

Desmond Hawkins – Oral History Transcript

Name of interviewee:

Desmond Hawkins

Name of interviewer:

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Name of cameraman:

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1. The early years – in radio

DH: Looking back, the great event in my life undoubtedly was the war because it switched my career. Before the war I was a young novelist with a good contract with a publisher Longmans, to do a novel a year, which was fine. I was fascinated of course by broadcasting, by radio, which was to my generation what television was going to be to, I suppose, to my children's generation. But, I started right at the beginning with Toorimatock, Rittle which I heard. I heard Dame Millie Melba's very first broadcast. I made a crystal set at boarding school and all that sort of thing. So, radio was very much in my sights, and I first appeared in the Radio Times (1) in 1936. And it turned out to be very appropriate, partly because it was a poetry programme, and I rather fancied myself as a poet in those days, and the subject of the poetry was birds. It was called A Nest Of Singing Birds (2) and so in its way, it was vaguely prophetic. Well then, came the war and of course more importantly came the Blitz on London, and that took out my publisher. The warehouse went up in flames, both my novels finished up as ashes, and really the career of a promising young writer was beginning to look a bit shaky, to put it mildly. The sort of journals I was writing for were now being rationed for paper. Then they couldn't get paper and one by one they were closing down. So that I was due for some sort of change. I didn't quite know what entirely, at the point. But, I was still pursuing this interest in radio as a side thing. Then I was approached by the Features department, which had had an order, that they must rapidly build up their output, particularly to overseas, even more particularly to the North American service because America did seem to be sadly a bit reluctant to come to our aid at that time, so we were going to do another 5 hours a day to North America. Some of this had to be documentary and so they wanted writers of my sort. And, most of the writers of my generation, were coming into the features business at that time. Not many names will now be remembered, but Dylan Thomas would, and Louis McNiece would, I think, and in another context Cecil McGivern, later as head of television, he was another one. So, that we were a fresh lot

brought in, mostly on short contracts, we didn't join the staff, to write.

The first thing I had to do was to write a series called, The Stones Cry Out (3), and each week the series took one of the Wren churches, or whatever it was that had perished in the previous night's Blitz and I wrote about it. Gradually I became settled in the features department. The two things that followed as far as I was concerned: one was, later in the war it was decided to start a country programme. The sort of style of broadcasting then was to have these specialised programmes in particular elements in what was called 'the war effort'. There was Worker's Playtime (4) for the factory people, and there was The Navy Lark (5), and so on and so on, so Country Magazine (6) was started. Well I'd been living increasingly, the life of a poorish countryman living out in darkest Essex. I was married, I had children, I hadn't got much money and I wanted low rents, and that really meant those parts of Essex where electricity hadn't yet arrived. Water that came out of the tap was still a remarkable novelty. I was growing my own food, and I decided the way to survive the war really was to write at night and in the daytime to turn myself into a smallholder and grow food. Because I now had two, and then three children and so everyone else to feed.

The Country Magazine (6) programme started off with H.E. Street presenting it, Jack Dillon, Francis Dimwitty's name, he was always known as Jack, was the producer and I was the scriptwriter. It meant I travelled really all over England, particularly, but I also went over sometimes to Northern Ireland doing this programme, writing the script and occasionally presenting it if either H.E. Street, or later Ralph Whiteman, who followed if he couldn't do it that particular week sometimes I also produced it. And the thing I look back on now in this context of course, was that Jack Dillon had very early made contact with a refugee from Germany by the name of [Ludwig] Koch who had very good sponsors in Julian Huxley, and in Max Nicholson and in, I think Sir Alexander Stirling of the film industry, who all wanted to get Ludwig helped, and settled in England. He had this strange passion for going out and recording wild birds. And I look back now to what I told you earlier about my very first programme which was called A Nest Of Singing Birds (2), and in that context the producer thought we ought to have the sound perhaps. He hired a music hall performer whose name was Imito, and Imito at the drop of a hat would do a cock pheasant for you, or a skylark, or anything of that sort. And that in 1936 was the only sound, other than natural sound that was available in broadcasting.

So the discovery that this rather strange German exile, who had been working mainly in the music industry, he was a great opera man. His great ambition had been to sing Tristan and he'd been told that he didn't have the physique for an operatic tenor. And so he'd instead, had been recording great opera singers and from that he'd gone on to recording wildlife. Well, we struck up a friendship together. It began really because Dillon liked to end this programme with a country scene. And this, you must realise was a great novelty in radio in those days which really was in very narrow categories which had existed before radio had started. It had taken over the talk, the lecture, the idea of somebody standing up in front of a table with a carafe of water on it, that was the spoken word you see and the book reviews and so on, all those things were done in that kind of way. And then of course, the outside broadcast was an enormously complicated thing with lots of gear and was confined to things like the Derby and so on. So that coming up with just a sound picture was quite a novelty and the one I remember was one that Dillon commissioned to be prepared for Christmas. He had a sort of nice background noises of a farming village, animals and cattle lowing and so on, and then he had church bells sort of sounding across the meadow and then suddenly in the foreground he had a mistle-thrush singing. I was very impressed with this. It seemed to me something that we could do, that books and newspapers and the other media couldn't do. So this was a germ for me, and a very important one.

Later I worked a bit on a war report when the invasion of the mainland Europe started. This war report programme (7) went out every night. Features department were partly involved in it, and I used to spend some nights working on that, really writing links. And part of my training in those days was, I was a chap who was good at writing links, and that was something that had to be done and so I'd sometimes spend the night down in the war report control place writing links. I got to know a bit about the war correspondents and when the war was over the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] realised that war report (7) had really been a

massive success. The war correspondents had become famous names, many of them are faded now, but some I'm sure remain: Richard Dimbleby for one, Winfred Vaughan-Thomas, Frank Gillard and they were all coming back from the various fronts they'd been on. The BBC decided it would like to do a book (8), and in those days it was outside its remit. It may seem strange to BBC Enterprises and so forth, but the BBC was not in the publishing business, of books. So they asked the Oxford University Press if they would publish such a book, and the Oxford Press said, "Yes, they would," and the BBC then wanted someone to edit it. And as I had, as it were, ink on my fingers and at least some experience of putting together a book or two and I'd been working on War Report (7), they said, "Would I like to edit it?" "Yes," I said, "I would." So I then began to arrange to interview the various war correspondents as they came back, their front having ended. I of course, had a great shopping list of questions I wanted to ask them. I can claim, I think, to be the only man who has ever read every single dispatch, from every single war correspondent during the invasion of Europe. And, they didn't come back of course, in a gaggle together, they came back at different times. So I would have perhaps, four or five days with Richard Dimbleby and then I would know that next week Frank Gillard would be home, and I'd have a few days with him.

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2. Moving to Bristol and launching The Naturalist

The way that these things would unaccountably happen, Frank [Gillard] and I somehow hit it off very very quickly. We had some kind of rapport between us, although we are very different sorts of men, with different sorts of backgrounds. But I liked him, and he evidently liked me. And he said he was going down to Bristol to revive regional broadcasting which had virtually closed down of course, during the war. And, he was to be head of programmes and he wanted to know if I would go down and be his features producer. Well, I'd been wondering what I ought to do, and I'd just bought a house at Moreton-on-Thames thinking that I would have to settle down at BBC Broadcasting House somewhere or other on the staff. So I said to him, "I can't go to Bristol I've just bought this house." and Frank of course with that skilfully decisive, but gentle manner of his said, "Well I suppose if you've just bought it you could possibly just sell it as well." Which, there was no real answer to that. As my wife was of a stage family, had practically grown up in a stage hamper, and loved Bristol as of course, a great theatrical city and I love the West-country, we set off. And peacetime started therefore in that way.

And I left behind me Ludwig Koch and Country Magazine (6), and War Report (7) and all these things, and arrived in Bristol to be the features producer. And, talked with Frank as each producer did when he came in, about what sort of assets we had, about what sort of programmes we would do. Clearly, we were not a big population area. We weren't big in sport, we didn't have big football internationals or things of that sort, and we weren't big in light entertainment. On the whole Blackpool or London were the big centres for those sorts of things. But we did have the wonderful west-country. Frank was a born west-country man, I was not. And, I think looking back that that mixture that we had, of those who were deeply west-country by birth and background, and those of us who were from a larger outside world, but with a great love of this particular part it, it was a very good mixture because the natives can become too **parochial** and too inward looking, and the in-comers can have the fury of the convert and the superficial enthusiasm and so on. So we rubbed each other off, I think quite well.

