



Mike Hay: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Mike Hay

Name of interviewer:

Jeffery Boswall

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

Date of interview:

18/09/2006

Place of interview:

Desborough, Northamptonshire, United Kingdom

Length of interview:

c. 70 minutes

Copyright:

© Wildscreen

1. The early years

Int: Mike, I expect this will last about an hour or so, or an hour and a bit. He's got one tape which runs an hour and then we'll probably go onto the second tape because that's what I understand usually happens. Colin Willock, your ex-colleague and my ex-competitor, would wish us to have a storyline. The storyline is incredibly obvious. It's going to be a biographical storyline.

MH: Oh dear.

Int: Is that all right? I've worked on it quite a little bit, I think it will go all right and I want you to be forthright and fluent, and amusing and informed, and above all honest. None of which I need urge upon you. So could you start by saying I'm Mike Hay and I was born in South China, and then just give us a summary from your birth, your school, briefly your jobs, and ending by saying you worked at Survival from 1968 to 1994, 26 years. Mike Hay.

MH: My name's Michael Allen Hay. I was born in China on 31st of May 1937, that is South China, the



mainland. As the date will already readily indicate, this was just prior to the Japanese invasion and so we had to leave rather rapidly through flooded paddy fields and all the rest of it, although I was blissfully unaware of any of this. Ran the Japanese blockade with Hong Kong, and then came back to Britain just in time to experience — I beg your pardon I've got a bit lost there. Is that alright? What happens if I get tongue-tied, just carry on?

Int: Pause, wait two seconds and then start again with a proper sentence.

MH: We came to Britain just in time to experience Herr Hitler's raids on London. My parents were missionaries and we then went out to Africa to what was then Northern Rhodesia, and to the Northern Rhodesian copper belt, Mindola mission, where my father, who's an ordained minister, as part of his missionary work and my mother as an educationalist and that's where I first experienced Africa and growing up. It wasn't exactly the back of beyond but it was certainly the bush, and in the days before running water or electricity or anything like that.

It was an interesting combination of experiences because there was the urban side and the close relationship to the African people, many of whom of course were recruited labour from the villages around Zambia, quite rural places. So it was a very interesting part of my upbringing.

Int: And your first job?

MH: My first job? Well, I actually left school and went into architecture, started my articles. But it was immediately apparent to me that I hadn't spent nearly enough time concentrating on my mathematics, and not having done terribly well in my **matriculation** examinations I looked for a way out. And that way out was an apprenticeship with the Central African Film Unit based in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia as it was at the beginning of the federal government of Rhodesia and **Nyasaland**.

Int: What did this job teach you? How did you start and how did you end, and how many years indeed were you there with the Central African Film Unit?

MH: The job was described as 'learner technician' and what that meant was that it should embrace training in all aspects of documentary film making. The vast majority of that was actually training as a cameraman and a director, and I was very fortunate to work in the first instance with Steven Peet who you may remember made several very eminent documentaries with the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation].

Int: He urged a particular principle upon you according to your notes?

MH: Yes. Apart from everything else, he was a very gentle man but he did observe immediately that I suffered from one fault very common to young men and so he urged on me, as you say, the principle of 'do it now'.

Int: Three cheers, three cheers for Steven Peet. Goody good. So how long were you with Central African Film Unit?

MH: I was with the Central African Film Unit for about nine years.

Int: Okay. And how did you get into Survival? But first perhaps you should tell us, what is your recollection of the very first moving imagery of any kind of wildlife that you ever saw anywhere? That must have been about this time.

MH: Yes, I suppose my first sight of any sort of filmed wildlife, apparent wildlife anyway, was my visits in the afternoon to the local mineworkers' cinema which was just down the road from the mission station.

Int: Okay.

This was going back to my childhood and, of course, much to the amusement of the local Africans they put on Tarzan films (1) and I guess that's what slightly got me fired up to it. But much later on, before I actually joined the Central African Film Unit, that series of documentaries was coming out in the cinema, Disney's —.

Int: True Life Adventure (2).

MH: Yes, that's right and, of course, Rachel Carson's *The Seas Around Us* (3), that sort of thing and so that fired up an additional interest. Although I must say this wasn't the central thrust of my idea of a career in the film business which was in general documentary making.

Int: Indeed. But you moved from general documentary to specific documentary to wildlife moving imagery via Survival.

MH: Yes, that's true. Although I should add that as part of the Central African experience, the Central African Film Unit experience, there was a considerable amount of wildlife filming to be done there as well. So I had some knowledge of what it took. And I think that when I joined *Survival* it was quite important to the organisation and the people working there that I did have this insight into what it took to be a wildlife filmmaker.

Int: So you had some personal knowledge of a continent famous for its wildlife and knowledge clearly of camera working and the direction of film.

MH: Yes.

