

## THANK YOU TO ALL THOSE WHO HELPED SAVE THE PONT-FARCY WHALE !

This news-sheet is to let you know that just before midnight on 15 July 2015 our 'Whale' left Normandy on the Ouistreham/Portsmouth ferry on two huge lorries. It was returning to the land of its 'birth' for the first time since June 1944. This morning we heard that the lorries had arrived safely at the Imperial War Museum (Duxford).

As you know very well, this Whale was threatened with destruction on several occasions and without **your** help it would not have survived.

When Simon de Lautour (president of *Les Amis du Pont Bailey*) signed the Whale over to the Imperial War Museum yesterday afternoon this represented a very satisfactory outcome after a long and exhausting fight to preserve an historic emblem of the Battle of Normandy and of the liberation of Western Europe.

Our Whale was a very rare surviving section of the floating roadway that formed part of the Mulberry (B) artificial harbour at Arromanches. After the war, probably in 1958, it was taken to Pont-Farcy where it served as an ordinary road bridge over the River Vire, providing access to a stone quarry at *La Grippe*.



In 1990, one of the bridge's concrete pillars was irreparably damaged by a severe flood and the whole bridge was then condemned.

With great intelligence the engineering company employed to dismantle the redundant bridge, *Loisel Travaux Publics*, stored it in a quarry at Brécey rather than recycle it as scrap, hoping it would one day be useful again. Twenty-one years later the company generously gave the Whale to *Les Amis du Pont Bailey* in return for a promise that we would do our best to preserve it intact in the same way that we had saved our Bailey bridge at Pont-Farcy in Normandy in 2008. We thank Jean Collette for his support and for introducing us to M. Loisel.

However, the Whale was quite unmanageable in the state in which we received it. It took hundreds of hours of hard work by volunteers to disassemble our monster so that it could be stored, assessed, preserved and transported. For this we thank Nigel Hay, Kenneth Lewis, Didier Guilbert, Samuel Delaune, Pierre Gobichon, Michel Manson, Richard Smith, Bill Twohigg and Pierre Desjardins.

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Meanwhile, endless meetings and negotiations took place with various local authorities and museums in our search for a suitable place to exhibit the Whale. Much of this was patiently handled by a sub-committee led by our treasurer Sarah Long who dealt with endless administration. Throughout, we were greatly helped by the generous financial support of Guillaume Bourrel.

In 2014, Ida Beckett, along with her two sons Tim and Mike, promised to help us find a final resting place for our 27 tonne baby. It had been Ida's husband Allan who, in 1943/44, designed the Whale system and the associated Mulberry Harbour assembly. The Beckett family has generously helped to finance the cost of transporting the Whale from Normandy to the Imperial War Museum at Duxford in Cambridgeshire.

Over the next two months a team of engineers from Borley Brothers will be busy restoring our Whale for presentation as a prominent feature among the vast collection of wartime exhibits at IWM (Duxford). The process of preservation and conservation will include a specialist drying phase; shot-blasting to remove surface rust; various repairs to the structure (although the general condition is excellent); and the replacement of a few missing parts. Another bout of shot-blasting will then precede the re-painting phase and the reassembly of the entire 'bridge' on specially designed concrete pillars.

When we gave our Whale to the Imperial War Museum it was made on just one condition: that the IWM would display an explanatory panel, designed by the APB, recording the Whale's post-war history and acknowledging those who contributed significantly to its survival. It was agreed that this panel would be prominently exhibited, on, or very close to, the Whale and that the panel will be maintained in perpetuity by the museum.

Hopefully the IWM will invite us all to an opening ceremony to see our Whale fully restored and resplendent, in the safe hands of one of the world's finest museums. There we hope it will provide a fitting tribute to its designer, Allan Beckett, to the Corps of Royal Engineers and to everyone associated with building and assembling the Mulberry harbours' extraordinary array of components which, all combined, constituted one of the greatest engineering projects of all time, as well as playing a vital role in the Battle of Normandy.

*The picture, above right, shows part of Mulberry Harbour (B) at Arromanches with a chain of 27 tonne 'Whales', linked together on floating 'Beetles'. In the foreground is a side panel from a section of our 'Pont-Farcy' Bailey bridge.*

