

Coldplay's Big Weekend by the Sea

By: Kate Lyon

The band's acclaimed performance included a stunning design, a remote location, and a most challenging load-in

The word "iconic" is frequently overused, often without appropriate merit. But in an effort to adequately describe the choice of venue for Coldplay's performance as part of the BBC's Big Weekend celebration, it is hard to avoid.

The end of May saw the BBC broadcast 100 live performances as a

COVID-safe replacement for its annual Big Weekend festival. Several were located at venues chosen by the artists: Ed Sheeran stayed close to home at the arts complex Snape Maltings in Suffolk; AJ Tracey used The Regal, a basketball court in South London's community hub, The Black Prince Trust; Jorja Smith performed at

London's Alexandra Palace while Royal Blood visited Brighton Pier on the Sussex coast. Coldplay, however, opted for a rather more eclectic venue: the ruins of Whitby Abbey, which sits on the southern clifftops of the North Yorkshire town of Whitby, dominating the vista of the coast and moors for miles around.

Photos: Radio 1's Big Weekend of Live Music 2021



The event's special effects were supplied by Strictly FX.



The dramatic setting has inspired artists down the centuries ranging from Cædmon, the first English poet, to Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*.

The history of Whitby Abbey is as famous as Coldplay. The site of a religious settlement for millennia, its earliest claim to fame was as the venue for The Synod of Whitby in 664 AD, where Christian leaders gathered to formally agree on a method for fixing the yearly date of Easter, which remains in place today. The dramatic setting has inspired artists and writers down the centuries, including Cædmon, recognized as the first named poet of the English language, and, many centuries later, Bram Stoker, who used the location as part of the ambient setting for his novel *Dracula*.

Today, the town trades heavily on its Gothic notoriety, with a global draw of Goth aficionados joining the seaside visitors who cross the bridge over the River Esk and climb the 199 steps up to Whitby Abbey—now maintained and run by English Heritage as one of the jewels in its crown. As a boy, Coldplay's Chris Martin was apparently one of those non-gothic visitors and it was this memory that helped make the final decision to take the produc-

tion to this remote location.

Bill Leabody, Coldplay's production manager, says, "The decision to play Whitby was a joint one between the band and the BBC. The BBC asked to come up with some iconic locations to shoot the Big Weekend series as, obviously, it wasn't possible to run the festival weekend with an audience. During February, there were a few different venues suggested before deciding on Whitby. We all had some calls in March and went on a site visit to the location on April 1. At the meeting were the BBC producers, site manager Dick Tee, Coldplay management, designer Misty Buckley, myself, and stage manager Paul Traynor."

Also in attendance were representatives from English Heritage, who were keen to keep the site closed for as short a period as possible and to make sure the fabric of the buildings would not be in jeopardy. Load-in was down a single-lane farm track and across the boundary wall; as Leabody succinctly put it, "Access to the site was very difficult."

Dick Tee, of EnTEEntainment, says, "I was approached by the BBC Live Music and Events team in March to assist them with the site and technical delivery of the Coldplay performance at Whitby Abbey. Having had a first site visit and initial production meeting with the Coldplay production team, English Heritage, and the BBC radio and TV departments, it quickly became apparent that this was going to be very challenging event.

"Bill and I looked at the logistics of loading in; the original thought was to come in just the day before—English Heritage had only just reopened to the public on a reduced basis and were keen to stay open as much as possible. However, once the full extent of the Coldplay creative aspiration and the sheer size and scale of their planned production became known, this had to be reconsidered and, in the end, we had a total period of around 72 hours to set up, shoot, and de-rig.

"Having a timetable to work to, there was then the actual location to consider. What an amazing and truly



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inspirational venue. So much history and intrigue. Perched on the top of the cliff overlooking the town and the sea, it is stunning. The abbey ruins are one of the most important monuments in the stewardship of English Heritage and, quite rightly, they were extremely protective of all aspects. The whole site is a medieval burial ground, so nothing could penetrate the surface. Nothing could touch the fabric of the ruins—thus no equipment, no cables, nothing. There is one small pathway—but only one. The whole of the rest of the site is laid to grass. There is no large vehicle access to the site—merely a single 'farm gate' off a single-track country lane.