2. Joining Survival

Int: But how did you actually get into Survival in 1968 because you were to stay there for 26 years?

MH: Yes. In fact I did join *Survival* somewhat earlier than that on a short-term basis. I'd come over from Africa at the end of the federal government's regime and the beginning of independence for Zambia, Zimbabwe

and Malawi as they are now. And I tried to make my way but of course in those days there was one quite significant obstacle to getting a job in the film business, and that was union membership. I was actually taken on with the union's approval at Survival as an assistant film editor, on the somewhat slim pretext that I had this expert knowledge of animals and would make a huge contribution to the Survival outfit as it was then.

Int: But it lasted only three months?

MH: Well, that only lasted three months before I hankered after being behind the camera again. Although I wasn't in charge anymore, I took a job with the BBC as a holiday relief assistant film cameraman which was great fun, of course.

Int: At Ealing?

MH: At Ealing, yes indeed.

Int: A famous place, wonderful. Bring us though, now Mike, to 1968. How did you actually get into Survival which, of course, as an employer came to dominate your entire life?

MH: Well, after I left the BBC I went out to Africa again and joined the Rhone Selection Trust Film Unit which was a copper mining company, and their film unit had quite a good reputation for making films, including some wildlife films too. And after that contract was over I came back to the United Kingdom, went into see my friends at Survival in Brook House, Park Lane, and was almost there and then offered a job as the technical manager. George Howe, who had had the job up until then, was leaving to do other work and it was good for me because I came in to the business there at a critical moment when television was preparing to go into colour in this country and I had the challenging job of turning Survival into colour which was feasible, on account of the fact that most of it had been shot in colour in the first place.

Int: But Survival was at this point in time, correct me if I'm wrong, already seven years old?

MH: Yes, that's right.

3. Early Survival programmes and Aubrey Buxton

Int: Can you just recall, though not from personal experience, the very earliest Survival programmes? I'm hankering after the story of Aubrey Buxton in his Rolls Royce in Highgate, looking out at a fox tipping the top off a dustbin. You tell the story now.

MH: Well as you say, Jeffery, it was before my time and I can't tell it with any accuracy or humour but it must have been quite an event. They'd decided to make this film on the wildlife of London (4) which, as we now know, has been made several times in different places. In other places shall we say.

Int: By other people anyway, yes.

MH: By other people, yes. But I think the most amusing part of the film altogether was Aubrey's rather plummy onscreen presentership which was good for its' time anyway. But that was probably an early example of what Survival wasn't really all about it, and that was having an onscreen presenter. And so it moved quite quickly into the area of having you know, 'womb to tomb' wildlife shows beginning, middle and end stuff and nobody in between.

4. Mike's role at Survival

Int: Okay. So you've joined Survival as a technical manager in 1968. Just give us a summary of the rungs on the ladder that you climbed until you eventually retired and then we'll go back over it in detail.

MH: Well, it was more like slipping down a rope really, Jeffery. The truth was that the whole business was expanding then. We started out making six half hour films a year for ITV (Independent Television), and suddenly there was the notion that these might be acceptable and successful overseas, came into being. Particularly because of course we didn't have an onscreen presenter and there was a wall-to-wall film which could be easily converted into foreign languages and so on. That meant that in a way that international success was driving forward Survival's own success and expansion. And before very long, particularly after we'd got into colour, the output significantly increased and, of course, we started making one hour specials.

Int: Can I just be clear? When you say you started by doing six half hours a year, that's from 1968 onwards not from —

MH: No, that was before 1968.

Int: Oh right, before you got there.

MH: In fact, they were somewhat less than that in the beginning of course. But that was the commitment from Rediffusion.

Int: Okay. Now your actual role and your title changed successively as your career progressed.

MH: Yes.

Int: Just give us briefly the steps on those rungs of the ladder and then we'll go back over them when you've given us a little content summary.

MH: Well, the role of technical manager was interesting because I was part of building the unit and the expansion of the unit. This gave me quite a lot of insight into you know, the wildlife cameraman's needs, the technical needs of the team at Brook House, the requirements for international sales, etc, etc. And as the unit grew to accommodate a bigger output, it was decided by Aubrey Buxton particularly, that it we needed a



general manager and so I was offered that job and took that on which encompassed the technical side of things but started to get into the business and I became a member of what the group that actually ran Survival for many years which was simply called 'the threesome'. Some unkind people have called it 'the triumvirate'.

Int: Even 'the Gang of Three'.

MH: 'The Gang of Three'. Aubrey Buxton, of course at the top, Colin Willock as the creative leader, and myself as the administrative leader, if you like.

Int: Let me just pause there just for a moment there then, please. You've defined your role at this stage and it remained roughly the same henceforward I think. Just start again and imagine people don't know and say Aubrey Buxton was who he was and what he did, and Colin Willock was who he was and what he did. Therefore, people can picture this 'triumvirate', this trio, this 'Gang of Three' at the top running the event.

