

Tony Soper: Oral History Transcription

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Name of interviewer:

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Date of interview:

22/05/2000

Place of interview:

Kingsbridge, Devon, United Kingdom

Length of interview:

c. 78 minutes

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1. The early years

Int: Let's go back right to the beginning Tony. Were you broadcasting first and natural history second, or was it natural history that brought you into broadcasting?

TS: That is a difficult one. My interest was always in wildlife right from the very beginning. But I suppose at school when people, my father for instance, were always saying, "What are you going to do?", I never realised that it was possible to make any kind of living in any way remotely concerned with wildlife. So I was very lucky when in Plymouth, I got the chance to join the BBC in Plymouth as a trainee studio manager. So I went straight from school at seventeen to the BBC in Plymouth as a sort of trainee, new boy, 'green' studio manager. They promptly sent me off to the training school at Wood Norton where I became a fully fledged trainee studio manager.

Int: How did you move from Plymouth to Bristol?

TS: I was in London working in the Overseas Service as a studio manager, being up all night doing things for the Arabs and the Brazilians and the Spaniards, one way and another. I had the chance to go to Bristol, I wanted to get to Bristol because Desmond Hawkins was working there and doing wildlife programmes. I grabbed the chance to join the studio manager group in Bristol and made myself useful to Desmond. He was doing radio programmes then, The Naturalist (1), Birds in Britain (2), Country Magazine (3), which was more

of a countryside kind of programme. He was a one man outfit and it was really too much for him, so I made myself useful. I used to reply to the letters, listeners letters. People were always writing in about the blue tits in their back garden or whatever and so I made myself useful and then indispensable. I worked for Desmond as an assistant features producer, he was a features producer then. We're talking about the days before the [BBC] Natural History Unit.

Int: At what stage and how did you move from dropping the needle on the gramophone that started the curlew, and what have you, to actually producing and arranging speakers and so on?

TS: I was doing that really while I was still a studio manager. I mean if you look back through the Radio Times (4), for something like two or three years I was producing programmes there which in the Radio Times (4) would be credited to Desmond. All the programmes I did would end with the announcement "Produced by Desmond Hawkins." I used to feel quite strongly about that at one time really. Desmond was doing the very first of the television programmes, where we had to go to London at that time, there were no facilities in Bristol. We went to London to do the first of the Look (5) programmes with Peter Scott. You know how they started off? Peter was doing radio programmes with us quite frequently and he said, "You must come to my lecture in the Colston Hall in Bristol." He was doing a lecture there and we went and saw Peter, where he would stand up and speak and he would do instant line drawings on an enormous sheet of paper on the stage. He would do an instant duck for them and things like that, and then he would show a bit of film. He'd got some 16mm film he'd shot on his holidays. And, do you know, the whole formula was made for television really. Ducks of course are made for television because they're the right aspect ratio, you know, four by three. So Desmond got a slot for Peter to do a one-off programme about ducks, I can't remember whether it was ducks or geese, and it was quite a success.

From that point on I think, we got the chance to do a monthly programme which was called Look (5). We had to go to London to do it. We had a half a day of editing with a professional editor every month. At that stage I was doing the preliminary film editing in Bristol, we had a **cutting copy** there. I sort of knocked together a rough shape and then the fellow in London would spend half a day and finish it off. We would then go into the studio there, and the formula in those early days, which was very much Desmond's approach to these things, was to have a guest who would bring his film along. Peter would speak to the guest for something like ten minutes, and then there would be twenty minutes worth of film. In those days we had no sound on the film of course, it was mute film, silent film, and I would sit in the gallery with a pile of gramophone records trying to give some sort of live feel to the film that was going on. I was a professional disc player if you like, so it was a great challenge to try and give life to a bit of mute film live during a broadcast. I enjoyed it enormously. Those were really very, very good days, but we very soon ran out of film. Never ran out of subjects of course, you'll never run out of subjects, but we ran out of film. Desmond was the begetter of all this really, Desmond was a writer, a words man, and he would always want to get things scripted. You've got to look back to the radio programmes like Country Questions (6), where Desmond would go out into the field and talk to countrymen; ploughmen, shepherds, cow-men, game-keepers, people like that. He would talk to them in the pub over a pint and get their stories. Then he would actually write the scripts for them, and they would come into the studio for radio programmes and solemnly read their pieces. You can imagine what it was like, it was very stilted I think as a technique, but Desmond loved it, and he transferred this technique to television where you would have a guest who would speak and then you would show some film.

It worked perfectly well but we did run out of film very quickly. One of my jobs was to telephone round all our contacts, because we had a pile of contacts for radio programmes and say to them, "Have you got a movie camera, did you take movies when you went to Skomer Island for your holiday last year?" It was amazing how many people did. People like Eric Hosking, who was a professional, world-class, stills photographer but also for fun, as much as anything, made movies, they weren't so great but he was good value, and this was the formula; chat with Eric Hosking and show his film. But we soon ran out though.

That was the point at which I, full of enthusiasm, and a green Plymouth lad full of confidence too, said to Desmond, "We should make our own films." Old Desmond was always up for anything really and I bought our first camera on petty cash. I went down to Dunscombes in the centre of Bristol and bought a Bolex camera. Bolex are still going strong, excellent, perfectly good 16mm cameras. I went off with absolutely no experience whatsoever but having told them that I knew all about film. I shot 16mm movie and you know how it is, if you're in at the deep end, you either get away with it or you don't, and we used the stuff. This was at the point when Heinz Sielmann came on the scene.