Among other things, Frank suggested that as I was, he knew I was interested in bird-watching and nature generally and so on and so he said, "Why don't you have a go at putting together some kind of nature programme?" There wasn't much going on that front in those days. Very few books were being published, popular journalism was really dreadful. It was awfully sentimental, and so he said, "Have a go, and see what happens." So, I revived quickly of course my connection with Ludwig, who was in London still, and got to know what recordings he had. Because the thing I felt sure about, was that the exclusive gift of radio really was that it could give you natural sound which a book couldn't and a newspaper couldn't, and only going

there yourself in fact could give it to you. And this was a great way of going there yourself. So I could see that this was a big, big asset that I had. Geoffrey Grigson who I had known as the editor of *New Verse* (9), and we 'd had some controversial passages with each other over the years, he was a talks producer in Bristol, and Frank suggested he should introduce the programme and I should write it, select the speakers and so on. Geoffrey came up with a very good suggestion, he said, "I think we should say at the start, that this is going to be", and these words are his, not mine, "that this is going to be a programme of science and observation." And I thought that's great, that's just what I want. So I put that in the billing, in the sub-title. It was going to be a programme of science and observation, and that was what we flew at our mast-head.

Then we had to get a title, that was easy, *The Naturalist* (10). And then I had to think to myself what I was going to do about a signature tune because in those days I don't think there was any series of programmes that came on the air that didn't have a signature tune, it was simply the custom of the medium. And I thought to myself, I thought about various bits of music, and I thought I don't want man-made music because that's not what my programme's about. I want one of Ludwig's recordings, and, what to me is really the voice of the west-country? And I of course had been exploring it and I was very romantic about the west-country in those days. Well, I still am and I thought to myself, the sound that excites me always is that wonderful calling of curlew. Sometimes it's down on the river estuary, a big open flat expanse of shiny mud and pools and so on, and you seem to hear it over long distances. And then I heard it up on moors around Exmoor and so on. So I thought, that's what I want, and Ludwig had a fine recording of the curlew, so I thought, right, that's my trade mark, and so off we started with the calling of the curlew. And, it became nationally very well known, I mean people used to talk to me about it as a very good trade-mark to have.

It did make the point at once, that we were going to take them on some kind of adventure and they were going to go out to wilder country probably than was their home patch, and they were going to hear some sounds that they probably hadn't heard before, and probably would not have been able to hear, except by the radio. I mean, I remember once asking one or two people, "What percentage of the population, do you think has actually heard a nightingale?" They all talk about the nightingale, everyone says it's a beautiful song, but I wonder if we really got the statistics just how many English people had ever heard a nightingale. So this became very much the lead part of the programme. I mean other programmes had experts talking about this and that, but Ludwig's recordings were really a great gift at that point.

3. The expansion of natural history radio programmes

Right, so that was *The Naturalist* (10) launched. I think the network had agreed to take three programmes and see what happened, in fact it ran for so many years I've lost count now, but it became our steady shop window piece. But of course we soon found out that there was a big response nationally, and I think in a way it was the response of a nation that had just come out of a war. Looking back on it, I am more conscious of that now, than I was then. I think we'd seen our country so ravished and damaged and cities burning and all the rest of it, that there was a great wish to sort of get back to England, to have a look at it and see what could be done to restore it and make it the country we wanted it to be. So, I feel I had a running tide in my favour, largely inarticulate but undoubtedly there I think. And so we had to recognise that *The Naturalist* (10) which did everything; I mean, one edition might be on badgers, another edition might be on woodland flowers and another edition still might be on porpoises, so it was such a huge thing to cover. We couldn't deal with the great passion there was, for getting out and bird watching. Which again I think was very typical of the post-war period. So we then created *Birds in Britain* (11) as a parallel programme with James Fisher presenting that, and even that wasn't enough really because we had some recordings of every one, but there were other things besides bird-song to talk about. So I then started one called *Bird-song of the Month* (12), which was explicitly devoted to going to listeners and saying, 'This month there are two or three birds you are quite likely to hear singing. You may not know what they sound like, we're going to play them to you and talk about them a bit. And with a bit of luck, if you go off for a walk tomorrow you will probably hear one or two of them.' And that was *Bird-song of the Month* (12) and it ran for two or three years, very largely of course, on

Ludwig's recordings.

But I did once get some American recordings from Cornell, was a moment when Ludwig went on strike, quite justly, he was **iniquitously** paid by the BBC. We had one of the most unimaginative contracts departments I think I've ever known. They paid so much a minute, one guinea a minute, but of course it doesn't take you long to speak for a minute and to earn a guinea. But to record recordings of a mute swan, that are going to be selected from quite a substantial bulk, and 37 seconds of them are going to be used, so you get a cheque for 12/9d, that is not really a way to foster and encourage one of your major contributors. So it was a running sore. And I, I suppose as a freelance coming in to the BBC, tended to be rather more critical than those who had grown up in the institution, but this was a problem. Then I started the search of course, to see if we couldn't get more good naturalists to think about doing a field recording. And this was developing, I think particularly with a man called Richard Margoschis, who was a great spirit really in the creation of the Wildlife Recording Society I think it was called, the WLRS. Gradually the technology became available, I mean, people began to be able to buy quite good, reasonably mobile, recording equipment. You see, when Ludwig started you had to carry enormous batteries, you had soft wax discs you could only run for three and a half minutes, you had to decide when to drop the needle and hope the bird was going to go on, it was a very difficult method. When for example you went to record white-front geese on the saltings at Slimbridge, the first thing I had to do was hire a horse and cart to carry Ludwig's equipment from the nearest road. Because the batteries alone, they probably weighed a couple of tons I should think, and it was a very cumbersome procedure, and not one for the amateur to do. But gradually of course, things got better and simpler, more miniaturised and more efficient, and there were naturalists who were beginning to see what they could do in recording their own stuff.

So we had the start of an archive building up, and I was always a great believer in competitions, some of my colleagues in the BBC weren't. I'm thinking of play competitions which I sometimes ran, and they would say all that happens is that every failed writer turns out his bottom drawer and sends you the same lot all over again. But, we did get good results quite often from competitions. Of course this was a new thing anyway, so that we worked with this Wildlife Recording Society from quite early days to get more material in that we wanted for that purpose.

I mentioned, the white-front geese of course that used to winter at Slimbridge, and that I'd taken Ludwig over to record, it was to have a very great significance for me later. It began really, one day when I was down there with Ludwig and in those days there was just a small game-keeper's house, that was what was down there, and Ludwig said to me, "There's a rumour going round in London that Peter Scott", who I think lived in a windmill in East Anglia somewhere at that time, "that he's bought the game-keeper's cottage, because he wants to study the white-fronted geese." And, sure enough, it was so, and before very long, I found that Peter was moving in to Slimbridge, in to the game-keeper's cottage and he had some very interesting plans indeed.

4. Early television

And it was just about the moment when the government had decided that television, which had been kept on ice in the first years after the war, was now to be developed. It's perhaps worth saying that television had been purely a London experiment before the war. It had closed down during the war and after the war the BBC had simply re-opened Alexandra Palace and the London service. But it couldn't do anything more nationally unless it got every sort of permit for capital development. Again if you think of a nation coming out of a devastating war, it's perfectly obvious that the government simply had to control the use of basic utilities, basic materials, things like steel. I mean you simply were not allowed to buy steel to make certain types of building because obviously, factories had to be rebuilt, homes had to be rebuilt, so that we had this strange period where if you wanted to see television you went up to London, and you, the small number of sets there,

you found somebody who had one, you could see what was being shown just in London. Anyway, in round about 1953 the government decided the time was now ripe for the BBC to get to work creating a national network and at the same time Sir Winston Churchill thought it might be a good thing to appease the many advertising executives on the back-benches of the Tory [Conservative] party, and his own personal hatred of Sir John Reith and the way he was treated during the miner's strike by saying, "Yes, yes, let's break the BBC monopoly." and so commercial television was about to start. Well these of course were very heady days indeed.

To me it meant, for one thing, that what had been blindingly obvious of course, ever since we got *The Naturalist* (10) going, that it was lovely to have the sound of the curlew but how much better to have the sight of the curlew. So that I was feeling impatient really for television to get out of this little experiment in London and get in to the nation. The price of it was of course, that ITV [Independent Television] was to be set up to compete with it, which was, in the long term no doubt, a very good decision. But it meant that immediately that the new companies really had no option but to bid whatever they must bid to get enough technicians from the BBC, because it was the only reservoir of people with any expertise at all. And the BBC seeing that this was the case, did various things to prepare itself for considerable losses of technical staff, producers, directors and so on. Among the things they did, they decided that they would make a reserve of trained regional producers drawn from radio. And although they wouldn't have any programme making facilities in their regions they would be a reserve who were trained, who could move into any other centre if needed and eventually of course they would have their own programme making facilities.

So it was a quite prudent way of dealing with the shock of a big loss of staff to ITV. I don't know whether the west-region was the first in the field, I've got a feeling, of course Frank [Gillard] was very quick on the ball in those sort of things, I think we may have been the first. There were two television media really, in which you trained in those days. One was outside broadcasts which meant working of course with a big scanner and with the problem of relaying pictures through staging posts back to a transmitter, and working in the big studio at Lime Grove, which meant at its most sophisticated of course would be in drama. So that really you went up to London, either to Wembley to train for outside broadcasts, which Nicky Crocker did, or, in my case, as I was on the whole a drama documentary type producer, I went to drama in Lime Grove. And when you got through this attachment you had quite a long training course with all the different departments, design, scenery, costume, all putting their 'penneth' in to train us to understand how their work was done. Then eventually we got into doing some directing ourselves, running a production and so on, and I —, Michael Barry was head of drama in those days, and Michael was very much in the English theatrical tradition, so that television was similarly, very much the child of English theatre, rather than having much connection with the film industry.