MH: Well, Aubrey Buxton of course had come into the business almost at the top as it were because he was a founder member of Anglia Television and he was to all intents and purposes the managing director (MD) as they used to call them in those days of Anglia Television. But he was also doing the Countryman programme (5) in Norwich and, of course, I think Peter Scott and others encouraged him to expand that idea and so Survival came about as a sort of international, if you like, wildlife programme which encompassed stories from overseas as well as locally. Now in his role as MD of Anglia because he then wore the boss of Survival hat as well, and I think in many ways he enjoyed that more than anything else.

Colin Willock worked for Rediffusion and the association with Rediffusion was such that they felt it would be a good idea if Colin, as a naturalist and as a writer and everything else, joined the Survival unit and so he became the creative leader of the Survival unit at that point.

I should add there was, before I became the third leg of the tripod, another man called Stanley Joseph.

Int: Indeed. Indeed.

MH: Who was the director in the film sense of Survival programmes. And in fact, a very imaginative man but one who took his time because there was time to make programmes. And I think he contributed an enormous amount to the Survival style. He brought in the music and the well-known commentators, and he added that aspect of showbiz to an otherwise straightforward wildlife presentation. He often gets lost in the history of Survival which I think is very unkind.

*Int: I'm delighted that you've brought him in. I actually, if I may make the claim, did have him down here because I thought I wanted to be reminded of his precise role. I met him and enjoyed his company and his sense of humour, and his wonderful irreverence about wildlife and science as clearly I think you would have done. But I'm glad that we've recalled him as well, and now we understand this triumvirate. We had Aubrey who was the distinguished boss. And I think we should just say that when you make mention of Anglia, Anglia was of course the regional television programme or company done for East Anglia, as opposed to Anglia Survival which was a separate, **limited liability company**.*





WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

MH: That was much later on, yes.

Int: Oh yes right, okay. Well, now I think we need to imagine the three of you in these incredibly smart offices in Park Lane, clearly the best.

MH: I'd like to correct you, Jeffery.

Int: Sorry.

MH: It was a smart address, the offices were not smart.

Int: Oh okay, whatever you say.

MH: They'd been well used because Brook House, of course, was originally a domestic residences for people and apartments. Then, of course, with the war it became very fragmented and all sorts of people, including the British government, moved in there with various departments and the place became a bit of a wreck. So I don't want anybody to assume that we had you know, foot thick carpets or anything like that —.

*Int: I'm sorry I did go there several times in the hope of being offered a job but never was. I do remember that it was fairly plush. I think the **cutting rooms** downstairs were a bit roughly certainly. But anyhow —.*

MH: Well, they certainly were a bit rough, yes.

*Int: Yeh okay. Now can we try to imagine a day in your life there? I remember you as the organiser chap. I remember you as the person to whom the director camera people, usually '**Zoosome twosomes**', had to come for money and agreement and contracts and so on. Could you talk a bit about that? I mean they wanted to make films, they wanted to be in the field, they needed the money, they wanted the excitement of being out there right next to the animals and the creative opportunity and you were the monetary and the practical and the organisational means by which they could achieve that. Sorry, I'm answering your question for you which is very unprofessional.*

MH: It's lovely, Jeffery, you carry on.

Int: No, forget what I've just said. Just make it a statement from you as to, well, what I found myself doing each day was —.

MH: I'd just like to say something about that. You were sort of describing me as some kind of moneybags and I you know really far from that, both psychologically and everything else. I think what brought about my relationship with the cameramen more than anything else was the fact that I was the guy at base who was looking at their **rushes** along with Colin Willock and I was giving them technical feedback, Colin was giving them creative feedback, and this created a really good, solid relationship between us, people like Des



Bartlett and Alan Root and all the rest of it.

So it was a fairly natural progression for me to become involved with the camera teams as somebody that they would relate to on a business, practical, logistical basis if you like, and a technical one as well. And then as I progressed in the company, it sounds terrible doesn't it, to general manager, the company wished me to take on these financial and legal responsibilities as well and so I became a negotiator with camera teams, new and old, for contracts for Survival programmes, yes.

Int: Thank you.

5. Working with filming partnerships – 'Zoosome twosomes'

Int: Let's just look, if we may, at one or two of the better known director-camera people and they were usually a man and a woman - Alan and Joan [Root], Des and Jen [Bartlett], Tony and Liz [Bomford], Mark [Deeble] and Vicky [Stone] more recently, and Dieter and Mary [Plage]. Could you just recall them in turn briefly, starting I think with Alan? I know that you, as we all do and did, think incredibly highly of his work. Just tell me about Alan Root.