"We had to go about considering how to get all the required Coldplay and BBC broadcast technical equipment into the grounds and then how to move it around; flight case wheels do not like long uncompacted 'natural' grass. The solution was approximately 400 sheets of plywood laid on the ground, screwed together, and painted

green so as to blend in on the camera shots. But we still had to get the kit on-site. We were allowed limited access through the farm gate for small vans and then [had to] push cases some 100m from the abbey front car park to the visitor center and then use the two pedestrian lifts—but this alone was not going to be sufficient. In total, we were looking at between ten to 12 full trucks of technical kit and equipment. So, the solution was to build an 'elevated loading dock' and forklift the vast majority of the equipment over a 3m high wall. It was a masterpiece of engineering and with military planning and execution—it worked!

"Now it is maybe clear as to why it became necessary to get my daughter and fellow director, Frankie, involved in looking after the traffic management and logistics of this complex operation. With COVID restrictions meaning the staff and crew were largely using their own cars, with 45' articulated trucks traveling up and down narrow country lanes with the wheels on each

side brushing the verges, with one-way systems needing to be instigated to make sure two large vehicles did not come 'head-to-head'—it was in itself an operational challenge. Also, we had to consider that there were local residents, a church, and several businesses still needing to use the abbey's access roads that we were sharing with them.

"On top of all of this was the challenge of how to keep the project secret! Had word leaked out to the local residents that Coldplay were going to be performing at the top of the hill in the abbey grounds overlooking the town of Whitby—there were genuine concerns on crowd safety and, most importantly, potential breaches of COVID-19 control legislation. We all operated under the name of 'Project Sunshine' and reported to anyone inquiring that we were making a documentary about famous British historic monuments."

After all the plywood roadways had been laid down and the loading dock



The project was produced in secret. Still, Whitby residents were teased by the spectacular special effects as the event was being filmed a full week before the broadcast.

had been constructed, the production came in at 3pm the day before the show. Paul Traynor has worked for Coldplay since the *Viva Tour* well over a decade ago and, as stage manager, worked with the BBC and English Heritage for several weeks, making multiple site visits to the abbey “English Heritage were very helpful throughout the whole process; we would discuss aspects of the show and if there were any protocols to be followed, they had a team working with us through the whole load-in and -out to advise on any issues we might come across.

“What we didn’t have was a Plan B—we were determined to make this show happen no matter what the North Yorkshire climate could throw at us. We had our own stage come in to set up, as Misty wanted a circular stage. Neg Earth Lighting came in after, followed by the ground lighting from Ithaca,” the Brighton, UK-based creative lighting studio. “The Ithaca lighting was suggested by Misty to

really represent the audience that we couldn’t have. It is a very clever product as it can take a video image that gives it real depth [more about it later]. For audio, there was a very minimal speaker setup by Wigwam,” a Solotech company located near Manchester. “English Heritage were mindful of the locals, so didn’t want anything too loud; we opted for a setup that would give an ambient feel for the band.”