We used to go to the Ornithological Congress every four years, as you well know and we went to the one in Finland, in Helsinki. There was Heinz Sielmann. There are lots of solemn academic papers during the day, but at dinner-time they would show movies. Heinz Sielmann showed his movie about woodpeckers (7), and the woodpecker film had some internal stuff, you know he had the camera so to speak, inside the woodpecker's nest. Sensational material to see in those days. We brought it back of course and he was a guest with Peter Scott on the Look (5) programme. We had good publicity for it, pre-publicity. Publicity was a thing that we never really understood but with the woodpecker film the newspapers caught it early and it was a big success. I mean we got fantastic figures. That really was the point at which I remember saying, "We are feature's producers, now we ought to be a unit devoted to wildlife programmes." There were just the two of us, Desmond, and I was just his tea boy really, his number two. I wrote to Desmond formally, a memo saying, "We should be an official wildlife unit." and literally within a week or ten days, Desmond had gone to Frank Gillard who was head of programmes in the region at that time in Bristol and they had set up the [BBC] Natural History Unit. I remember thinking it was a bit pompous really, for a title, but it's turned out quite well really. That's the way the formal unit started, but we'd been doing telly [television] programmes for a year or two before that.

2. Finding presenters

Int: When you moved to television you already had a big range of contacts but how were those contacts developed? During the days of The Naturalist (1) you had two or three speakers all contributing on their certain subjects, wader birds or seabirds or what have you, how was that list of contacts drawn up? Was it you visiting ornithological conferences and looking for talent, can you talk about how that evolved?

TS: One of the continuing problems with radio and television too, is to find people who are competent to speak, to find people who have expertise in a subject, but who are also able to put it across, who are communicators. This is the difficult thing to find. David Attenboroughs don't grow on trees. Desmond had been doing radio programmes after all, since I think 1946 or so. His skill was in going to the pub, talking to people on different levels. Out in the country he was looking for people for a programme called Country Magazine (3). But he would also be talking to people like James Fisher, Peter Scott, Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, Maxwell Knight. People who were in the academic field themselves of course add a great range of contacts. Inevitably with these things if you're involved in any kind of programme or other, you get your mates in on it, don't you and why not? Because on the whole you tend to know the people and you trust them, and you have a feeling that they might play. But we had plenty of people who were not so successful, let's face it there were plenty of 'try-ons'. We had a list of academics, with their friends and a list of country people, Ralph Wightman is a good example there. Ralph was the kind of BBC countryman who had a big range of contacts. So if for instance, we would say to James Fisher, or Peter Scott, we're looking for a feller who can talk about shelducks, they would always know somebody was able to ramble on about the required subject.

Int: Can you remember how James Fisher came into the scene? Because he was pretty important in those days. Was that Desmond, or was he already there?

TS: I'm pretty sure that James Fisher was a contributor to Nature Parliament (8), which after all had been running for many years. So I suppose some of the people were theirs. Peter Scott, James Fisher, Max Knight were all contributors to Nature Parliament (8), so I suppose we would have nobbled them without a doubt, because these were all good communicators.

3. Early formats

Int: Going back now to when you bought your first Bolex camera. One of the first things I can remember was you going to film Dick Bagnall-Oakley actually, because I came with you, which was basically to build up sequences to Dick Bagnall-Oakley's own film. What was the first complete film project you embarked on?

TS: This leads on really from Desmond's technique. Desmond's formula for these programmes, as I say, was always to have a guest, someone who would be interesting to meet. He was a words man and he was a people person, he liked characters, he liked warm personalities. So we had this formula where there would be a guest who would speak, and then he would show his film. My own feeling was that this was very often a little bit stilted and I felt we should experiment with films. Whole 30 minutes, 30 minutes was the classic time of course, as always, and that we should do the complete 30 minutes on film. The first chance we got was when I sold Desmond the idea of making a film about fulmars, about this wonderful seabird, which was of course James Fisher's bird. James had written the monograph, the fulmar, for the Collins New Naturalist series. So we had the right man already there. My job was to persuade Desmond that we should make this film without having to see James in vision, and it would just be a film about the bird. I'm fairly sure that really, that was the first complete, all film, wildlife programme that we made. It was a big success I'm glad to say. You will remember this very well, we went off to Fair Isle and had a week perhaps, I doubt if we had more than a week. Knocked off some film of a moderately convenient fulmar on the cliffs and then came back and put it all together, and it was called The Fulmar (9), if I remember rightly, with James of course doing the commentary and writing the script. After that the formula remained pretty much the same for some years. We made one on shelducks with Peter Scott, that was a complete 30 minute film, although we shot some of the material with Peter in the field. That was the other thing that I reckoned, instead of them sitting them down in a studio in a chair, make them sit out in the field and talk about their subject. I believe it made better and more easier going — .

Int: It was a 16mm camera that you used for Fulmar (9) which was really quite a change from the old professional 35mm wasn't it?

TS: Yes, in the days which we're talking about now, which is what? I suppose it was late 1950's, when we shot the fulmar film. We did it with this Bolex which we bought at Dunscombes in Bristol, with a turret, a **three lens turret**, if I remember rightly, with a bit of a wide angle, a one inch, and the six inch lens which we were very proud of. We shot it with this clockwork camera which you had to wind up to run for 30 seconds. One of the really clever moves, one of the quite skilled parts of it, was that you had to be quite good at behaviour because you needed to know when your bird was going to do something. You needed to press the button two seconds before it started to do it and you knew you only had a 30 second run because it was a clockwork machine. So there was quite a challenge really in shooting but enormous fun of course. You have to remember, in those days, to use 16mm film was regarded as an absolute joke by all the professionals in London. Everything was done in 35mm, on the professional standard. So that when we started working with 16mm there were no facilities in London for managing it. There was one **cutting room** which had a 16mm editing machine. It was not taken seriously at all. It's interesting that we were the first people to use 16mm and within, what, five or six years, everybody used it. Who could tell the difference in quality, and the difference in price was tremendous? You know, there was an awful lot of sense in using 16mm, but we were

certainly regarded as rank amateurs until we started getting the good results from the programmes. Until our listening figures went up, and our appreciation index went up, and it was blindingly clear we were on a good thing professionally. Later on we actually had electrical cameras, there was a time when we all had Arri's [Arriflex] obviously. But the Bolex days were very good fun, very demanding, and personally I could never tell the difference between the material we shot and the material they shot with their great Pantechnicons in London.

Int: Can we talk about a time that you got interested in a different type of programming. I'm talking about Plapp (10) and other things which were animals, but not quite pure wildlife. You obviously got interested in a slightly different type of programming which was very popular. Can you talk about how you got into that? Was it by accident or was it through seeing an Arne Suchsdorf film, or what?