MH: Well, I think Alan was actually atypical of the Survival camera team as it were, or Alan and Joan as it was in those days. Des and Jen Bartlett, of course, were well-established with Survival then and Dieter was coming along with them. They were people who placed a greater reliance on the creative side of Survival than Alan ever did. And Alan was with us on the condition in a way that he took care of the creative thrust of his programmes and that he was in charge of them. This was in happy agreement with Colin Willock who never had any wish to monopolise, you know, the creative side of it, and there was a happy tension between them in that respect.

With the other teams, of course, Colin played a much greater creative part. But whatever happened, Alan as well as everybody else needed support of some kind. Although Alan's establishment in Kenya was a very significant one and he'd long been working out to create it, yes.

Int: He, of course, had earlier worked and indeed right at the beginning I think worked for Bernard Grzimek, didn't he, on two cinema films?

MH: Yes, and in fact to some extent continued to work for Bernard Grzimek because that was the deal with Survival. Another tremendous example of Aubrey Buxton's skill at, you know, getting the best out of people by continuation of their previous arrangements. Of course, it was a happy arrangement with the Frankfurt Zoological Society and all the rest of it. So Bernard Grzimek still had the rights to broadcast Alan's programmes in Germany.

Int: Right, and Bernard Grzimek was famous for his two cinema films, Serengeti Shall Not Die (5) and, help me, there was another cinema one.

MH: Was there Jeffery? I only remember that one.

Int: It will come to me in a minute or at 3 o'clock tomorrow morning. Michael Hay, you mentioned Des and Jen, that's Des and Jen Bartlett who I think started with Armand and Michaela Denis originally.

MH: They did, yes.

Int: Then moved to Grzimek.

MH: No. They had a period of relative independence but, of course, they were working with the National Geographic, mainly on the stills side, and that was the basis for their whole being in fact because that relationship went way back. And they related to the National Geographic magazine (7) continuously.

Int: Okay. But then Des and Jen became a 'Zoosome twosome' along with the others for Survival.

MH: Yes.

Int: Tell us about working with them.

MH: It's an awful phrase that, isn't it?

Int: Sorry, I was rather proud of it.

MH: I'm sorry, Jeffery.

Int: Tell us about trying to work. Sorry, that's a leading phrase. Tell us about happily, positively, joyfully working with Des and Jen Bartlett.

MH: I think they were in many ways the easiest people to work with because Des is a very, apparently laid back, or is apparently a laid back character. Jen's very quiet and kind of keeps the show on the road in a way. But they were always very appreciative of the support that we gave them. They had no real axe to grind about how we used their material. I think if Des had any fault at all it was the vast amount of film he used to expose which the Survival library benefited from but I'm quite certain that most of it hasn't been used to this day.

Int: There is a rumour that on one occasion he exposed so much material that while Survival Anglia did agree to pay for it to be processed, a lot of it was never even printed and never even seen. Is there any truth in that?

MH: Well, of course, in the original set-up we were filming in 16mm **reversal film**, colour film, and in the old days we rather brutally used to run this stuff through a projector would you believe, and make selections for printing, etc. But we used to live dangerously. In the **Kodachrome** days which was the pretty robust stock physically we weren't running too much of a risk. But when ectochrome commercial came in, of course that

was a different matter altogether. But it did mean that in fact we used to print quite a lot of Des's **rushes**, you know, eventually but you can imagine Colin and I after a fairly decent lunch, sitting in the theatre watching Des's rushes ad infinitum and nodding off. But Des always used to say, "Well, I was there in a good position and the behaviour was happening so I filmed it, Mike, and somebody will want it one of these days." And I used to say "we hope." But there was nothing wrong with that for all that.

Int: It's mimicry of Des Bartlett's Australian accent, of course, yes. Living dangerously you referred to. Did you live dangerously with Liz and Tony Bomford, for example?

MH: I got on terribly well with Liz and Tony Bomford, and we collaborated on one extremely successful operation in Malawi. Although Tony could be a little edgy at times I always got on very well with him and Liz. The Malawi operation, was to my way of thinking, the way it should happen, because not only were we filming there but we'd arranged to feed back into Malawi, into their information system, with sponsorship from local business, the films that we were making and making them available free to schools and so on and so forth. Because it's an interesting part of the African experience particularly in those days that the urban African knew about as much about African wildlife as the urban Briton did.

6. Budgeting and managing camera teams and their rushes

Int: Can we imagine that, say Tony and Liz [Bomford], it doesn't matter which couple really, are in your office, they've successfully completed one trip and it's no doubt being edited, or is about to be edited, and they want to go somewhere else. Now what kind of arrangement did you come to with them as regards how long they would go, how much stuff they might expose, and what you would hope to get out of it in screen time?