That came later on when Sidney Newman replaced Michael Barry, and I'll perhaps come to that later. But, Michael was essentially the theatre tradition. And of course the BBC was a monopoly in, virtually, in the early stages. He did some very courageous things which are now entirely forgotten. I mean he put on a full-scale production of *Peer Gynt* (13) with Peter Ustinov playing Peer. He put on an uncut version of O'Neil's *Strange Interlude* (14), which I mean practically corpsed the nation one Sunday night, those who weren't interested in O'Neil. I found him a very **congenial** man to work for. I did one direction as assistant director to a producer, until I sort of got the hang of how you directed, and then I had, I don't know how long it was, it must have been more than a year, I did four or five productions. I did a Rodney Ackland I remember.

It was sort of a mad world because so many people had been drawn away from the BBC that, if you were still standing, you were working you know, it really was like that. On one occasion I'd just finished a production on the Sunday night, I came in on the Monday morning, there was a message from Michael Barry with a package, and inside the package was the script of a three act play, and he said rehearsals start at 10:30 at a boys club in Edgware, you are directing it. I hadn't read it when I got down there. So I thought the thing to do was to say it would be nice if we all read it right through, so we all get familiar with the general feel of it,

and I found out what it was about. When you had your session with designers and so on —, I've been thinking about a wonderful sort of slang, which I think has gone out. Would you know what 'peeling off and swizzling' meant? You wouldn't, no. Well you see the cameras were far more sensitive, and if you had somebody with a pronounced check, rather like my shirt, the whole thing began to 'swizzle'. It just vibrated like this, do you see. And then, if you went too abruptly from one contrast, I mean through a great range of contrast, if you went straight from a largely white screen to a largely black screen it did literally appear to peel off. The top of the picture just simply came over and the whole lot just went, you know, you lost it. So it was quite hazardous. And you had, you had three cameras that were operational, and you had strict instructions that if you lost one you were not to come off the air, but to do the best you could.

These were, the general repertoire was the London West End three act play. They lasted one and a half hours, you had only one interval. And they put on one of those little interval things that the rest of you remembered, and it was an absolute killer. It certainly was to somebody my sort of age and background, because I soon learned. You see you write your camera script, you had to learn it, I mean I learned a much bigger part than any of the actors learned. Because the moment you dropped your head, you lost your preview, I mean the script was there but you weren't, you'd look at it in rehearsal you see, but you couldn't look at it on transmission. You just had to be watching your preview and your transmission, and I mean, if it was a fairly dramatic thing and you were cutting fast it really was quite something. So anyway, so I did my stint up there and I mean I enjoyed it but, I was pretty flaked out because I kept some radio going at the same time.

There was great talk of ambidexterity and Frank was very keen on it. And the idea that we were moving into a world where a producer was, and you see there was this great half truth, if you had a producer who's got a specialised group of contributors and specialised knowledge and the kind of television he's going to do is fairly straightforward, he should be able to be ambidextrous if you've trained him properly. But if you're wanting really very advanced television with highly sophisticated techniques, well I mean ambidexterity has largely died out, but there was one famous night that Frank's often talked about, when I was rehearsing this play. You just had, I think, often two days in the studio with cameras and lights, otherwise you were out in these boys clubs where you just rehearsed moves and lines and so on, and checked your shots of course all the time. But, you only had a very short time in the studio. And Frank turned up with Ian Jacob who was Director General then, and I was sort of prime exhibit, because he'd brought Jake [Ian Jacob] down there so that he could see that I was going to direct this play in a few hours time that evening you see. And, according to the Radio Times (1) I was producing Ludwig Koch on the third programme. The programme of course had been pre-recorded, but it was a strong card in the great game of ambidexterity.

Television was of course my great excitement then, and there was all the radio still there and that was what I had really had built up and that was my ultimate asset. Of course, I'd no guaranteed future in television at this point. It was very difficult coping with such output, and I tried very hard to get an assistant. But the establishment decided that the features producer at Bristol should rein in his enthusiasm and not do so many programmes, and stop bothering them with requests for an assistant, which they had no intention of providing. So Frank, as ever resourceful, thought perhaps we might find some other way of doing it. And he said, "Have you got any views about any of the studio managers we have?" And I said, "Well yes I have, because there's one of them, a young chap called Tony Soper, who is a rather interesting case." It began to occur to me that whenever I was doing one of The Naturalist (10) programmes, on the Grand-Banks, I always got this young man Tony Soper to the point where this seemed to be beyond coincidence. So I taxed him with it one day and I said, "Tony, its very nice to see you again, but it does strike me as odd, you work on a rota system in studio managers, but somehow the rota always seems to end up with you coming on to me, you see." I said, "Is it really just a coincidence or are you fiddling the rotas?" And he said, "I'm fiddling the rotas." Well I said, "That's very nice, why are you doing that?" Well, he said, "You're doing the kind of programmes I like, I'm very interested in naturalist programmes and that's where my heart is, and of course I enjoy working on them, and the others don't mind at all, its all one to them so they just let me fiddle the rotas a bit."

So Frank said, "Well fine, so we're not hard up for 'effort' in studio managers, they're not over worked, or anything. I think what I'll do, I'll second Tony to you." I mean, that began really an absolutely vital support I had in this very choppy water between radio and television and ambidexterity, you know. Trying to do both at the same time and all the rest of it. We were very much on the same wavelength, we understood each other very well and I was always happy to leave Tony holding the shop if I wasn't there, and that was how we really got by.

5. Working for ITV on the side

Going back to Peter Scott now, perhaps I should do. Because I think I last mentioned simply that he'd bought the game-keeper's cottage and settled in. That now I'd finished at Lime Grove, I'd done my full period of attachment there and I'm coming back to Bristol. There's one rather amusing little aside here, that in coming back to Bristol I realised I was going to go out of production as a television director. That I didn't want to happen, because I'd sweated blood to master, as I had tried to do, the craft of this new medium, and I wanted to keep my hand in. But nobody was going to let me direct a play in Bristol, that was a certainty. So I did something entirely wicked and treasonable in BBC eyes in those days. Of course there was really immense hostility and jealousy over ITV, and that you were working for anyone but the BBC would have been terrible. But I had a friend in an agency, you realise if it was known you had directed you were a target all the time, I mean I had other offers while I was on attachment in London, you know, leave Bristol, come up here and commercial this and commercial that, and all the rest of it. But I had this friend who was doing commercials for a dreadful American beer that was brewed in New York, and they'd hired Douglas Fairbanks Junior to present this, it was a la—. It makes you wonder about commercials nowadays, 35 seconds and they are up and over, aren't they? But, Douglas Fairbanks Junior, I think he had two and a half minutes or so. They wanted a story, and he also wanted someone to write a camera script.

So I did this deal in my leisure time, I would write one or two commercials for Douglas Fairbanks Junior on the understanding that no-one in the BBC was going to know about this. But it seemed to me very prudent, that having had this long training in television drama, it was silly just to go rusty. So that's what I did. He had to have a New York story, it was a New York Brewery, and I ransacked the Bristol Library for any book that had any kind of story, that had little bits of New York history, which would give me some kind of little yarn. I remember, one day, doing one on Tammanee hall, the Irish immigrants and so on. They seemed to like to have that sort of thing. It all seems a very remote kind of advertising now. But of course Douglas Fairbanks Junior was a great pull, just to have him talking about New York I suppose.

6. Developing natural history television programmes

So anyway, that was just an interlude, but much more promising, was the appearance of Peter [Peter Scott] when he finally moved into the cottage and we quickly got to know each other, and to talk about things. He knew that I'd been working in television and so naturally we talked about when it was going to come, and how are we going to face it and what are we going to do with it. He was at that time, he was just starting the Wildfowl Trust [Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust] and to make money for it, he was doing big tours of the town halls of big cities. He found this was the best way to raise money and he'd worked out a very good one-man show, really. He had bits of his own film, which he had shot on his various expeditions. Not much of it, but anyway it was enough to make a nice garnish to show the audience. And then he'd got very skilful at doing quick, very quick draughtsmanship on a big drawing board, of things he was talking about. I mean, just illustrating two or three things, ripping that bit of paper off and doing another one, and that also was very good visually. So we had some film, we had Peter doing this drawing board business and then he could also talk. I mean he didn't have a guest on his town hall thing, but if we did it on television there was no reason

why he shouldn't have a guest to talk with as well.