TS: I suppose we regarded ourselves as fairly serious, sort of moderately academic programme makers really, in both the radio sense and also when telly started too. We used academic contributors and our films, we liked to think, were pretty serious. But there was also a demand, a requirement for programmes which were perhaps less academic, more stories, more warm, more simple if you like, especially for children's programmes. I'm not demeaning them because we always did a Look (5) version for children on the day after the first evening broadcast. But there was clearly a slot, for adventure programmes if you like, for children. We'd had a Swedish film in, what was it called, Tufty (11) I think, something like that? Which was very good, very simple little movie about somebody who brought up a little duckling, and it turned into a duck. Johnny Morris did the commentary. Johnny was one of our star performers. Johnny, but that's a totally different story of course. Johnny was discovered in a pub in Aldebourne by Desmond, yet again, who was absolutely brilliant at identifying possible broadcasters. Johnny Morris did the commentary for it and it was a big success.

We also had a whole series of cartoon movies (12) from Heinz Sielmann's unit, Film und Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht (or whatever it's called in Germany), about hedgehogs, very simple little cartoon films. I was inevitably deputed to put them into English versions, to put commentary and music to them. We did that with Johnny and we had enormous fun doing it. We also set off to make some general interest films, animal films if you like. The first one was Plapp (10), a film where I brought up a cormorant, more or less from the egg, and had this tame bird which would walk around on my arm, like a hawk. We went to Scilly, to St Martins a most wonderful island in the Scillies, and made a very simple little film about Johnny Morris being on holiday on an island where a bird got covered in oil and he cleaned it, looked after it, made friends with it, and saw it go to sea. Very simple, if you saw it today, it was unbelievably repetitive actually as a movie but at the time it was cutting edge, and was shown more times than any other BBC film at the time, over a period of some years I think. So we made one or two like that, but those were 'by-blows' in a way. The main project was to do straight forward natural history and to encourage people to have a more sympathetic attitude towards the whole ecology of Britain.

4. Leaving the BBC

Int: Having thought of the idea which was picked up by Desmond and Frank in the first place and then being the unit's first producer, you didn't stay with the unit all that long before branching out and going independent. Why was that?

TS: Well, I absolutely loved it, I mean my whole time in the BBC I was very happy. I loved it, they were exciting times and we were doing something new. We had the best of all subjects to work on and very good people. I liked making films but they wanted me to be head of the unit. I didn't want to be the head of the unit, I just liked making films. I suppose also, much as I loved Bristol and everything about it and all the people

there and all the rest of it, I'm a Devonian by interest. I didn't want to spend my whole life living in Bristol, I wanted to get out more. In those days it was quite difficult to get out in the field. There was never the money to get out and make films in distant places and so on. So I went freelance, partly so I could base myself in south Devon, but also so that I would be freer to write and to travel. I may have left a bit too early because of course, after I left the whole thing blew up. I mean whereas there were only two people running the unit in the early days goodness knows how many there are now. It's an empire, and there were many more opportunities for perhaps more exciting series, the sort of things you did, Life on Earth (13), which was your baby after all. So in retrospect maybe I left too soon, but I don't think so, it's been a lot of fun.

Int: You mentioned writing, did you have an idea that you wanted to do more writing at that stage, to combine it? You've actually done a lot of books since then, in fact writing has been almost as important a part of your life as broadcasting.

TS: Yes, I suppose that's true but initially it was script-writing for films because I used to write quite a lot of the material for our programmes and I enjoyed doing that. Script-writing for films is a specialist sort of technique, as we all know. But I suppose I thought also, you haven't done the job properly if you don't write a proper book. So, I set off to do that as well. I'm a bit of a 'jack of all trades' really to be honest. I like doing a bit of this, a bit of that, it's worked out quite well.

5. Working with Peter Scott

Int: Going back a bit, I mean you may not remember the circumstances of this, you remember that Peter Scott went to Australia in order to take part in the Olympics there as a judge and that seemed to get the idea going there would possibly be some filming there, which became Faraway Look (14)? Am I right in thinking that there was a possibility that you might go there, because Charles Lagus eventually did the trip? Can you remember the circumstances?

TS: Oh yes, very well indeed, and it's not quite that way round. Charles Lagus was a London cameraman with a great reputation, very good, worked with Attenborough on Zoo Quest (15) and things like that, and was regarded at that time as the number one wildlife staff cameraman. So when Peter put up the idea for a seven part series in Australia Charles Lagus was the obvious right person to do it and he did it. It was called Faraway Look (14) because the main series was Look (5). They did a seven part Faraway Look (14). Then the next year when they wanted to do another one, Peter wanted to go on holiday again and make another series, Charles was ill and couldn't go. That was the point at which we were looking around for a subject and came up with Galapagos, because Galapagos in those days was a very difficult place to get to and nobody had really seen much of it except some spectacular still photographs. So that's when I got the chance of going off on a really pretty serious field trip for three months.

By this time we'd got an Arriflex camera and we were actually working with electricity with four hundred foot mags [magazine], which made a big difference. So yes, I went off to do Faraway Look 2, Galapagos (14). Seven parts, seven 30 minutes, three month trip. We were still shooting in black and white you know. I took thirty crates of equipment. It was just Phil [Phillipa], Peter's wife, Peter and myself; just the three of us. I had to do all the shooting and I'd never been away on a job like that before. I'd had seven days in Normandy with a school friend camping. This was my first overseas trip to Galapagos. I took thirty crates of gear, realised when we went to the British Virgin Islands first and were shooting there that I'd over done it with all this gear. I was very embarrassed about it and thought I'd be hauled over the coals when I got back, so I sent stuff back from every airport. We seemed to be going airport, airport, airport. At every airport we went to I would send another crate of gear back to Bristol. We ended up with half a dozen pieces of gear. In the beginning we had underwater cameras, a compressor for topping up the air tanks for doing underwater work.