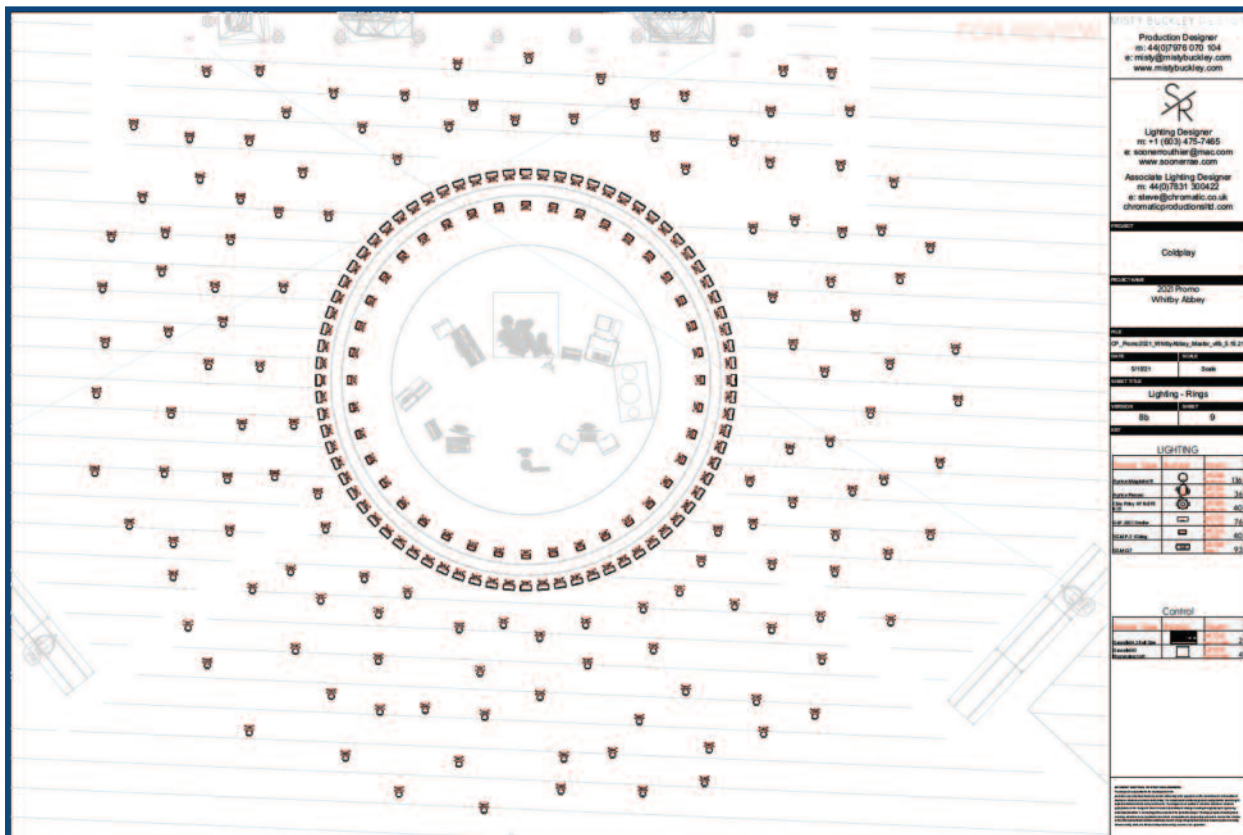
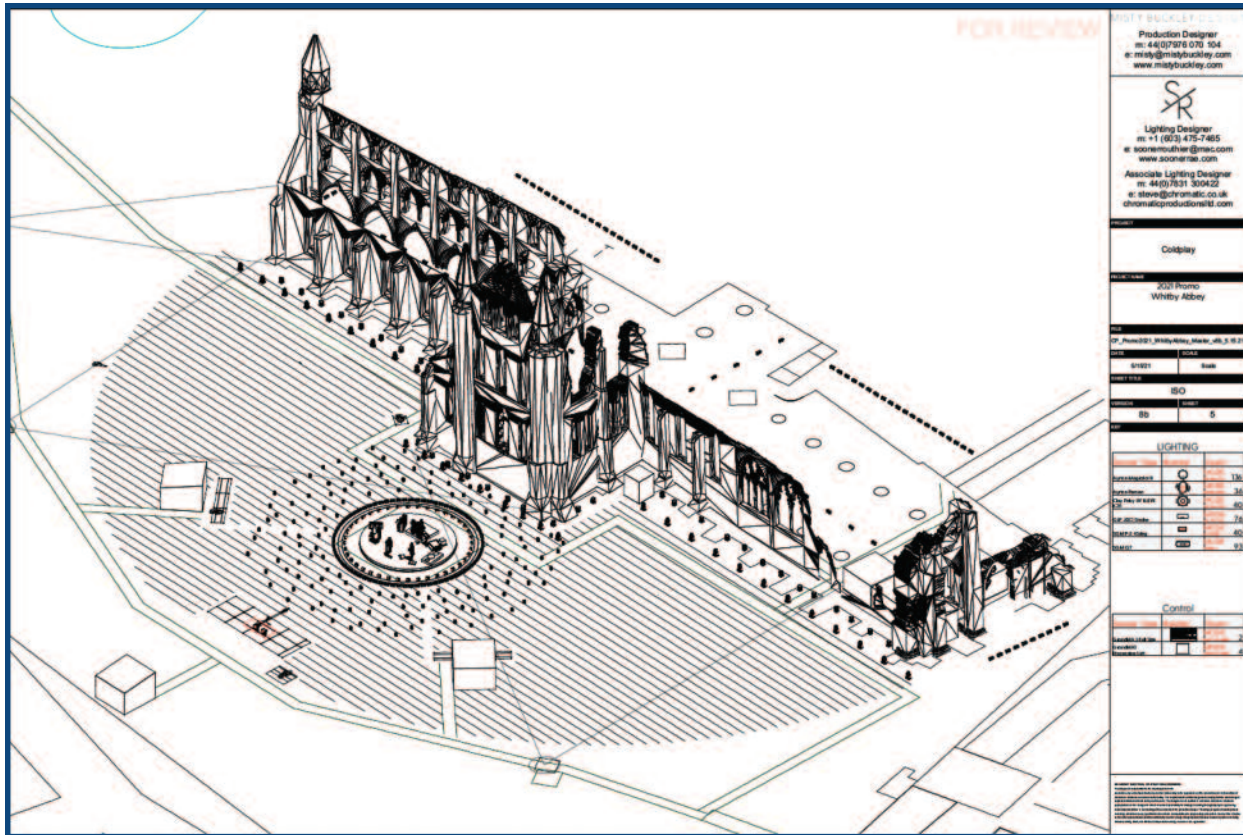
The design