So this looked like the germ of something. The problem was I needed to see it and we went through our diaries, and he was always up somewhere like Newcastle. There wasn't time for me to get up there and get back, and it looked as if we were never going to find a date when we were both going to be able to be in the same place. At that time my eldest son was at Bristol Grammar School and John Gerrat I knew very well as the Headmaster. I said to John Gerrat, "If I told you, that I could persuade Peter Scott to show his one-man show to the school, would you welcome it?" and John said, "Of course I should.", do you see? And I said, "If," I said, "my only condition was that you allowed me to sit at the back and see it, would that be possible?" "Oh yes," he said, "that's fine." So, we put the show on for Bristol Grammar School, and I sat in the back to see what it all amounted to and began to think what I could do in the studio with it you see. Then the next thing was to revive my old acquaintance with Cecil McGivern and say, "I think I've got something that television could have a look at." and I'd kept in touch with him a bit. I had at some point, I can't think exactly when, at some point he'd fixed up a year or two previously for me to go up to Alexandra Palace and just have a look at what it was like. I remember I'd seen Richard Dimbleby doing his weekly show, just to London, as it was then you see. And I remember, it was one of the last of the great London 'pea-soupers' when we came out that night, it was absolutely blacked out with fog. And Richard said, "Where are you trying to get to?" "Well", I said, "I want to get back to the West End somewhere." and he said, "Well I'm driving back to, wherever it was, and I can give you a lift as far as Marble Arch, and you can get on the Underground there." And so we had quite a talk, I was quite fascinated and he said, "I realised I could go back into radio and have a whale of a time." You know, because of having been a war correspondent and all the rest of it. But he said, "I decided that television was the future and that I had to get into it right at the start, make all my mistakes when nobody was there looking and master how to do it." It explained to me why I had totally lost all sight of him you see, he had really quite deliberately, as a long-term plan, that's what he'd done.

So, now I'm back with Peter Scott aren't I? Yes, no this is McGivern, I beg your pardon. So, McGivern said yes, he thought he'd take three. It was rather like *The Naturalist* (10) all over again. And Frank [Gillard] of course as head of programmes, was involved. He'd talked to McGivern about it, and he could make me available and so on and so forth. And it was sensible use of Peter Scott now he was in our region you see. So it was decided that we would do three programmes (15), see how we went. And the first thing was to think what film we had and then we'd think what else we had, we had Peter doing his drawing and I thought I'd make the set the same as the big room at Slimbridge. And I got the designer to go up and look at it and make it like that. There was a question as to whether we'd have somebody else in the studio with him, and so on. And the important point here, really, is that film was a relatively minor ingredient, at that stage, really for two reasons: You see I'd got used to the idea that in radio, if there was a subject you wanted to do a *Naturalist* (10) about, there was no problem. If you wanted to do migration, or the birds of Nepal, or whatever you wanted to do, you found out who could talk well about them, you wrote a script and you did it. But in television, if you wanted to do a programme about migration, you had to show birds flying. Whatever you wanted to do it about, the first thing was, had you got any pictures? If you hadn't got any pictures, you could forget it because there was no programme there.

That was a great lesson to learn, at a very early stage. So, it was a case of building what we had around Peter's bits of film. And sadly of course he'd, as so many people did in those days, he'd shot, not only on what was regarded as the amateur gauge of 16mm, but he'd shot at the amateur 'happy holiday snaps' rate of 16 frames to the second, instead of 25 frames to the second. That meant you had quite a bill for making a 'stretch' print if you wanted to use some of it. But, film was not going to be a large part, because the allocation I had was half a day of one assistant film editor in London. He would wax the film and see that there weren't any serious breaks and tears in it, and that would be about the extent of what we should have.

So we had to have other things as well, and this is where my drama training came in you see. I was full of interesting moves to make the thing nice and animated and get new things going on. When, for example, we

came to Woodpeckers (16), Sielmann's film only lasted for 18 minutes and we had thirty minutes on the air. Among other things, we got a skeleton of a woodpecker's head, showing the groove right over the top where this great muscle bangs, goes, and we got James Fisher to come in and talk about it and he had to get up and move over and show and so on. Peter did his drawings, as well as showing Heinz's film. And that really was the kind of television that McGivern stood for, and Gerald Beadle when he went up to become Director. It was BBC policy that television, and these were the magic words, 'Television was an electronic medium live in its own right, and not a branch of the film industry.'

I well remember a meeting of programme controllers programme board, at which Jack Muirhead who was the head of film department, had said he wanted his department to make a film about something or other and McGivern fairly slapped him down and said, "Look Jack, you must understand, you are a servicing department, you are not a programme originating department." Now those are very powerful words, and that was undoubtedly the rule at that point. The export business was going to be done by tele-recordings. And of course, for anyone who's lost their history of television, a little matter of inventing video tape was still some ways ahead of course, and the industrialisation of the industry would come when you had total, easy recording and you didn't have to work live, at the hours when the audience wanted the programmes. So live it had to be, and it helped us in one way, in that it was classified, the programme that we did, as an illustrated talk. BBC contracts, in fact the whole of the BBC, had gone into television absolutely unchanged, with the whole apparatus that it used in radio.

So the production unit in television was one producer, one secretary, one stopwatch, and they could do the best they could in television with that, but that was the production team. And the same way when they looked at contracts for outside contributors. Radio had talks, and sometimes there would be little dramatic insets to illustrate them. So television didn't have anything like the later Look (17) programmes, it had illustrated talks and some film could be included in that, and happily there was no rule about how high the proportion might be. But, we began on that basis, and we had to stay on that basis for quite a while. So we put together these first three, and I mean names that come back to me now; Ernest Neale, the badger man, he had some film (18), Humphrey Hewer had some film, he had some film of seals (19) I remember, and he had some other film, Dick Bagnall-Oakley. I felt we were tending to find it easier to get film of birds in nests feeding young and practically nothing else, so I was keen that we did a programme called Away from the Nest (20), and Dick set to work really to try to get that sort of material, but it was never going to fill the whole thirty minutes. It was always going to be a burst of illustration, with Peter talking. And of course Peter, there was no dubbing, Peter had to comment live on the film which he'd seen run through on the monitor perhaps two or three times during the afternoon at rehearsal. We hadn't seen it before, and he remembered what shots were coming up next and commented as best he could.

So it was very primitive in those sorts of ways. Look (17) was the title I wanted and what pleased me very much was a rather old adversary, in a way, Grace Wyndham-Goldie who was Assistant Head of Television Talks and was a great sort of mandarin figure in London on television. She'd been radio critic of The Listener (21) before that and there was no great love lost between us. But she said to me one day, "The one thing I've never forgiven you for, you've got the best title for a television programme, and it could never have been got that I was so cross that we didn't think of it first." Of course I like short, monosyllabic titles and Look (17) I thought for television, you know I thought it must be that. Dear Peter said "There's an American magazine called Look (22), like Time (23) and Life (24)", and all the rest of it, do you see, and he said, "We can't use that." He's quite wrong of course, there is no copyright on titles, but I had a difficulty with him. To this day I can't remember what those first three programmes were called. They probably each had an individual title for them. Well you may even know, but there it is.

We had wonderful placing, because we were on a Saturday night and sometimes we were before Benny Hill, sometimes we were after Benny Hill, and that was really a very good audience time. Benny Hill was an old friend, because he was very much a regional artist, you see. I'd first come across Benny Hill as a

Southampton milkman who was making a name as a stand up comic, and we'd invented a touring radio show with Benny and with Johnny Morris, oh as early as about 1950 probably. So we had a sort of private game, whoever was on first, tried to end the programme with some sort of payoff line that the next one up would pick up you see, and of course Benny was much cleverer at that than Peter and I were. But it was cheery and club like and easy going in a way in those days, I suppose, because it was a monopoly, because it was so new, because we were all of us feeling our way and trying things out. And of course you see, the listeners were tremendous participants, they'd telephone in all the time talking about shows.

And the same way afterwards. I remember one programme I did, just a solo one off, of Peter in thirty minutes painting one of his paintings (25). It was a typical marshy scene of ducks flying in and so on you see and, I mean we had a steady stream of calls into the control cubicle offering thousands of pounds to be paid to charity, or whatever. I grew up very much used to that, that you were as close to the audience as that. And the other thing was of course that sometimes colleagues, or your boss would ring up after, and it was in all those sorts of ways much more easy going and informal. But anyway we did the three and that was fine. And then, for me the scene of course now began to change because in 1955 Frank Gillard went off to London to be number two to Sir Lindsay Wellington, who was head of radio. Looking back on it I realised what an extraordinary stable decade we'd had really from the end of the war in 1945 to 1955, most of the main producers, people like Owen Reede, Pat Beech and so on, we'd all been there for about ten years as a very stable team. Knowing each other very well, playing into each others hands very well, auditioning people together and so on.

7. Setting up the BBC Natural History Unit

In 1955 Frank [Gillard] went off and I was not thinking actually of applying, because I was so busy in production. But anyway I was pushed a bit, and I did apply and I became Head of Programmes. Of course I then realised it was crazy of me not to bring that together, because I hadn't realised as much as I should have done, that in the BBC, at any level in the BBC, there are some levers you can pull, and that there are other levers that you touched at your peril. And as head of programmes I could really start talking about making a proper unit, instead of begging to have a studio manager lent to me under the counter. That's what we ought to be doing, that's what we ought to be doing, and several things came together then.