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Peter was very enthusiastic then about fish but under water he'd only snorkelled. I said "You've got to learn to scuba-dive, do the job properly." Off we went to Galapagos, just me with no help at all. We shot seven half hours there. Of course, Galapagos is in many ways the easiest place in the world to shoot film. I mean nothing runs away from you, you just stick a camera in front of them and they do their stuff. Yes, it was moderately successful. We did some underwater filming. We had done underwater filming in Britain before that. I was very enthusiastic about underwater filming, and we did quite a lot of stuff underwater in Galapagos. I think we were probably the first people to do that. I nearly lost Peter while we were on the job. We were both off the Isle of Fernandina where the marine iguanas are and I said, "We've really got to get these marine iguanas grazing underwater", they get their food underwater, so in the water we went.

I was terrified of sharks at this time because you know, I was completely raw on all this stuff and I did not want to be eaten by a shark. So I said to Peter, "It's your job to swim behind me and make sure that —".

I've got a camera which always makes you comfortable that you've got this great thing in front of your face, but there's nothing behind and I didn't want to be eaten from behind. I found the iguanas, they were grazing on the sea bottom, I filmed them and I turned round to Peter to say, "Got it", give him the thumbs up and say, "We can go home now" and there was no Peter. No Scott, and he was BBC's secret weapon in those days and I thought, oh no he's been eaten by a shark. Swam back to the beach where Phil was waiting, and there was Peter with his little aluminium painting board, sitting on the bottom of the sea painting fish. I was really angry, really angry with him. He was a single minded man. You know Peter better than I do; he was the most single minded man you've ever met. Anything that stood in his way would be pushed aside, lovely guy though.

Int: Did you have a fairly easy relationship, you say he was very single minded, but about those early day of Look (5), was it hard going with Peter, getting him to fit into the discipline of making a fortnightly television programme?

TS: You've got to remember that we didn't only have Peter. James Fisher was always there as a sort of standby. Peter of course, was very jealous of the fact that if he couldn't make it that old James would step in like a shot and do it. But no, Peter was always very easy to work with, provided you agreed with him. You had to be very subtle at changing things to your way, if you wanted things to be done your way. But no, he was the perfect guy for this kind of thing really. He didn't know much about filmmaking or television to be honest, but he knew his subject well and he was absolutely brilliant at communication. There was no one so good as Peter at being able to enthuse somebody, and he could never stop actually. If you were travelling with him he couldn't bear to sit waiting for an aeroplane for thirty minutes, he would have to tell you something, a story, or draw you a picture, or discuss an idea. He could never relax.

Int: The other series that you did I remember, after Faraway [Look] 2 (14), I think, was a trip you did down the Eastern Seaway —

TS: Yes. We made this little film in Scilly called Plapp (6), the bringing up, the resuscitating of an oiled up cormorant with Johnny. I remember at that time I was really keen to go off and make a straight wildlife series, and I sold them the idea of sailing down the east coast of the States from New York to the Bahamas, down this incredible waterway they have. You can work from New York to the Bahamas almost without going to sea. I had at that time been doing quite a lot of diving filming and my diving instructor, Trevor Hampton at Dartmouth, had the ideal boat for the job a little 35 foot motor cruiser. Nobody had a budget in those days did they really, you just had to sell the idea and you did it. I said, "We'll take this little boat across to New York. Sail it from New York to the Bahamas and make a film about it. Just tell them what animals we see on the way", and you know, unbelievably they said, "Yes, ok. Do that". So we put this 35ft motor cruiser, a hefty,

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solid little vessel, as deck cargo on a freighter which was going to New York. Trevor sailed across with it. When they got to New York they off-loaded this thing into the sea and as they did it the rudder dropped off. We were divers but we couldn't find it and so I had to telephone back and say, "I'm terribly sorry, we've lost our rudder". The builders, somewhere up in Scotland, had to give us the drawings and we got a yard in New York to build us a new rudder for this ship. So we were stuck there for about ten days, not very long really, but I was dead worried that we were wasting the BBC's money. Then we went off and we did three parts, three 30 minutes, called Waterway (16), or American Waterway, I can't remember, about this beautiful intra-coastal waterway which is inside passage, inside mangrove stuff when you get further south. Some short canal sections, but mostly an inside passage, inside these barrier islands which are all the way down the east coast of the United States. We were at sea when we started, first three hundred miles you are at sea, then you go up the Delaware, down the Chesapeake estuaries, and inside these barrier islands through the mangrove until you get to Miami. Then of course we had to go to sea again to go across to Nassau and spend some time in the Bahamas. I got a lot of wonderful material, mostly in the Everglades because you know the American national parks are so superbly run. Got a lot of film in the Everglades and then in the Bahamas some underwater stuff, and went down to Inagua Island where the flamingos had a disastrous season. It's a famous place for flamingoes. When we got down there the place was all flooded and everywhere you looked there were flamingo eggs floating about on the water. Extraordinary trip really. It didn't actually cost anything. Nowadays everybody knows to the last penny what things cost, with those early films, had no idea what they cost. When we went to Galapagos I remember very well that I was given £3,000 literally in sterling for expenses on the trip, we didn't spend anything because Peter had such wonderful contacts that everywhere we went we were treated like royalty. He was 'the commander'. We stayed with the colonial office people, the foreign office people in the embassies here and there, and I remember bringing back virtually all the money I'd been given at the beginning and trading it in with my expenses form. You know the expenses form, and I felt so proud of this. Nobody ever said, "Well done Soper! You did that job well —". Ever after that I thought to hell with them with their expenses.

00:38:09:24

Int: At one stage, it must have been almost during the first year, you were going to go off somewhere and it was all very sudden and I was yanked out of the cutting room and I was given a little office, which was either your little office or the one opposite and was told 'you are going to have to work in production because Tony Soper is going overseas' and I was terrified actually, I'd hardly learnt how to put film together. There was a five day period where I had to get to terms with this, and then whatever it was that you were going to do fell apart and it was cancelled. I thought that might have been you going off with Peter Scott?

TS: On the Australian thing?

Int: Yes, I thought perhaps Charles Lagus couldn't do it and they were going to send you and that's why they had to grab me to do some of what you were doing. It was about a week, and I was actually given a desk, I never used it because it all fell apart, back to plan A. I kind of thought that might have been Faraway Look (14)?