The award-winning designer Misty Buckley has been working with the band since 2010 and, together with Coldplay’s creative director and co-manager Phil Harvey, is responsible for much of the band’s look. Lighting designer Sooner Routhier explains how the visuals took shape, “Misty and Phil set the scene by placing a circular stage in front of the ruined abbey. Misty and her art direction team painted the stage with what we’re lovingly calling ‘space glyphs.’

The stage was free of any overhead rigging, to ensure that the camera’s eye was not obstructed by any trussing, towers, etc. We wanted to maintain that clean background so that the abbey could be properly seen in all its glory.”

Creating a lighting design that worked in daylight, without the shadowing benefit of an enclosed stage, and registered successfully on a television screen was something of a conundrum, as Routhier describes: “In the beginning, I was a bit worried that the majority of the set was going to be played during daylight. However, when we reached the site and realized how truly magical it is during the ‘golden hour’ of sunset, all those worries vanished. It was quite a spectacular thing to see the setting transform from daylight to full dark while hearing and watching Coldplay do their thing. The most difficult thing was making sure that the band was lit properly during the ever-changing light. Our lighting director, Graham Feast, and our pro-

CLOSE-UP: TELEVISION



The drawings above show the relationship of the Ithaca Sea of Light to the stage. “The Ithaca installation was meant to put the band in a sea of light,” Buckley says. “They were tiny balls of energy representing the audience that couldn’t be present at the shows.”

grammer, Joe Lott, did a great job of chasing shadows and making sure the band were perfectly lit.”

Neg Earth provided the hardware along with a full complement of crew: Davide Palumbi, Jim Mills, Jon Shelley-Smith, Mark Bradshaw, Michelle Parker, Neil Johnson, Richard Larkum, and Steve Kellaway were on hand to realize the design. SGM Q-7 RGBW floods and P-2 LED washes provided ambient color with Ayrton MagicDot-Rs and Perseo-S, B-EYE K25s from Claypaky, GLP JDC1 LED strobes, with control from a full grandMA3 package, offering an almost infinite palette of visual splendor. “The BBC were actually really easygoing about how the performance was lit,” Routhier reflects. “They gave us complete control. Graham, Joe, my associate designer Steve Nolan, and myself worked to make sure the band was lit in a nontraditional way.