One is a strange little anecdote on its own. My office was at the end of the row of the BBC's Whiteladies frontage, and next to it was a house which was full of Polish refugees in those days, and so we used to get a lot of Polish jolly music coming through the wall. That's how I knew they were Polish refugees. And in the garden at the back, I suppose the Polish refugee thing had been requisitioned by the council, you see of course during the Blitz, the council had requisitioned all sorts of properties, for obvious reasons. And at the back of the garden had been requisitioned for the Inland Revenue and they had all these temporary huts built into the garden, and the time was coming now you see that we were getting back to the mood of the Festival of Britain, the war was now behind us, and so on, now let's think about the future. So the Inland Revenue were going to leave their huts, and we meanwhile, had acquired the garden. Well the lease required them to remove the huts and to restore the garden, which was going to be a hell of a nuisance to them, and quite an expense. So they said to us, "Would we have any use for the huts?" If so, "would we accept them as a gift in lieu of the obligation they would have to restore the garden?" And, I bring this story in at this point because it brings in Pat Beech.

You see I became Head of Programmes, Pat became Assistant Head of Programmes. It was a wonderful match if I may take the vanity of saying so because we were very different sorts of people altogether. Pat had among other things had experience with a film unit in Burma during the war. I'd had no experience film-making whatsoever, it was a closed world to me. Pat at once saw, of course, that if we got our hands on these huts, these were ideal as cutting rooms. By then we were both realising that we had to get more and

more into film. The dream of the electronic medium, and the illustrated talk was on its way out. Film was becoming bigger and bigger and bigger in every episode of Look (17) that we did. And it was becoming very hard to find and to get, but we had to be on site with our editing process. So that was an enormous asset really that we had. But the other was that we were getting a strong response to the Look (17) programme.

And I mentioned earlier in a different context the woodpeckers (16) film, but it is just worth saying I think, what the woodpecker film (16) did for us. Just as I look back on Ludwig's recordings as really a tremendous bonus that I had in the beginning of radio, the woodpecker film (16) was a tremendous bonus. And it came out of partly, of what I think of as a right strategy that I had. I'd been an editor, I'd been a literary editor, used to seeing people with talent, that interested me, getting them working in a group and in the radio days with the Naturalist (10) I had made enormous use of James Fisher, of Bruce Campbell, of Peter Scott, of Maxwell Knight, of people like that, they were sort of antennae who told me of all sorts of things that were going on. And the same thing, of course, was true in television. Now, Peter had gone to an ornithological congress in Switzerland, Berne, and he'd seen this woodpecker film (16) which was made by the Bavarian equivalent of the Ministry of Education who employed Heinz [Sielmann]. Peter said to me, "You must get hold of this film, woodpecker film (16), it's an absolute smasher." So I then got in touch with the Institut Für Film Und Bild in Munich, and said, "Can we see this film, can we show it?" And when we showed it, it was so totally new, so advanced in terms of television, partly it was professionally shot on 35mm, so it was a beautifully made piece of film.

But of course it was really the first example that we were going to keep stressing, that what we could do now in television was to start adding to scientific knowledge by showing some things that had never been seen before, and that really was a tremendous plus value. It wasn't just holiday snaps, or easy entertainment, it was back to our science and observation at the beginning of The Naturalist (10) in a way. The woodpecker, showing the inside of the tree, the nestlings in the nest inside the tree, really took the nation by storm. And of course it was still a time when the BBC had virtually the whole of the television audience. The supervisor of the telephone exchange at Lime Grove rang me up the next morning and she said, "You may be interested to know our switch board was totally blocked last night for three hours after your programme came off." And I've said to you before, the extent to which the audience participated you see and this was what happened. People saw this thing and they thought this is out of this world, and they went to the phone, as they instinctively did in those days. From that point really, I don't think we ever looked back, because McGivern was very easy after that you know, he at once accepted the series as a series. And anyway, we were in business with Look (17), if with nothing else.

Int: You mentioned another reaction to the woodpecker film (16), from Granada.

DH: Yes, I was always going to face this problem of getting film in a very scarce market, and I knew how good woodpecker (16) was and the next morning when I came in, I had this nice message from the telephone operator, but I had another rather convoluted message which didn't seem to identify where it had originated from, and I traced it back rather carefully. And it came, I can't think of his name now, anyway a very nice man he was in those days at Granada, it wasn't Bernstein it was you know the other one. It was Granada, were very interested to know where this man lived, and did the BBC happen to have his address? Because they would like to write to him you see. I got on the phone to McGivern and told him this and I said, "Can I please get on a plane to Munich as quickly as possible and sign this up?" and of course, McGivern was quick to say, "Yes." So off I went and got to Munich. Found Heinz, absolutely stunned by what had been happening, people recognising him at the customs next day going back home and so on, you know. "You're 'the woodpecker man' last night, aren't you?" So he was most taken by the effect of British television on him.

It was a very strange arrangement you see, because he was an employee of a very bureaucratic German ministry. In fact it was the federal states of Germany, he was employed by the Bavarian Ministry of Education to make these teaching films for the sixth forms. He made one or two of these and so I made a deal with

them for the lot and that we would have exclusively the first options. To me that was a tremendous asset because you want I think in anything, you want every now and again, you want a really big hammer-blow otherwise it just settles down to a nice steady go. And every now and again I could come up with a completely new Sielmann series, he'd been to Indonesia, or he'd been to the Arctic, or he'd been to the Galapagos (26) or somewhere and it set the tone for the whole of that winter series. It was really invaluable. I mean, for that reason it was one of the few things that I always kept in my own hands, until I finished, really, I always had some control over the Sielmann contract, because I felt it was so important for us.

Int: The early films you mentioned were all recorded in London. Can you remember the transition from London to when you started actually doing these programmes in Bristol, was it the start of the Look series (17) in 1955? Which is probably when you moved up stairs actually. Can you say about that transition?

DH: What I remember of course is the horrors of **genlock**. You see, when finally we got a kind of a studio in Bristol by de-rigging our outside-broadcast set-up. I mean, what the west region was given was not a television studio, but a scanner, an outside-broadcast scanner. And, we were allowed to de-rig it into our big music studio and we could do, once a month, a regional 30 minute programme. But we could also use it, increasingly, to put programmes into the network, rather than having to go up to London. But the awful price was something called '**genlock**', which meant that every time you went over to film and every time you came back from film, you slipped a frame. And it looked awful on the screen, I used to hate it. But I can't remember exactly when it happened, no I can't. But the moment you began to talk about that, the word '**genlock**' was forming in my mind. I used to complain and say, "Why can't we get proper equipment down here", and there it was.

8. Politics in the BBC

DH: The obvious date for me to talk about next must be 1955, when a huge change happened in my circumstances. First of all Frank Gillard went off to London to be number two to Lindsay Wellington as Director of Radio. This was a very good move for Frank, I know that his ultimate ambition was that he wanted to be controller of west region when the day came that Gerald Beadle retired. But in those days you could never become controller of the region if you had never left that region. At some point in your BBC career, you had to have been in some other part of the BBC, which was probably quite a good rule. You weren't allowed to come in as a postal boy and thirty years later become regional controller without having ever left the building. That was the rule, that was pretty certainly why Frank had decided to go off and work with Lindsay, you see I mean it was a very good experience for him. He was right at the centre of things. And I then settled down with Gerald Beadle as my controller, with the loss of Frank who'd always been my boss, and we'd always had a very good understanding and now he was gone, and Gerald Beadle was. I would call him one of the pioneer 'pros'. He'd been right through the BBC in almost every capacity. He'd been an announcer, he'd been a director of staff in the administration, there was practically nothing you could mention that he hadn't at some time or another done, but he was of the old-guard with both the virtues and the drawbacks of that.

But I got on very well with him. Funnily enough Frank never objected to this. Which I'm surprised now I think of it, but for some reason, I think I'd, I think I'd misunderstood the rules when I joined the BBC. Every year I sent Gerald as a regional controller of the BBC a general statement of my total output, how many programmes I'd done and so on, thinking he'd be interested in it. Afterwards I realised I should not have done. I should have sent it to Frank and let him pass it on. But I'd always had this relationship quite close with Beadle and we now talked about what my new regime was going to be. He was very encouraging, he said, "I want you to go your own way in the job. Frank's been very good and effective, but you are not expected to come and be a Frank mark two necessarily, see what you want to do".