TS: The Australian one? Charles did it, but perhaps I was meant to do it.

Int: Maybe he was going to do it —

TS: and he became available, it does actually ring a bell now, something happened. Yes that's right I practically had tickets for something didn't I, it has to be that because Galapagos he was ill and that was that.

Int: All that was shot on colour, as you know, Peter wanted it for a lecture film. Faraway Look (14) was shot entirely on colour.

TS: and Galapagos was shot in black and white, was Galapagos was first?

Int: No, Galapagos was second. The reason that Faraway Look (14) was shot on colour was that Peter did a deal and he said "I will pay the difference in cost between black and white and colour because I need it for lecture film". So all this master came back, Lagus shot on colour as well and Peter had his own little camera, he shot a lot of it, Peter shot about 35% of it.

TS: This was **reversal**?

*Int: All reversal, all Kodachrome. What we did was, I actually edited the stuff and it came back and we made a black and white **dupe neg** and we cut that. Then Peter paid me, on the side, to put his lecture film together and he paid me very handsomely, that's how I could afford my first car actually.*

TS: Good for him! Well, I do now dimly remember at the last minute not going somewhere, practically having tickets. It has to have been the Australian thing, because Galapagos was never anything, that had to be me —.

Int: But why you didn't go on it? I don't know, it may have been that Lagus was available and you were required for something else. I don't know. Well if you ever remember you can tell me.

TS: Was it when I had to run the unit, for about eighteen months I think.

Int: Brandon [Acton-bond] disappeared and there must have been a transition between Brandon going and Nicky [Croker] coming on.

TS: That's right, and in that period I did it.

Int: I think it was before the unit was officially formed, but effectively you did it.

TS: That was the unit. I mean I did it for about eighteen months, not wanting to, because somebody had to. It couldn't have been then?

Int: It might have been the reason that you weren't allowed to go.

TS: Truth is I can't remember, so I can't say anything useful about it. Dimly I do remember practically having the tickets in my pocket and then —.

Int: Can I go on?

TS: Ah! I do know, I do know. I was the unit's film producer but I had never been to this ridiculous school that they had in London, and in order to you had to have the ticket kind of thing. You had to have been through this school, and it was what, a couple of months in London in August. I remember the heat of an August in London, and I very reluctantly had to go to do this course, a producers course in London. I didn't want to go, I was a bit bolshy about the whole thing really. I didn't want to do it, I thought I've done it, I don't need to be taught how to do it. Oh dear! So that must have been it. It must have been at that point and perhaps I was meant to go to Australia. I don't remember that, but I was out of work, so to speak for a good couple of months.

6. Moving in front of the camera

Int: Can we go on to another phase of your life? I see you very much as moving in front of the microphone, in front of the camera at some point. Can you remember what caused that transition and when you started becoming more of a well known television personality and presenter of programmes and the man behind the microphone? When did that shift occur?

TS: That was the beginning of Animal Magic (17). We did a kid's programme called Out of Doors (18), a very good kid's programme I think, with Les Jackman in Paignton who was one of the stalwarts on it, very straight forward. People would say it was a pretty plonking kind of show if you like nowadays, but I thought it was a cracking good, very straightforward wildlife programme. I suspect it was regarded as not zippy enough and they wanted a change. The idea was to do a wildlife magazine, and it was at the point where I went freelance, and there was some suggestion that I should be the 'anchor man', the presenter for this programme. But in fact they got Johnny, Johnny Morris, a much better choice and I was his sidekick, I was his number two. I was at the meeting in Bristol where this thing was planned. Desmond was there and the head of children's programmes came up from London and we were talking about a title for this new programme, and this woman from London said, "Well of course, you've got to say that animals are the big draw, and that the other word which goes down well in Radio Times (4) and so on is magic. So you must call it Animal Magic (17)." I remember thinking, what a crummy title for a show really. I never liked Look (5) as a title, so I've got a very bad record for thinking of titles.

Animal Magic (17), Johnny got the job but I suppose as a kind of sop they let me go on, and I was the number two. I don't think I'd been on at all, apart from the end of the Galapagos series on programme seven (14), in introducing it Peter introduced me. I sat there for sort of 40 seconds simply saying who I was and what I had done. The thing I remember about that is that you know, I was terrified about the whole thing, and had worked out my little piece very, very carefully and Peter used my first line in introducing me. This was live of course, so there was nothing I could do about it. Anyway, that I think was the only time I'd ever been on simply as, "Here is the cameraman that did the series".

Animal Magic (17), obviously I'd had bags of experience at broadcasting as a studio manager. I mean I wasn't frightened of broadcasting, but I'd never been 'on' in that sense at all. Johnny was such an easy person to work with that the thing was a success and that was the first time that I'd been 'on' as a presenter. I left Animal Magic (17) in the end because I was worried that I would be tarred with the **anthropomorphic** brush. I had endless admiration for Johnny. I think he was very, very good, but there is no doubt that he represented a particular kind of wildlife programme. He was enormously funny and sensitive about animals, but I wanted to do straightforward wildlife, natural history, not scientific material, but at least more real, real life stuff.

So that's why I left Animal Magic (17) and made a couple of series with what was called Further Education at that time, Continuing Education now. We did a series Discovering Birds (19), then no, Beside the Sea (20) was first. I did a programme about the **littoral**, the British coast, which is you know one of my interests, with Judy Brooks, a girl who'd come from Plymouth and was a good friend. She was a producer in London. We worked out this idea, we did Beside the Sea (20). I introduced it, I wrote the script, I planned the whole thing and all the rest of it. Then we did Discovering Birds (19), which was an unbelievable success. You know, the book was number one for ten weeks, the book of the series (21). So I did a couple of series for them, and that was when Nature (22) started. What was really badly needed and is still badly needed, was a magazine programme which dealt with conservation in the broadest possible sense, and when Nature (22) started in Bristol, I was the presenter for that. That was a wonderful job to do, I was very happy with that because you had real influence. Some of the things we did actually mattered and changed people's attitudes towards wildlife and subjects. I'm quite proud of having been on that for whatever it was, two or three years, until it became too successful and the news people took it over, and I got the boot.