“We used a ring of SGM P2s to create a warmup light on the band. It almost created a ‘fireside’ look as they played on the circular stage. We also used a few Ayrton Perseos to help chase shadows. They hung rather low on some structures used to house the band’s backline techs and gear. The abbey itself was lit with a combination of Ayrton Perseos, SGM Q7s, and Claypaky HY B-EYES. We oftentimes pointed the Ayrton Perseos at the band stage for a bit of camera candy.

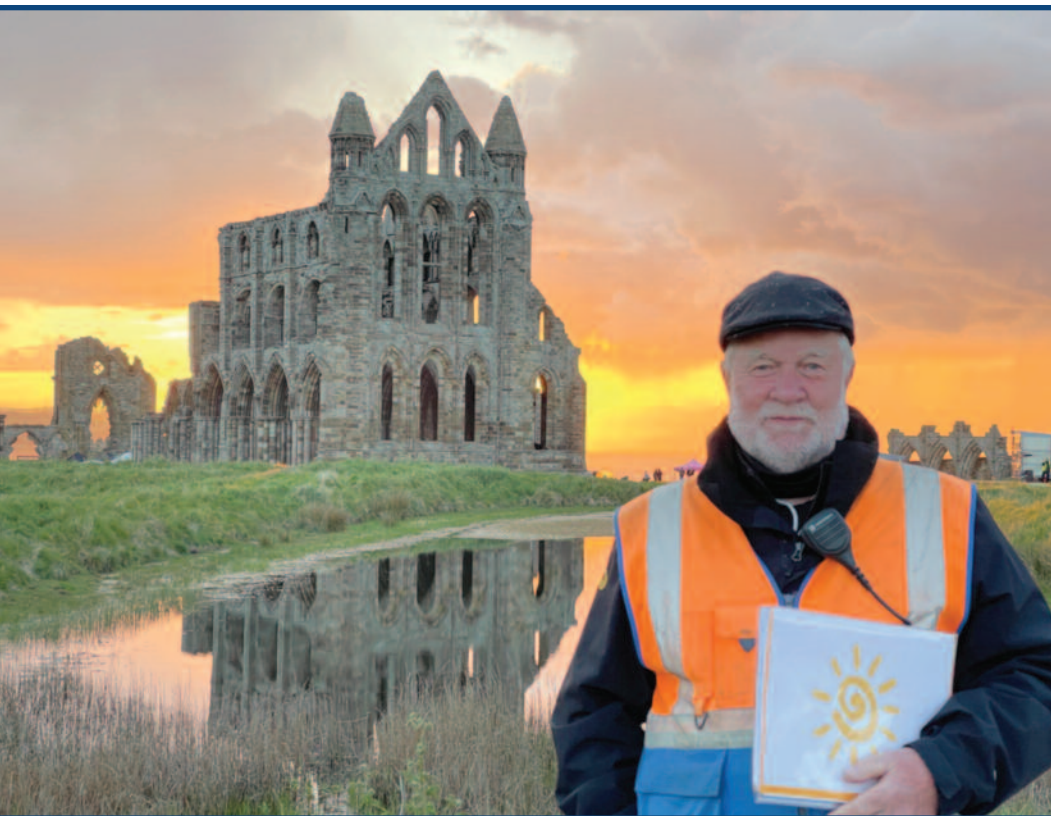
“Our main design element for the event was the ‘planetary aura’ of GLP JDC-1s around the band’s circular stage. It created a bit of a light barrier between the band and their surroundings. We also created an orbit of Ayrton MagicDots around the stage so that, as the drone camera was flying about the site, it would catch some smaller beams from above. We originally had the MagicDots spread out asymmetrically as a way to add beams to the Ithaca ‘Sea of Light.’ Once we got on-site, we determined that they would look better placed in a circle around the stage. Once we made that change, the site cleaned



The plan was to keep the site closed for as short a time as possible to make sure the fabric of the buildings was not in jeopardy.



Load-in was down a single-lane farm track and across the boundary wall.



Site manager Dick Tee.

up significantly.”