It seemed to me, I suppose so much was happening, it was a bit of an obscure period. Of course I don't know when I began finally sitting down with a sheet of paper saying "I think we ought to have a natural history unit. I'm now going to write down on a piece of paper how many secretaries, how many producers, how many assistant film editors", I'm sure it wasn't as clear cut as that. But I had a ramshackle army at that point, I mean I had Tony who was a seconded studio manager, I had, I mean, when I was too busy to direct *Look* (17) I passed it over to Brandon Acton Bond who was really a drama radio producer on attachment and it held together alright, it was a totally un-planned thing you know, it was a case of living from hand to mouth. We've got this programme next week, what are we going to do? I can remember one night driving in a Landrover and I can remember driving back from Lime Grove with my secretary Mavis and Tony Soper my assistant, and I remember saying to Tony, "What do you think we could be doing for the next edition, have you got any idea of anything that's around?" So it was as ramshackle as that and that was not at all what Pat [Beech] would have wanted. But I had the fixed idea obviously, that after ten years of *The Naturalist* (10) and the other radio programmes, and now the experience I'd had up at Lime Grove in television, nothing was really going to stop me from trying to do in television what I had done in radio, and there I'd done it very largely by allowances with people.

I mean *Birds In Britain* (11) didn't take me very long to put together because I agreed with James Fisher that the subject would be such and such, he said the two or three best people would be so and so, and I would say, "Well why don't we have so and so, who were very good last time?", and he said "OK" and I said, "Well, do get the script in before Saturday because Mavis has to type the damn thing, and you're always late with it". And that was how we worked and then I would go down and direct rehearsals you see. That is the only way you can keep up that sort of output, so it was natural to me to really I think, to think what sort of resources do I need to bring that sort of thing together? I can't go on with Brandon and Tony struggling to keep the output going somehow, and going down to a studio when I can get away. I think force of circumstances probably pushed it onto me bit by bit, I don't think I had a great stroke of lighting and a great period of inspiration when I said "Ah yes, we want this, and we want that". I think it was a case of thinking, how for god's sake are we going to get through the next month?

That was rather the mood of the period, so it was lovely to feel I was in a position where I really could set out a plan, and with Pat you see there was always Pat saying, we must be practical. He had this sharp sense of what was possible, what was practical, what we could somehow get out of the corporation if we got the engineers to conspire with us a bit, to break one or two rules here and there, and that was how we set about it. But when it came to really writing the thing you see —, by then the most extraordinary change had taken place with my controller because, now I forget now, whether this is on the video or only in talk, about going up because of McGivern?

Int: No only on talk

DH: Only on talk, right, shall I do that now? Well, the great change which had come over the region was that Gerald Beadle, who had seemed absolutely firmly fixed for his last whenever it was, two to three years before he was due for retirement, he would stay as Regional Controller, I mean there was nowhere obvious for him to go. He was never going to be Director General at that age. Frank had gone off to London and so we looked very stable.

But there was a problem in London, and that problem was Cecil McGivern, who was becoming a difficult leader in television, because he was becoming un-predictable and un-reliable. Management were worried that making him the director of television when Sir George Barnes retired, George Barnes was an old sweat from Broadcasting House in the thirties, he'd been director of talks and so on in radio, he'd finished out his

years as director of television purely as an administrator, with McGivern as the programme man. He retired, and by then of course, McGivern so dominated television that everyone was expecting that he would follow on as director, but the board of management, I think prudently, could see that something dangerous was happening with McGivern and they were very reluctant to give him total control. So they did a very surprising thing, they took Beadle from Bristol for his last two or three years and said, that they wanted to put him in as a man of great experience of BBC life, and all the rest of it, to civilise McGivern, to make him keep appointments and not be in some distant land when everybody thought he was in Lime Grove, and to groom him really, to take over as director of television in the sort of manner that the board of management would have liked. So, to everyone's astonishment, suddenly the announcement came that Beadle was now Director of Television.

And it's this that partly makes it so difficult for me to remember this period. Half the time I'm trying to remember when it was that Frank came back. Which obviously had not been foreseen at all, and totally changed the controller/ head of programmes relationship, moreover. All I just know is that as 1955 wore on, I was somehow spending more and more time, on thinking about what our future was to be. How we were to get really solidly into television, with enough on site facilities, you see this was always the problem. We had to go up to Lime Grove, we had to just put up with any assistant film editor that someone gave us, which was probably the last person at the end of a line, and we needed to get our own control of these things in Bristol. We knew they would come sooner or later, because the long-term capital plan was there and Bristol was one day going to be a production centre, and was to have **telecine** one day and not the dreaded **Genlock** which slipped a frame every blessed time you went over to it, and every time you came back from it. Which was a great way of destroying the atmosphere of a piece of film if it wasn't a very long one, and I know I was putting in some little refinements... It was a very expansive period, it's worth just remembering that.

My generation in the BBC was extremely lucky, because, we were in an expanding world in resources and in finances. You see the television licence money was going up every time a new television transmitter opened somewhere in the United Kingdom. Suddenly there was a transmitter in the west of Scotland or a transmitter in Wales, and there was another rush of people to take up licences, so that I was never very conscious of budgets. It's a funny thing to say now, but I don't think Frank ever gave me a budget as a radio producer. And when I was doing Saturday Night Theatre (27), I thought who I wanted to play the lead and I got on to that person's agent and said, "is he or she, free". It didn't occur to me to think that I ought to consider what the fee might be, I wouldn't know what the fee would be in fact. That was very important to the [BBC] Natural History Unit, the fact that it happened to strike that moment in the history of the 'Corp', when, as never before and never since, it was seeing money really rolling in large, large quantities.

And what I always think of, as symptomatic, is that as I wrote in, in this little pet thing of mine, that I should have the right to give a bursary to someone working in another country, in television, who I thought would gain by coming and having an attachment to our unit in Bristol. I suppose having had all these chaps attached to me in our office next to the Polish refugees, I was sold on the idea of attachments. But as soon as I went out into the world I realised we were miles ahead in those days of everybody, we really were. There was nobody in Europe who was anywhere near us in terms of television, and the same in the English speaking world you see. So we gave one bursary to a Canadian, we gave the next bursary to a New Zealander and then everybody forgot about it and my little toy was finally dropped I think. But I felt it was something we had to do. I was really very touched once when I had a visiting Israeli producer who wanted to look at the film library and for some reason I was being her host and showing her round, and she wanted to know about the film library and she said, "You're sitting on all this material. How can I possibly get hold of it, how can I use it? Do you realise what a difference it would make to me and my programme making?" And that really went home to me, I thought if we've got this leadership, we ought to do something about it and we certainly did have the leadership just then without any doubt.



9. David Attenborough and Desmond Morris

Int: When you got as far as proposing for the establishment of the [BBC] Natural History Unit, the post of senior producer was the senior post, can you say something about your thoughts about filling that post because isn't this where there was some consideration of a very bright young man in London, he was also doing travel programmes.

DH: Yes, yes, I'm trying to sort of think about years.

Well now, having got the unit up and running we were in business in television. We were on the other hand, a region and London is always a bit guarded in its way of looking at regions, it doesn't want a competitor for one thing, and the talks department in London did not greatly welcome the arrival of this unit in Bristol. So a meeting was summoned, to bring together Desmond Hawkins from Bristol and David Attenborough from the talks department London. We were to attend this meeting with somebody very exalted, I don't know who it was, it may have been McGivern, or it may have been somebody of that sort of calibre. It was thought that they should nip in the bud any kind of dangerous **inter-nicene** war that might develop between Bristol and London you see. I've laughed about this often enough since with David, because it reminded me of a famous moment when the Pope called together the King of Spain and the King of Portugal, because this business of exploration was getting out of hand with chaps like Columbus and so on. And he decided, he'd better divide up the world between these two great Roman Catholic powers, so there shouldn't be any misunderstanding and nasty fighting. So he gave the east to Portugal and he gave the west of the Atlantic to Spain you see, countries they had never seen or knew anything about yet, but he thought it was a very good move, as a Pope, that he should make. We found at this meeting that we were going to have the same sort of division you see. The Pacific to Attenborough, the Atlantic to Hawkins, and then they can sort of keep apart and not clash with each other and so on. But you see, we were really in totally different businesses, we both knew in ourselves that we weren't going to clash.