Int: I think being a presenter/writer is a very vulnerable thing because fashions change and sometimes it is just the whim of the controller. Do you feel fed up by those kinds of fashions and things? You've obviously got a lot of potential still, but you're not perhaps in the limelight so much now as you were ten or fifteen years ago.

TS: Well as one door closes, another opens you know. I've had the most wonderful time since being given the boot; working as expedition leader on little ships doing the things I enjoy most, visiting wilderness islands. But yes, I'm sad that I missed the chance of being able to be at the cutting edge and influence people's thinking, obviously. No, I certainly don't feel, times change, fashions change, and it's good to bring new faces in and new ideas of course. I suppose, that if you are asking personally, I was unhappy to be given the boot in such a way. Alan Yentob had every right to say, "This guy is dull, he's no good", but I think that the head of programmes, head of the Natural History Unit at that time, might perhaps have shown a little bit more support for somebody who had been there for quite a long time, done quite a lot of films with moderate success. But you know, those are small things really, small things.

7. Working with Ludwig Koch and Konrad Lorenz

Int: Let's talk about Ludwig [Koch]. Can you remember the first time you met Ludwig?

TS: Ludwig was a fairly regular contributor to The Naturalist (1), the monthly programme talking about all aspects of natural history, but also Birds in Britain (2) the other programme that we did. Because of course Ludwig was famous, he had become famous because he was the first guy to see the commercial possibilities of birdsong. The first man to produce birdsong recordings commercially, gramophone records of birdsong. He was an important contributor because he could bring lovely wildlife sounds to the studio and of course, that lovely accent. You couldn't go wrong with the accent which he carefully honed over his thirty years or so in Britain, I was very sure he wouldn't lose it. He was good value, he said good things, he had beautiful records. He was a bit of a fraud you know really, old Ludwig. I mean he would stop at nothing really, and tell you whatever suited at the time. He sold me on the idea of going on a field trip to Germany. He had never been back to Germany, having left there whenever it was in the early 1930's, having come to Britain. He had never been back home and he said to me, "There is a wonderful story in ze Black Forest", so I said, "Ludwig great, tell me about it and maybe we can do something.", "I cannot tell you. It's a secret you know but it's a wonderful story this, you've got to go." So I went to Desmond and said, "Listen, Ludwig, you know he's a good contributor, we have to trust him. He says he's got a wonderful film story for us to do." And Desmond

said, "Ok, go.", so off we went. This was with the little Bolex 'Mickey Mouse' camera, to Frankfurt or somewhere like that. Anyway, we travelled across there. I remember it well because the moment we got there, on the P.A. they said, "Vill Doctor Soper come to the telephone?" and I thought it was wonderful. You know in Germany you've got to be a Doctor, unless you are a Doctor you are nobody, so they give you the benefit of the doubt. I liked that a lot.

Anyway, we went off into the Black Forest, I hired a Volkswagen beetle and we put the gear in it. Off we went to this address that Ludwig finally gave me, which was a lodge, a sort of 'Gasthaus' in the middle of the forest. When we got there he said, "Tony, it's cranes, *cranische*." We were going to film cranes. There was a place there where cranes would come on migration. Next day we went to this site, there was nothing, there was absolutely nothing to be seen anywhere. Ludwig promptly became ill, you see. We slept in a double bed, Ludwig and I, I remember. One of my claims to fame is, I've slept with Ludwig Koch. It was hellishly hot, that is the other thing I remember, in this place on that one night there. "I am old, Tony, I am ill, I am so ill, I am ill, we have to go home." So I had to take Ludwig, acting ill, all the way back to London, having travelled all the way there and spent what I regarded as an unbelievable quantity of money in those days. I was so embarrassed, we went back with nothing. Desmond was very good about it, but he didn't like it. Ludwig was no more ill than the man in the moon. As soon as we got back home he was okay. That was Ludwig.

The other thing about Ludwig, is that he went to the isles of Scilly to do recordings. He went there I think to do Manx shearwaters but while he was there, there was a very nice cormorant colony. He set up his microphone for the cormorants, went back up on the top of the cliff, and put his great headphones on. You've never seen such a massive pair of 'cans', headphones that he wore on his head. He listened and got these wonderful sort of 'gwaach wa gwaach' gurgly noises. He starts his machine, a disk this is incidentally, wiping the **swarf** off with his little paint brush and so on, and got some nice recording. He went down to retrieve his mic and it was eighteen inches underwater, the tide had come in. It worried me that Ludwig, who was after all a very famous man and a very good broadcaster, very good value and had done a tremendous archive of birdsong recordings, it worried me that there was no film of him. He didn't exist on film. We're talking about radio days now really. We were working on Look (5) programmes and at that time we had no camera, this was before we had our own camera. I organised a film crew and got Ludwig go to the swannery at Abbotsbury, the scene of one of his famous recordings. We filmed him with his disc gear which we borrowed from the British Museum, I think, in London. I don't know where it is now but it was Ludwig's disc recording machine. We took him down there and I filmed him crouching down with the swans in the background, dropping the **cutting head** onto the acetate disc, and wiping the swarf off with his paint brush. He wore these enormous headphones and he had the biggest pair of field glasses round his neck that you could imagine, and so we filmed him for the archives. I remember on the day I said to him, "Ludwig fantastic pair of binoculars you've got there", "Ha so Tony!" he says, "Tony, you try them". I put them on and you couldn't see a thing, they were opaque, they'd been given to him by Peter Scott. It was this great pair of naval binoculars, but they looked great on the movie. Ask me where the film is, and we lost it. We shot him in 35mm because I was worried that he was going to die but in fact he went on for ages. It seemed to me we ought to have film of the old boy before he died. We shot it and then promptly lost the film. I bet you find that you can find no pictures of Ludwig Koch, I don't think he exists on film.

Int: Talking about working with Ludwig Koch in Germany reminded me of another trip you did, I worked with Tinbergen a lot, but you worked with Lorenz. Tell me about that?