MH: I think it was never that exact a science. The idea would be there and with most of the teams the next idea would be pretty much up and running before they'd finished the last operation. And so they would be 'champing at the bit' to get on with their next venture. The situation, the process, was basically that they would put forward a proposal or come to the 'threesome' meeting and make a pitch. And Aubrey [Buxton] in his clever way would, of course, be checking in the background with his eminent friends in the world of zoology and wildlife affairs to see how much more we could get out of such an idea, and how much support we could give them. And so it would emerge from that. It was a fairly slow process, nothing happened overnight. We would then ask them to put forward a budget and a timetable, and all that sort of thing, and we'd sit down and thrash it out. We would assume in those days that we had an outlet for their material, and so we had that sort of confidence going for us, and it was never a question of saying, "well, I don't think we can make that because we can't see a way of showing it" if you know what I mean.

Int: But there must surely have been some kind of understanding as to whether they were going for six half hours and one special? There must have been some discussion as to —.

MH: Well, in theory, Jeffery, but as I say it wasn't an exact science and could never be and I think that the marvellous thing about the threesome is that we all three of us respected that, and stood between any criticisms of rather lackadaisical, happy-go-lucky approach to it from the real moneybags in the business and the camera teams themselves. So we would look at things realistically and say, well, if Dieter Plage is going out to South West Africa he's going to plan to be there for at least five years. We would have that in our mind and so the scale of things was pretty much based on that. There were operators who were going to go out for a few months only and they were projects that were fairly easy to define. But that was the way it was. We took a very flexible attitude to it. What we wanted to make sure was that the material was flowing into the Brook House **cutting rooms** as continuously as possible.

Int: To what extent was there any kind of advance commitment, since I can't get you to say whether they went for six half hours and two specials which I can remember one lot telling me once but it might have only been true once, that's not it. Was there any advance agreement as to storyline, as to the structure, as to how the material from Malawi would be broken down into different kinds of story? A story about the person, a story about the species, a story about the habitats, a story about the river from source to mouth, or anything. How free were these people when they left with your money and urging and support and technical expertise?

MH: Of course there was a structure to what they were going to do but as I've said before it had to be flexible. My mother always used to say it's always worth making a timetable even if you only stick to one date on it because you've got some sort of mind's eye of structure to work on, and something agreed between parties. So if anything went wildly wrong you could come down on them gently, of course. But with wildlife programme making, I think what we felt was that these things tended to develop in the field. There could be events, there could be this, that and the other, and they were worth following up, they were worth going along with as it were. So, yes, I might have structured Liz and Tony Bomford's tour of Malawi into, say, six half hours and the money would be roughly assigned accordingly. But it didn't matter if they made five or if they made eight, if you see what I mean.

*Int: I see exactly what you mean. It surprises me a bit, although I can recall that there was a lot of flexibility and there wasn't always a lot of scripting—. I mean you were involved in a **limited liability company** that existed to make money. Wasn't there rather an excessive risk in this?*

MH: Well, I think the reality was that we were making money and we were also enjoying a huge degree of kudos by what we were doing, and so was Anglia Television and so was ITV and so was the United Kingdom for that matter. And that you couldn't put a value on. And therefore, I think the hardest hearts had to agree that this was a pretty weird operation but it was what it was and that's the way it needed to be.

*Int: Right. So whoever it is, this couple, come back with all the stuff and it has to be processed of course and then turned into programmes. Could you define broadly - I see the word flexibility written across your face already in the answer. Could you define broadly, what the role of the director-cameraman and his wife or partner, whatever you have to call them nowadays, is, once you get to editing the material and shaping the programme in the **cutting room** and deciding where the music's going to go, and writing and reading and recording the commentary?*

MH: I think this was Colin Willock's particular brilliance, in that the wildlife team and he, we'd all of seen their **rushes**, we would have had a very good idea of what was available. But he would then sit down for weeks on end with them and discuss and view, and discuss and view, and then he would come up with a plan, usually a lot of bits of papers scattered over his desk. And this would be with their co-operation and approval, even if some of the decisions he was making weren't exactly in line with what they had had in mind but that's the element of compromise that has to occur.

Int: That's the nature of the business.

MH: The nature of the business. So quite a lot of the teams had a fairly extended stay with us in London, and this was good for them and it was certainly good for us. They would have a great deal of input into what was happening. But Colin's genius in a way, it's a terrible word to use because there's no such thing I don't think, but his real skill was in buttoning all this up. And he had such an immense energy for work that he tired

everybody else out, if you know what I mean. So, there you are.

7. The decline of Survival

Int: Survival was, as you've said, a success in London, regionally, nationally, internationally and so on. But eventually there came a point where it started to decline. Could you bring us to that point, please?