Because, let me just analyse the two people because this is really quite interesting. David thought of himself as a producer and as a man creating a unit, the Travel and Exploration Unit, all of which was a great mistake. He's an inspired and brilliant performer, a wonderful front man. I thought of myself, when I started in broadcasting as a broadcaster, a performer and so on. But really, my talent was in the background, always turning the spotlight onto Peter Scott or Heinz Sielmann or whoever, and creating a unit so we were very different, and we both mis-understood what our talents were in the early days, I think. Anyway, that's how I see us both you see and when you look at David's history as a producer it was pretty disastrous because he was put in charge, I suppose by Mary Ellen of George Cansdale and that dreadful programme in which Cansdale stood up and unmentioned, un-named, beneath the salt keepers handed animals in to him (28) and, did you ever see any of these? Well you know what I am talking about, I mean it wasn't the greatest wildlife programme you ever saw was it? But, that was what David was doing, and his interests really were the London Zoo and his great liking for exploration and travel, particularly anthropology. Now, when I first talked to David about coming to Bristol he was very depressed with the talks department and was thinking of taking at least a year out and doing a degree course on anthropology at London University. That was a great interest of his, and when you think, we talked about Zoo Quest (29) you see. But when he went to Bali he didn't go to Bali for the animals, he went to Bali for the folk customs, for the dancing, for all that sort of thing. So David's interests were really quite different ones from mine. I mean mine was a crusading one to get the people and the wildlife on terms with each other if you like. David's was much more a study of anthropological subjects and the fact that he just happened to be involved with London Zoo, and he'd gone off as you know, with Jack Lester on his first Quest (29), not to perform at all, but to be in charge of it. And Jack Lester died and somebody had to do something on the expedition, and David did it, and that's when he first began to show what his real talent was. He was marvellous at doing that you see. But you look at his travel and exploration unit and it never got anywhere and it just withered away. Partly because, there was nothing he could do himself in it. He never got enough money for the people, I mean what he used to do,



some university group would be going off to some place and they would say could he let them have some cans of film, or borrow a Bolex or something, and so he would do that, and set them up and off they would go, and he would wait see what came back from it. But that, is simply was not his talent at all, and so nothing really came of that. And the Zoo Quest (29) business. I mean, where we didn't clash really, was the sort of things that the unit was now developing in Look (17) and so on, was far removed from what he and Charles Lagus were doing. There was no clash, we got on very happily together, there was no problem at all, we really had an unbroken friendship. I can't remember ever having any squabble of any sort with David. And I always felt that it was another world, another thing, you know, there was tons of room for both of us, tons of room for both of us, so I've gone on a bit about that, but it is quite important I think, really.

And I mean going back to the setting up of the unit with a head and so on. Nicky Crocker, who as I've already said, went up as one of the first with me to Lime Grove to learn television. He'd become a very good television 'pro' as an outside broadcast producer, and I was casting round for too much really. I wanted somebody who was a big name in the biological sciences who knew all about television and was going to be an absolute wizard at running the unit and so on, and that was going to be almost impossible to find. I began to realise that what I really needed, because I was opening the shop as it were, with a very new staff of keen, young, new producers with no real experience under their belt, in many cases, but with promise, with talent and so on, and I thought what the unit is going to need most of all, is a television 'pro' who could simply keep pouring on them, his sort of angle of how he sees what they're are doing, of what the unit should be aiming at. Of what sort of standards it should achieve. Of what really is the kind of television we are trying to create. And, Nicky was the wise old hand at that. So that was the first one. But then the, Bruce [Campbell] came after Nicky, did he? Yes, that's right, I'm not sure if Bruce was my first choice then. I'm not sure when I was trying to get Desmond Morris.

Int: It was about that time.

DH: Anyway, the two big fish that I never landed were Desmond Morris and David Attenborough. Let me just deal quickly with each of them. Desmond Morris, I first knew as curator of mammals at the London Zoo and of course he and David, David with his zoo connection were very close friends. Desmond Morris, funnily enough, I had given his first radio broadcast in a rather learned piece on snails in *The Naturalist* (10), when he was a very early beginner. And then we rather lost sight of each other, then he'd become curator of mammals at the London Zoo. Of course he was a very big fish, and creating quite a lot of excitement with his *Naked Ape* (30) and all that. But I thought he would be interested. He'd gone into television with Granada, and he'd had some experience with Granada on their zoo programme (31). I thought it was worth seeing if he'd like to come to Bristol when a post became vacant and he was very taken with the idea. But in his case there was one great stumbling block. It was vital for him to remain in the scientific circuit. In other words he had to be holding some sort of academic appointment, as he was, as the curator of mammals at London Zoo. Which meant that he got all the circulated papers and so on that would naturally come to him. If he dropped out of that world he would loose all that circulating intelligence that he needed to have. Otherwise he was quite prepared to move to Bristol because he'd been in the west country before, so that was OK. At that time, the vice chancellor of Bristol University was a man, Harris, Doctor Harris, he had been head of Zoology, and then became Vice Chancellor. He and I got on very well and this was in this expansive period. One of his men was doing a very big work on, I think chimpanzees and he went out to South Africa, and in fact a chimp killed him, so we had a lot of exchanges going on with Bristol University and they were very disposed. They may even have had a house, they always, they were thinking of buying a house by a river and diverting the water through the laboratory, so they could do a lot of studying of underwater life, something they wanted to do. And the suggestion was, that we would go in with them as a partner in this house, and we would put in the cameras, the film side of it and document it, and they obviously would have the use of the film for their research studies, and we would have the use of it for our programmes, and that was getting really very well advanced. Desmond Morris would have been very pleased about that, and then tragically Harris just died, suddenly, just like that. One morning just came a message to say he died. And the new Vice Chancellor just didn't want to know, he didn't want houses with the river diverted through it, so that

collapsed. But Harris had said, that he would appoint Desmond Morris, to a sinecure post on his biological department staff, with either a peppercorn salary, or practically no salary but with the academic status that he would continue to get all this scientific information that he wanted, and that might, that might have matured, but it didn't.

Now, the case of David, he became very disenchanted with the dominance of Grace Wyndham-Goldey and the political establishment in talks. Leonard Miles was head of talks, but he was a very sort of gentle head, and Grace had really taken over the department and she, I mean she always did the great general election broadcasts as the overseer of the whole operation and so on, and David was not really her cup of tea and she wasn't his I think. And so I got wind of the fact that he was thinking of leaving, and he told me about, he might do this degree course at London University you see, and I said, "If you're going to go freelance, think of coming to Bristol because I could guarantee you a reasonable income. I mean you'd become chairman of *The Naturalist* (10) and you would do television programmes," and so on, and so on. I mean, there was plenty of work to be had. "Or you might become head of the unit, or whatever. But do think of it as a possibility", again, which he did you see, the problem with David was of course he is deeply embedded in Richmond and family and children at school and the thought of leaving Richmond was the worrying thing mainly. But the decisive thing was there was another palace revolution at Television Centre. Huw Weldon became controller of programmes, rang up David and said, "Would you like to introduce colour on BBC2?" and that was the end of the conversation. David said to me "How can anyone say no to that?", but there was a tremendous payoff in a way, because David was a marvellous friend when he came in as Controller of BBC2. You see, he really taught me that the day of the *Look* (17) formula was finished, I mean, we had got a very good formula for a thirty minute programme, we knew how to do quite good thirty minute programmes. And he said he wanted to start something called *The World About Us* (32), with a sort of vestigial element of his travel and exploration unit which gradually withered away it was to be, was it forty-five, or fifty [minutes]?

Int: Fifty

DH: I thought it was, it was fifty and I remember saying, to a meeting of the producers, "Don't think it means it's just a programme that's twenty minutes longer. It's a totally different animal altogether and we've now got to get into that league". So that was a tremendous bonus. And in other ways for example, I had a little trouble with Kenneth Adam when he was Director of Television, and he suddenly took against Johnny Morris. I think we were doing *Johnny's Jaunt* (33) in those days. And Kenneth, in one of his rather heavy after lunch sessions, suddenly announced he didn't want Johnny Morris on his screen any more, he'd offended the Japanese, he'd done a programme in Japan and he thought Johnny had offended the Japanese. And to my surprise Baverstock took this very seriously, he said "Well, Kenneth's said this, I can't go on with Johnny's Jaunts (33) you see". So I rang up David as Controller of BBC2, told him I had this problem and I said, "I'm going to make this series anyway because I can do it as Regional Head, and we're committed to make the next lot of Jaunts (33), but I can't pay for it in colour, would you put in the colour money for it? And I'll do it in colour and it will go out on the region first and then you can then have it on 2 in colour", "Yes, yes," he said, "fine." So that was the nature of the friendship that we had.

10. The changing face of the BBC

*Int: Since you mention Baverstock can I take you back a few years now, because one of the things I recall was a certain amount of panic going through the BBC about the success of ITV. Baverstock was brought in, he was running *Tonight* (34) and he was elevated, he wasn't called controller it was some other title but he was effectively in charge of BBC1, and began to make some sweeping changes. I sense that a lot of people in Bristol felt that some of our old well tried formulae were vulnerable including *Look* (17) and certainly including the children's programme *Out Of Doors* (35), could you say something about that?*

DH: Yes, it was him and Michael Peacock you see, they were talked of as ‘the young lions’. They’d been very impressive at one of those sessions at Uplands, and everyone thought this new young generation could save the bacon of everybody, so they both, Peacock was put in charge of [BBC] 2, and Baverstock was put in charge of [BBC] 1. Kenneth Adam became controller or director. Nobody stopped to think that neither of them even had the experience of running a department before. I mean, they both were talented men, but suddenly to take over a whole channel, is a very, very difficult thing. I was very fond of Baverstock actually. He used to come down to Bristol to stay the night, see producers during the day. Then at night we used to sit down with a bottle of whiskey and really talk away through much of the night. Because, I think, I was outside the London circle, I was no competitor of his at all, and we talked about lots of things, some very strange. For example, he at one point said he had great regard for Joanna, Joanna, Joanna, controller of programme services. Oh ridiculous, well anyway, Joanna, it will come back to me. I remember him saying to me, “She’s my idea of a great English lady. She should be given a title and go into the House of Lords, as soon as she retires.” Now that was extraordinary. It was quite true that it was Joanna who held the television service together.