Ithaca’s ‘Sea of Light’ is a custom, modular light art installation consisting of tens of thousands of RGB LED spheres. The company has developed it over a number of years. It can be molded to fit any large space and is capable of covering thousands of square meters of ground, flowing like water, filling in all the spaces, or even hanging overhead, creating spectacles at huge scales. Ithaca’s managing director, Chris Evans-Roberts, explains, “Our system is completely bespoke, able to handle hundreds of universes of data and [can be mapped] to any kind of organic shape. With our in-house creative team, we can then program stand-alone shows, interactive or audio reactive sequences, or indeed tie into the incredible multi-department productions of a band like Coldplay. For this particular performance, the lack of audience provided both challenges and new creative possibilities. Representing an audience with thousands of points of light, we could individually program each of spheres in the Sea of Light, creating pulsing patterns flowing out from the stage, across the magnificent grounds.”

For Buckley, the Ithaca lighting not only played its part in creating a virtual audience but made a significant contribution to the ambience of the complete visual effect—both for the band and for the setting and the extended vista. “The Ithaca installation was meant to put the band in a sea of light. They were tiny balls of energy representing the audience that couldn’t be present at the shows. We really want-

ed to capture both the sunset and the view of the sea...so we could get the full sense of scale and drama of the abbey. From a production point of view, we wanted to get the balance of giving the audience at home an amazing show whilst keeping the tone of the global situation. The UK was in full lockdown at the time, and we had our hearts set on bringing some pure joy and wonder to their living rooms.

“The abbey itself enhanced what our design wanted to achieve; it was the perfect backdrop. The abbey was never meant to feel dark; for us, it was a celebration of an historic and majestic building. It marked an iconic place looking out from the very edge of North Yorkshire from which we could share some music, joy, and love.”

Alex Leinster, managing director of Milton Keynes-based Video Design, was part of the crew that provided the AV hardware of Panasonic laser projectors and disguise servers that brought an under-

stated portrayal of the environment to the page: “Working outdoors 200’ above the shoreline, open to whatever the North Sea winds might bring, the choice of venue brought some exciting challenges for everyone. English Heritage’s understandable concerns and the prospect of loading in all the equipment over a medieval perimeter wall only added to the mix. It might not have been a siege, yet even for a Coldplay show there was an extra element of the magical.

“That said, having someone with the experience of Bill Leabody to direct the production was reassuring. Under his careful stewardship, Video Design marshalled an oversized technical team to address the logistical demands. Frankly, we were mob-handed: myself, Luke Collins, Jack Middlebrook, Alan Yates, James ‘Oz’ Ross, and Andy Coates. With so much technical prowess on hand realizing the breathtaking imagination of Misty and Sooner’s design became a pleasure.”

And breathtaking was the critical response to the show, which was widely praised as the highlight of the virtual four-day BBC Big Weekend Festival. Whitby residents were teased by the spectacular special effects, supplied by Dave Kennedy, of *Strictly FX*, as the event was being filmed a full week before watching the show on TV. Even the local *Whitby Gazette* couldn’t confirm what was really going on behind the Abbey’s high boundary walls.

“We had to be very careful with the site for English Heritage, but we worked together really well, and all the crew were very respectful to keep away from the stones of

the abbey,” sums up Leabody. “All in all, it was a difficult project to do. Location was tough but we were very fortunate with the weather. Load-in was tough but the Coldplay crew, Dick and Frankie Tees and of course the great crew from [Potters Bar-based] Stage Miracles did an excellent job in making it go smoothly.”

Dick Tee is equally satisfied with the end result. “There were times when we had second thoughts as to what we were trying to do. Planning to bring in some 10–12 arctic trucks worth of technical kit and equipment to an incredibly sensitive venue with only one small ‘light traffic’ entrance gate, whilst not damaging the grass or the fabric of the monument, over a time frame of four days from arrival to departure, with some 200 plus crew—oh, and in a pandemic! As a team—BBC Live Music and Events, English Heritage, and Coldplay—we pulled it off.

“What was so gratifying, from all our perspectives, was the messages and feedback we received from English Heritage after we had all gone that we had left no trace and you wouldn’t have known we had been there. Even the plywood was recycled and not just dumped or sent to landfill. All in all, a great project.” 🌸