MH: Yes. There were many reasons, I think, for the decline. There was, of course, the serious world recession going on in the early 1990s. The attitudes, I think, towards the wildlife documentary in a commercial context were changing. I think ITV was becoming less interested in these wildlife films, or even perhaps more truthfully how they were programmed in the schedules. And so with that in mind we had to be very cautious about how we did spend our money from then on, and a great deal of pressure came on us to make more use of the library. Hence such series as *Animals in Action* (8) which were, if you like, spin-offs but they're valuable in their own right. So it's difficult to put your finger on the precise point of **apogee**, I think is the word, the point at which things started to come down. But they were largely commercial considerations involved.

I'd like to get this as straight as possible because it could sound very critical of a lot of people involved. But, of course, part of *Survival's* success was its partnership in America with J Walter Thompson. Part of that success in turn arose from the release of primetime network television slots to documentaries, and the sudden scramble or scrabble amongst the broadcasters defined where the educational or documentary material. Of course, wildlife happened to be quite a glamorous thing to have and so that had a premium. Now that success, and there were some tremendous, you know, promotions of *Survival* and its appearance as network specials, its existence on the network and in syndication as a half hour series. So its exposure in America was enormous and that, of course, underwrote quite a lot of the financial success and security of *Survival* as well. Not to mention, of course, that it was being sold all around the world as well.

But the American focus, I think, meant that *Survival* expanded to accommodate this, you know, situation and of course, we were rather overreaching ourselves before we knew it. There then came about a very disappointing, let me put it politely, event with J Walter Thompson when the syndication team was discovered to have been party to a fraud in the representation of their returns and distribution among the syndicate in America. And we were soon dropped like a hotcake and that, of course, was in many ways a turning point for us because we had to look for other partners. There wasn't anybody quite as successful as J Walter Thompson had apparently been in distribution in the United States to replace them.

Int: How does this relate, or how does the move from Brook House in Park Lane to Norwich relate to this?

MH: As with all these things there were many factors. One of the significant factors in the move from Brook House to Norwich was that our landlords, Metropolitan Estates, were of course coming towards the end of a lease or there was some new policy about the use of that building and I may be incorrect in this, I think traditionally Anglia Television had the premises on a favourable lease. That meant that Brook House was going to become domestic again, it was going to be in fact pulled down and that meant that *Survival* had to go somewhere. We struggled in a way to keep it in London but we realised that with the general economic situation the only way it was going to work was for *Survival* as a unit to move to Norwich, be closer to the parent company.

MH: Sorry should I —.

Int: No no, no. Did a situation arise then or later in which certain programmes were completed, and I'm quoting from your notes to me and thank you for them and they've been extremely helpful, and they represent a written record which I think, quite apart from this interview, is tremendously worth keeping if I may so. You suggest that some programmes were completed but never shown, never televised, never aired. Is that right?

MH: I think it would be untrue to say that they were never aired but they were never aired as intended. In other words in prime time in the United Kingdom, which was candidly a loss of earnings to Anglia Television as much as to Survival. And so the whole situation had to be looked on in an entirely different way. But there were quite a substantial amount of programmes made and ready which never got into that traditional outlet.

8. The establishment of the Wildscreen Festival

Int: I'd like to raise a rather slightly different matter, if I may. I'd like to ask you about the establishment of the Wildscreen International Film Festival because you were one of the three, or perhaps even more, founding members of the committee. Could you say why and if you can recall, and I can't, when and how it came into being as a wildlife film festival?

MH: I think the first thing we knew of it was when, I knew of it anyway, a meeting was arranged at Brook House between the BBC, senior people in the BBC and Aubrey Buxton, Colin Willock and myself and Michael Johnson. Clearly there had been some push at the BBC to elevate wildlife in general, to enhance the wildlife film making community, as it were, and therefore a festival was an obvious thing to do. You know, after all there were well-established festivals like, you know, in the United States already.

I think initially we were slightly reluctant to agree to it and I'm not saying this because you're sitting in front of me, Jeffery. But we at first got it confused with the Wildlife Filmmakers Symposium, which we felt was a tremendous get together of people, and as you probably know, we were all very, very supportive of that. It was just what it said, it was a community affair rather than a big international, glitzy festival. But nevertheless you can't walk away from these things, and being one of the principle producers of wildlife it was, you know, on our heads to actually get on and try and make a success of Wildscreen which we did very cheerfully.

Int: It's not really my role today but I can tell you why Wildscreen came into being I think. It came into being at the instigation of Michael Johnson who you mentioned, who was some bigwig in the BBC, from Wallasey Grammar School but we won't go into that, and the University of Cambridge where he read geography. He and Christopher Parsons were bitterly disappointed that Miami Vice (9) beat David Attenborough's initial mega series, Life on Earth (10), at BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts). They said bugger this, we're going to run our own wildlife film festival and that was the initiation of it as I understand and as I can readily believe, and I'm not necessarily asking you, but I think you can perhaps readily believe that as well.