TS: In one of the early Look (5) programmes Konrad Lorenz came across to show his goose film. I mean this wonderful film which shows him swimming with the geese, the imprinted geese, he tells his imprinting story. This was the programme where in the live section where he's being interviewed by Peter Scott, he was sitting there with a goose on his lap and while he was talking the goose did what geese do, all over his trousers. Konrad takes his handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes the dropping off his trousers, puts his handkerchief back in his pocket. Later on in the programme live again, he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. That must exist I should think. Anyway, it was quite a success that one, so we had

the chance to go to Seewiesen to his field station to do some filming. Subsequently I suppose, maybe it was the same programme, I'm damned if I can remember. Maybe it was before that —

Int: I think it was a different programme.

TS: Anyway, I had the chance to go to Seewiesen, to go to Germany, to Konrad Lorenz's field station with Peter Scott. Peter was to go there and do an interview with him. We did the interview on film. This was in the days when I was persuading them that it was a good idea to film on location so that you got the excitement of being on location. It was a Sunday when we got to Munich and met the film crew. And so we set off to Seewiesen to do this interview, we only had the one day to do it in. When we got to Seewiesen, Peter went off with Konrad to have a bit of a chat and to look around the place, see all the geese, and the film crew turned to me and said, "Where is ze film?" and I said, "No, you've got the film stock", "No you have ze film" and this was on a Sunday. We are now thirty miles away from Munich and no stock. So they looked in their bags and they did in fact have one 400 foot roll, that's as you know 10 minutes and 40 seconds, one 400 foot roll and so we had to do roughly ten minutes worth of interview to go with the 20 minute movie. This was still in the early days when I was pretty terrified of going home and saying things had gone wrong, so you'd never say that things had gone wrong. So we set them up to do this interview and I got Peter ready with his questions. We'd do it with no clapperboard or anything like that, we were just flicking fingers in front of the camera. I said to Peter, "The moment my flick goes you must speak. Get on with it." and in the end we shot the whole thing at a ratio, you will know this better than anyone else, at a ratio of 1.1:1. I think you probably cut the film. It was absolutely true what I say, 1.1:1, practically nothing was wasted, nothing went on the cutting room floor except the beginnings and ends of the stuff. That was one little disaster, one of many disasters really, but we got away with it.

Int: On that clip you must have taken Peter and Konrad into a studio and recorded the narration as they were going through his film?

TS: Yes that's absolutely right. So which film was that then?

Int: It was his classic film, of the imprinting.

TS: It must have been the imprinting film. So we must come back to this, the story about the goose droppings has to be on a different epic. That's right. I went to Germany with Peter Scott in order to record an interview with him in the field which would act as an introduction to his twenty-minute imprinting film. He was famous for having written an academic piece explaining this curious process of imprinting where a gosling, you know, coming out of the egg, first thing it sees is daddy, or mummy, so he was their mummy. He'd wonderful film of the little goslings swimming along behind his head in the sea. So we went to Seewiesen to film them. Having filmed the interview, we then needed to get the commentary for this twenty minute mute, silent film, and we went to a studio of some kind in Munich. We sat them down in front of a microphone, ran the film and they talked to it. That's the way we did those things in those days.

*Int: We'd made a **dupe neg** and for some reason or another they couldn't put edge numbers on it so you had to match it by hand and I of course, was **neg cutting** in those days as well as everything else and I actually had to go to London on the train to use the **foot joiner** to cut the stuff together and come back the next morning. The only way to match it was to look for action and also various little marks on the film —*

TS: That's right, or a flash or something.



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*Int: — and you matched that. There was a Slavonian grebe on absolutely still water with a perfect reflection right in the middle of picture, no skyline or anything. So I matched what I thought was this, and of course in those days it was played from London **telecine**. You had no control over it really, and you rehearsed it with a **cutting copy** in the studio, if you remember —*

TS: Yes, **back projection** onto a screen in the studio

*Int: and then on the night it went out live, and it came down from London **telecine CCR2** or whatever it was and then I can remember this film going through and either you or someone saying, “Why are the ripples going in towards the bird?”*

TS: No it was you.

Int: Was it me? Yes, because actually Peter didn't spot it I don't think.

TS: I didn't spot it. No it was you that spotted it, you said afterwards you realised that that bird was going backwards.

Int: The ripples were going —

TS: Because they look the same each end, don't they, tail-end, head-end.

Int: It was a perfect mirror image, the only thing that gave it away was very faint ripples and they were just going in, and I thought they don't do that normally.

TS: And the ripples were up in the sky, but nobody noticed.

Int: No, nobody noticed apart from me I don't think.

8. Living in the office and how it all started

Int: Have we anything else to talk about? We've almost done it.

TS: Done it.

Int: Unless there is anything you passionately want to talk about? About the BBC or something?

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TS: No, no I was very happy, loved every moment of it. I had the most wonderful time there damn it. For one whole long period I had nowhere to live and slept in the office.

Int: Yeah I remember you having a bed in the office because the cleaners objected at one stage.

TS: In the end they objected.

Int: Well let's talk about that. We must get that.

Int: We are talking about the early days, and you didn't have anywhere to live and I can remember that you had quite a small office and there was a bed in it.

TS: Well, it was a camp-bed wasn't it, because I had to close it up during the day because I had to pretend that I wasn't doing this. I had a camp-bed and sleeping bag. Slept in the office and got up before the cleaners came in, in the morning and packed everything away so they didn't know I'd been sleeping there all night. The problem in the end came because there was a cleaner in there and there was a scratching noise and she went to my roll, my sleeping bag roll, wondering what the devil it was, unwrapped it and there was a polecat ferret inside that we'd had standing by for the Out of Doors (18) programme, I'd been looking after. Lovely, lovely little animal, no trouble you know, it was a pet really. It was free, it got out of its box or something, and the cleaner screamed and shouted, not unreasonably objected to the fact that I'd been sleeping in the office. I'd been in there for months, just eating in the canteen and sleeping in the office. You could get away with things like that in those days, goodness how! The **sartorial** thing you ought also to talk about, because we're talking about the days, Reith was not so very long gone and the whole thing was very gentlemanly and proper. You wore a tie at work and things like that. I broke that one by coming in with just a polo neck and something like that on. I remember being hauled over the coals by Desmond, saying that you know "This was not on. You can't come in to the BBC without a proper jacket and tie on." How times have changed.