Int: Spicer?

DH: Spicer, that’s right! McGivern always just used to call her Spicer, yes, that’s right, Joanna Spicer. So, when Kenneth Adam came in, he’d come from radio, the Light Programme (36), he’d no idea about television and logistics. As head of the Light Programme (36) he’d been used to saying that if you wanted an outside broadcast tomorrow, well you had an outside broadcast tomorrow, you see. In television it just wasn’t quite as simple as that, to say outside broadcast tomorrow. And Joanna tirelessly used to hold the damn thing together. That was Baverstock talking about her. Yes, as he’d never run anything on that scale, he found it very difficult to make decisions. He’d come down and I’d have a great list of producers he was to see, and we’d have our offers meeting. He was going to talk to each of them, and he’d have twenty minutes with Brandon [Acton Bond], and so much with somebody else, and so on, and of course they all wanted a decision. And at the end of the day they would have gone through my office and had a fascinating session with Baverstock full of splendid ideas of wonderful original ideas of things that they might do, but they still didn’t know. Did they now go ahead with the film crew they’d provisionally booked for next Tuesday? That was, I think, his great limitation.

But, he was a very strange mixture, because I said to him once, “Why don’t you write something Donald [Baverstock]?” because he talked so well you see. Incidentally he was a great fan of A.J.P. Taylor and the talks Taylor gave straight to camera were the sort of thing that Donald would love. And I remember him saying, “You know my curse is, I can write a brilliant paragraph, I can’t write a chapter.” and it was a very shrewd self-assessment. He was very, very good in a quick first response, always stimulating, with exciting new ideas. But when you got down to, who was going to do it and when and where and with what, then it all began to get woolly and fuzzy. It didn’t somehow come together. But anyway, when he came in the immediate role he had to fill was this disastrous, really disastrous loss of ground in the ratings. Where, I mean Jacob was really weakly saying that the BBC must have the majority audience, at least one night a week, well, it was a pretty defeatist attitude, wasn’t it?

The real point of the new regime that Baverstock represented was to overhaul the sort of general ethos of BBC television programmes. And the idea was that they were too middle class. That was the general view and more-over, in the ratings war, what mattered mostly, was what people started the evenings with, because if they were satisfied with it, they stayed with it. So there was a great deal of attention turned on the period before six o’clock, which was a quite separate enclave devoted to children. The BBC’s view for example, of cowboy films, was that they were fit to be shown before six o’clock for children. ITV buffed Panorama (37) by putting up a fifty minutes cowboy film called Wagon Wheels (38) on a Monday night. They

didn't waste film of that value on the five to six period. And these were the lessons that were being learned, of course, and the children's period became for a time a sort of battle-ground. In the terms of the ratings they had somehow to get rid of the rather middle class, rather paternalist idea, of being good for children and they had to think, is there some formula that we can still disguise as being for children but will be just as acceptable to adults? That was the design, so that poor Owen Reede, who had been my drama colleague in Bristol and gone to London as Head of Television, he'd lost his drama producers, who were transferred to the main drama department. Whereas, they had specialised in doing children's serials, things of that sort, and for all practical purposes the idea of a completely separate period on television devoted to children went. Just of course, as it had gone on radio in the same sort of way. The programme we had been doing was called, Out Of Doors (35). The intention was, that it should be a sort of club type of programme, full of ideas of interesting things to do. Instead of just sitting watching television all the time and it had that sort of benevolent, slightly educational, entertaining factor in it, and that had to go.

Baverstock came down to Bristol said what he wanted was something that would appeal to everybody old and young, and it had to have animals as a factor in it, he wanted that, and it was to replace Out Of Doors (35). And so we had to set to work and devise something. I mean, the obvious assets we had then were things that made Animal Magic (39), were Johnny Morris in his role as Keeper Morris at Bristol Zoo. Of course that was a nice alliance we had in those days with Bristol Zoo and, and Johnny, undoubtedly became a very popular national figure in his Keeper Morris role. We had Gerry [Gerald] Durrell, now established with his zoo, who brought live animals over to Bristol and we had all sorts of live animals in the studio and that was a very important factor. There was a third point I am trying to think of, I'm trying to remember what it was, there was Johnny, there was Gerry, well I mean, there was Tony Soper who was developing now as a freelance character in his own right. And with all his experience behind him he'd decided to go his own way and become a performer. So, Animal Magic (39) was born in that way, and did indeed succeed of course. The idea was that the general working population in the lower financial levels of working population, tended to be home earlier than the middle class commuters. But they were the decisive element, between five and six, and Animal Magic (39) was just their cup of tea, they took to that. So the old regime was swept away. And, I mean, I gradually of course, got the message coming up from the unit that they were increasingly worried that Peter Scott was open to the same sort of criticism, that he represented the establishment and the middle class, and Duke of Edinburgh and all that, and sadly the break had to come.

11. Retirement

Int: Lets whiz on now to the time of your retirement when the unit, was not as large as it is now but it was well established, it still had a very good output on radio, BBC1 and BBC2, and we were two years in to colour, so what were your thoughts when you finally had to retire, as we all have to eventually?

DH: Oh, well they were rather disagreeable thoughts, I expect you may think Chris. I'm a great believer in being up to the neck in something when I'm in it, and leaving it when I leave it. I don't like armchair generals who go on grumbling away about old controversies that they still go on fighting, and so on. So as far as I was concerned, when I left the BBC I left, unlike Stuart Wyton, I left the BBC. There were plenty of people there with talent to carry it on. I enjoyed coming back, I enjoyed meeting old friends. Occasionally, somebody kindly asked me to write a commentary to a World About Us (32), or something. I like to keep my hand in. I liked each year, to do a bit of television and a bit of radio, for old-times sake. But I did have other fish to fry by that point. You see I very much wanted to get back to writing. I'd been increasingly conscious of the fact that there were all kinds of things in that field that I would like to be doing that I couldn't do. And the other thing, and this was very much bound up with the unit, I did also realise, that I'd been muggins who'd sat in Bristol sending every other person in the building to all the places I would like to have gone to, to do some bird watching, and it was high time now I got my skates on and went off somewhere.

And so I did a terrific bit of travelling, and I combined it with lecturing on Hardy, which was a way of paying for it. And in 1970 to about 1985, I suppose I did really travel a great deal, and you know I'd always wanted to see bower birds in Australia, so I went to Australia and I saw bower birds. I'd always wanted to see a great bustard, so I went to Hungary and I saw a great bustard. And I'd always wanted to go to Japan and meet the Thomas Hardy society of Japan and talk to them about Hardy, so I did that. But particularly, I suppose, I went to America a lot. I did a lot of lecturing in America and I wrote a lot of books. I did write a lot of books, probably too many. And I mean really, Hardy I suppose, and the wildlife of the world, particularly the birds of the world were the two preoccupying things. And actually I left the BBC after the one unhappy year of my life. I had twenty-five years in the 'Beeb'. Twenty-four of which were extremely happy, and the last one extremely unhappy, because broadcasting in the seventies was really the end of the region as I knew it. And I was saying to Frank [Gillard] recently, "We have gradually seen everything in the region, brick by brick, dismantled and gone." and so I was completely out of sympathy with management policy, and I was caught in a ridiculous situation. I was the Regional Controller, but everybody knew I was about to retire in a few weeks, so to make a dramatic resignation as a protest, would have been ludicrous.

I mean, I agreed with some of the things also, but I could see what it meant you see. That they really were taking back in to London all the things that actually matter, like money, and staff and all the real decisions. As head of programmes, I'd had considerable autonomy and I think the creative period of the regions was when they had that autonomy. You know, it wasn't just one stream of inventiveness in London. When you look back, I mean *The Archers* (40), quite a considerable asset of the BBC's, was invented in the Midlands, *Any Questions* (41) was invented by Frank Gillard in Bristol and *Going For A Song* (42) and all that was invented by me and Lobbie [Anthony de Lotbiniere], and we started *Going For A Song*. There was room then you see to, to invent and I saw that going. Once you've taken away from the head of programmes the right to screen or radio time, and money, you may just as well close the thing down and say it's just a branch office.

Int: Well the region may have been destroyed, but at least it gave birth to the unit.

DH: It's the extraordinary irony you see, really, that the Natural History Unit of course, has grown far, far beyond any thing I could possibly have imagined. But, just that really, I felt I'd had my day, I'd had a great time, I'd done a lot of programmes that I'd enjoyed doing, and I'd made lots of good friends. It had been a wonderful twenty five years, but I was not going to hang around and complain that somebody was doing this which was done differently in my day and so on, you know, all that sort of thing. I think, get out of the way and let the next generation get on with it that's my belief.

END

Glossary

Parochial: Having a narrow outlook.

Iniquitously: To behave unjustly or immorally.

Genlock: A device for synchronizing two different output signals.

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

Inter-nicene:

Congenial: Pleasant because of qualities or interests similar to one's own.

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