MH: Yes.

Int: Then how Jackson Hole came into being and this isn't strictly relevant but I'll say it. I expect you know.

Do you know why Jackson Hole Film Festival came into being?

MH: I can't remember the names involved but, no, you tell me again, Jeffery.

Int: I think the principle was that the Americans found they never won at Wildscreen so they were going to have their own b....y festival, and then they never won in Jackson Hole either.

MH: You're quite right, I remember that now, yes.

Int: Sorry that's an aside.

MH: So none of this ever occurs on the basis of nice thinking does it really?

Int: Nor rationality, no. Something happened at the very first committee meeting of Wildscreen when you said something which I happen profoundly to regret that you ever said. You wouldn't be able to guess at what that was or be able to remember?

MH: No, I can't. Like all unpleasant memories it got binned.

Int: No, it's not in the least unpleasant and what you said was fully understandable. I wasn't there, of course, I wasn't on the committee. But apparently you said, listen you guys, we've got to associate this festival with some organisation or other. We can't associate it with the BBC because you're half of it and Survival are the other half of it. We can't do that, we need some outside organisation. As I understood it at the time and have remembered since and can't bring myself to forget, you said, "Why don't we associate it with the World Wildlife Fund." Can you remember that?

MH: Yes, I can and it's absolutely true but it was said by me with the background of there having been some discussion already because we mustn't forget that, of course, Aubrey Buxton was a pillar of the World Wildlife Fund.

Int: So I'm to blame him as well as blaming you am I?

MH: Peter Scott and all the rest of it. And so whether or not I was brainwashed I can't remember.

Int: Would you ever be? How can the son of any, I was going to say 'Zoosome twosome' of missionaries, ever be brainwashed, come along?

MH: No, I do remember saying it and actually I suppose in retrospect it was rather a clever thing to say which is very untypical of me, Jeffery, as you know.

Int: Well, yeh. My view is that it would have been better done under the Royal Television Society or under a professional body as opposed to wildlife conservation body because I think it has had a number of disadvantages. One of which is it makes it very difficult for people who make films critical of WWF, who make films about hunting and so and so forth, which might professionally be very skilful. You can't kind of enter them in there. It's taken away from Wildscreen as an international film festival a certain independence of stature which I personally regret. But —.

MH: I take all that on board and I think the net gainer from Wildscreen over the years has been WWF. In fact, I think it's probably done more for them than many of their other activities. I think it was extremely fortunate that we had Ivan Hattingh who's something of a pragmatist who was their representative with us. Indeed we went to the same school in South Africa, at different times, he's vastly older than me.

9. Survivals move to Norwich

Int: Yes, let me just ask you this if I may. You left Survival in 1994. Now what was the status of the company then and are you happy to say what has happened to it since, or would you rather I waited and asked Aubrey [Buxton]? Because Aubrey is apparently prepared to talk about that now, though rather complementarily he has said he's only prepared to talk to me about it, and we're going up there in December. What is your understanding of, and we've just talked about the decline of Survival, what about the fall of Survival because Survival fell, didn't it? It doesn't exist anymore as a company.

MH: Yes, that's quite right. I think the move to Norwich probably changed things irrevocably. I mean for me personally that move was a disaster because it meant a whole lot of awful you know, business with the people and personnel, and all rest of it. Anglia was extremely generous with the people who moved up there and so we mustn't be up that. I think that you know, the move, once it occurred, did what I'd always feared it would do and what I was resistant to, and that was it moved Survival into a provincial circumstance, 'off the beaten track' as you might say. Now nobody in Norwich or Anglia would agree with that I am sure for one moment. But we were an international organisation and London you couldn't get better as somewhere to be.

As I think I've said in the question and answer, and address in Park Lane, even if it was rather scruffy, you know, did add an awful lot of sparkle to our lives. We were then very close to people like ITC [Independent Television Company], Lew Grade's operation over the road, you know behind Marble Arch there. So it was very easy to administer things from London. Once it moved across the camera teams didn't have their nice London base and some of them were even encouraged to buy properties up in Norwich.

But I think that to go to that particular point that was a significant act, married to which was the concern that we all then began to feel that Survival as a wildlife programme was not a prestige programme for ITV anymore. And that was made clear if not stated.

Int: And once you get an acceptance of something declining it's difficult to get it to plateau out again, isn't it?

MH: Very difficult, yes.

Int: Yes, I do understand that. Okay.

MH: On the other hand all evolution's the same that it must have some natural cause and effect attached to it I guess.

Int: Yes, causality is universal.

MH: Causality, I love that word, yes. I hear it quite a lot.

Int: What did you say?

MH: Everybody adds 'ality' to everything these days, don't they?

Int: Oh alright. Bertram Russell added it to that.

