for PA, you may be able to tune your receiver to the same channel and pick up clear announcements and any speeches etc. If you are tempted to use different mics on the two channels, either use manual level control or be aware that auto gain control will affect them both equally. You may be able to make use of a separate sound recorder such as the Roland R-05 or similar to get some wild sound to cover edits.

3. Things to bear in mind when editing.

Don't use the first or last frame of a clip, as due to compression the sound may not be complete. Beware of gaps, particularly when insert editing; you may hear a glitch or lose a little sync. Expand the timeline to its maximum to see this on the audio track. And although Studio continually 'saves', you can still 'Save' and 'Close' now and again.

Your best friend is an A4 pad and a pen. (An A4 pad in Wilkinsons is about 79p). Open your project as 'Filename v1' (version one). Input your first structure or footage and 'Save' and 'Close' it. When you re-open it to do more work, 'Save as' the next version number after you've worked on it. While you're working, as you complete a bit of work, 'Save' the file. Make a note in the pad of your changes and the version number you are working on. Now you're under way, 'Save as' the next version number before Closing so that when you re-open the file - maybe the next day - you're ready to go. Again, make a note of the new version number. And run a back-up to a different disk or external memory. This way, if it all goes horribly wrong, you can go back to the previous good version and 'Save as' the next version number to work on it. If Pinnacle crashes (which it does), the screen goes pale and it stops. Just click on the 'X' at the top right corner and crash out of the program. Give it a couple of seconds and restart. Pinnacle continually saves the file as you are working, and will give you the opportunity to Continue where you left off. You will probably have lost nothing, or very little. Which is good.

4. Rendering.

When rendering your project in preparation for burning to DVD, it writes a 12-frame GOP (Group Of Pictures in an AVCHD file) at a time to a VIDEO-TS file (Video Transport Stream). Check the destination drive on the Discometer. My 1-hour video took about 2 hours 10 mins to render, 5 mins to write the final file and another 6 mins to burn the disc at 4x. These times are very dependent on the specification of the computer (mine is a laptop). The final VIDEO-TS file size was 3.40GB. (Subsequent to my video, the Bristol Record Office suggested that .avi files are preferred for archiving).

5. Anything else!

Pinnacle Studio has no 'busy' indication, and you will find that it takes a little time to catch up with changes and additions as you are working. When chaptering, wait for rendering to finish (look at the disc busy light). In Pinnacle, Titles are Menus without buttons; if you select a menu from the standard templates within the program and delete the buttons, you have a title. When filming, I used a battery-powered bubble machine (about £10 in Tesco) which filled the street with bubbles and brought a smile to everyone's face! It was very popular, and adds fun to the images. You probably won't need to buy extra bubble liquid, as the small bottle supplied with it was sufficient.

And note that Bristol is, or was, the UK Street Party capital - according to a BBC report on the above website, there were about 70 in 2006!

6. Finally...

DVDs are fickle. It may be the burner, the choice of media, the player – there are a myriad traps to fall into. I wanted copies for each resident - about 32 copies, and was unwilling to do this myself. I opted to engage the very reasonable services of a professional duplication house. It was a good move, Profile were extremely helpful. After burning a few unsuccessful 'coasters' and finally getting a working DVD, my problems really started when I took them the finished disc. It had played fine in all the DVD players that I checked it on - mine and those of others - but when checked before duplication at their premises not a single frame showed! Nothing. Their equipment complained of an 'unacceptable menu structure', even though it was about as simple as you can get, but there is no point in copying it if you aren't sure that the recipient will be able to play it. Don't assume that just because it plays on your kit, that others will be able to play it too. It's a minefield, and there seems no easy solution. I had to lean heavily on their experience to get the copies I needed. And if you ask five professionals which blank discs to buy, you will probably get five answers!

Good luck!

Pete Heaven, April 2012.