I joined straight from school at seventeen. Actually, my father kept on saying, "What are you going to do in life?" he had worked hard, from nothing made something of his life and he wanted to know how I was going to make a living. I had no idea how I was going to make a living, but a friend of mine tried for a job at the BBC in Plymouth and got turned down and I thought, that sounds like quite good fun, I'll give them a try. I went up to this very fine residential building in the genteel part of Plymouth, knocked on the door and the fellow that answered the door, I said, "I'm a smart young lad and I'm looking for a job." and instead of saying 'Push off', it was the engineer in charge of the station, a very small station and he very kindly said, "Come in" and showed me round. There was a studio and the control room, which was wonderfully exciting and all that kind of thing. He showed me around, gave me a sort of ten minute quick look round and then said, "Sorry there aren't any jobs, but do come again" and I took him at his word and went there every Saturday. Knocked on the door and said "Got a job yet?" and in the end they took me on. That's true, very kind. I was there for five days, there was absolutely nothing for anybody to do there you know and they sent me off to the training school at Wood-Norton, at Evesham. When I was first interviewed by the fellow in charge there, Colonel Stafford, I went into this great office, I'd never been in such a big room with this big desk and he had a lamp which pointed towards you. You sat on a chair and it was like being in a spy film, that you couldn't see him. I couldn't see this man who was talking to me and he had the big, grand act really, Colonel Stafford.

Int: What year was that?

TS: Well it was the year I joined, it must have been 1947, 1948 I suppose. Colonel Stafford. They did nothing in Plymouth as well, I say. All changed now of course. Very exciting, cutting edge place Plymouth!

Plymouth always has been a very good training place really, a great starting place. Look at the number of people who came from there, Sue Lawley, Angela Rippon, Hugh Scully, the sports fellow with the lovely Devon accent, me, extraordinary number of people from such a small station. Very big station now of course! It's mainly because we were allowed to have a go at anything. You could, ok you were a studio manager but you could, I was going to say you could edit film but I don't believe we ever edited a film there but you could have a go at different things. Much the same in Bristol you know in the early days. One of the really good things about it was that you could have a go at different kinds of job. You could have a go at film editing, you could be a studio manager, I would be on the floor acting as a floor manager for programmes. Really knowing nothing about it and learning on the job, and having people like Ron Webster scream at you because you got in front of the camera at the wrong moment. So you learnt on the job and you learnt very, very quickly. When we did the first OB [outside broadcast] very quickly with the Look (5) programme, Peter Scott was saying, "This was all very well to show film in the studio, but you ought to come to Slimbridge and do birds live. So that people see these geese, the geese that come to the Dumbles in the winter, see them for live." and off we went and did it.

Int: That was presumably with people like Nicky and Ron and perhaps Peter Bale later on?

TS: That was with Peter Bale, Peter Bale did the first one. Peter Bale was an OB producer in Bristol. We had the scanner, **three-camera scanner**, right. We went out to Slimbridge and I acted as floor manager for those things in the early days with Peter Bale. Then later on we went back again. [Aside:] Ooh, there's a sparrowhawk, or was it a peregrine?

Anyway, we went to Slimbridge and did live broadcasts of the geese. That was the beginning of what after all, became quite a long running annual series of live OBs from the field; seabird cliffs, flamingos in the Camargue, oh wonderful stuff on the Exe.

Int: Before that though there were quite a lot of inserts. Were you involved in the inserts that we sometimes did into children's programmes, and also once or twice into the early evening Tonight (23) programme? It was in Bruce Campbell's time, I think, we did inserts from rookeries, from a Cornish estuary, were you involved in that?

TS: Don't think so.

Int: It was a pretty stupid thing to do.

TS: Well, we did some pretty stupid things. I mean the most stupid thing I ever did I think was in radio where we were doing The Naturalist (1), programmes like that. Naturalist (1) was monthly, Birds in Britain (2) was monthly. So, every fortnight we had a radio programme and we had Ernest Neale, who was the world authority on badgers whom you knew very well, Ernest Neale and we said, "Let us do a live badger watch on radio", I'm really ashamed of it. So, we went up to a first-class badger set in Gloucestershire. Went in to this woodland, a fantastic place, with entrance holes everywhere you looked and we cut down some young trees and built a platform ten feet above this set for them to watch. We cut all these trees and made this hide, the

day before the broadcast. So of course, absolutely nothing happened. They were there for ten minutes, ten minutes I think. Ernest and somebody else, Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald or someone like that had a ten minute live transmission from the top of this hide where obviously, nothing happened, nothing was going to happen, because badgers were not going to show their faces. Not out of those particular holes for the next six months I should think. That was bad news, that was bad planning. But you know, you have to forget about that one and remember all the live things we did, the flamingos and the wonderful thing on the Exe estuary where we had the waders coming in on the tide, coming right up, right in front of your eyes. Eyeball to eyeball, great. Quite exciting.

END

Glossary

Anthropomorphic: To attribute human form or feelings to a non-human species or object.

Back projection: A technique whereby live action is filmed in front of a screen which the background action is projected on.

Cutting copy: The film editor's working print, assembled from the rushes.

Cutting head:

Dupe neg: A duplicate negative produced from a specially made fine-grain print or from a colour positive.

Splicer/ Foot joiner: A device for joining film shots in the cutting room.

Magazine: Film roll

Littoral/ littoral zone: the shallow marine zone where light reaches the substrate; this zone is subject to submersion and exposure by tides

Neg cutting: The process of finding the negative to match the cutting copy and joining it up accordingly.

Reversal: Film type which gives a positive image when projected.

Sartorial: Relating to tailoring, clothes, or style of dress.

Swarf: Fine chippings or filings

Telecine: A machine which electronically scans film and converts the visual information into a television signal.

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