10. Famous narrators

Int: Very interesting to hear what you have to say about America and the role of America, and the importance of the internationalisation of the thing to the monetary success as well as the other successes that Survival had. Of course it brought, for example, Orson Welles to your commentary box and other very well-known people. What in your —.

MH: Generally speaking we had to go to Orson Welles's commentary box, sometimes a bathroom in a hotel in Los Angeles. Occasionally a studio in Paris, depending on how his tax situation was.

11. The worst and best natural history programmes

Int: What are the worse programmes, natural history programmes, you've ever seen and what are the best natural history programmes you've ever seen?

MH: I think it's extremely unkind or cruel to say what a worst programme was.

Int: It's my Paxman [Jeremy Paxman] act.

MH: Yes, thank you Jeffery. I think the reality is that a worst natural history or wildlife programme can only be judged by whether it is not a wildlife programme. In many cases where presenters in the United States of programmes like Animal Kingdom (11) for instance was concerned, I think they went over the top with their high jinks with Stan the Man [Stan Brock] and other people, other presenters of that kind who were pandering to a kind of, what I always refer to as a Coliseum attitude in the audience.

Int: Saturday night at the Coliseum you mean by that, yes.

MH: I don't mean that, I mean the Coliseum in Rome, the games and so on and so forth.

Int: How unclassical of me, forgive me.

MH: Not at all.

Int: Stan the Man was Stan Brock, wasn't he, in Venezuela. He kind of wrestled with alligators like Steve Irwin.

MH: A lovely chap, you know.

Int: I believe so. English public schoolboy, did you know that?

MH: Yes. I could never see the relevance of all that going on in a wildlife programme. An adventure programme perhaps.

Int: But the best.

MH: I cannot say anything other than I think Alan Root's work is the best and finest by a tall head because Alan encompassed everything it took to make a good wildlife programme, wildlife film. He had the inbred knowledge from a childhood in Africa, wildlife, its behaviour and all the rest of it. He had massive intelligence to take that a step further in educating himself more deeply, involving him in the science of things as well as everything else. He may not have been the finest cinematographer but he was b....y good and he had a way of understanding how to put films together, full stop.

Int: And driving you into a corner as I must, which programme would you pick as Alan's best ever programme?

MH: For me, without doubt, the Secrets of the African Baobab (12). Because it was slightly microcosmic in its approach, and the more interesting from that point of view. And yet it was a look at a massive African icon, the Baobab tree, and all that it hosts and continues to host.

Int: And who did the commentary for that?

MH: In the United Kingdom I think it was Bill Travers originally and in the United States we recorded Orson Welles in Paris for the special that went out on the NBC [National Broadcasting Company], I think, network.

Int: Orson Welles had a comment on the film?

MH: He did, yes. It was a rather interesting experience altogether because if I may go on about this a little

bit, it's just the classic of film-making in a way. I was asked by our American office in those days - there was one in Los Angeles and one in New York - to try and get hold of Orson Welles because, of course, they couldn't do it in the United States, he never went there for financial reasons I think. I phoned his agent up in London and she said, oh, I don't know where he is, he's in Paris somewhere and you might get him at such and such a studio. So I thought, well, fair enough, I'll phone that number and I phoned the number and a voice said "yes." I said "is it possible to speak to Orson Welles, please?" And he said "speaking." So I was able to engage him for the job.

Colin [Willock] and I went over to Paris on an afternoon flight and arrived there. We were booked to do him at one of the studios in Paris, and he said be there at 9 o'clock and I'll be there. We went out with a French Parisian fixer friend of ours who we liked to have around for such occasions. And we had a very nice dinner. We pitched up at the studios and I said to Colin, this guy's not going to show is he, this is all a con. And we sat down in the studio and sort of twiddled our thumbs for a bit. On the dot man mountain came in, apparently on castors, there was no apparent movement of his legs. And he said, "gentlemen I'm here." And we said, "right sir, Mr Welles sir, you've had the script, is there anything you want to discuss about?" "No." So we said, "Right, we'll put the film on." "I don't record to film." So I thought oh, dear oh dear, this is going to be a real disaster because I've been caught out that way before. He sat down, he spoke this commentary, from the script as though he knew it off by heart. Did one retake I think for our benefit, there was nothing wrong with it at all and said "thank you very much gentlemen", gave me a stern look. As I went over with the brown paper envelope he said "That film is brilliant, it really is a treasure" and he left.

We went back to London with this set of tapes, transferred them to 16mm magnetic. I called Ken Hansford, the dubbing editor, up and I said, "Ken, you're going to have a lovely time with this and I said let me know what's what." At 4 o'clock Ken phone me up and said "it's all done." I said "it fitted?" He said, "yes, perfectly, no problem at all." So there are other geniuses in the world as well.

12. Current output

Int: Right. What do you think of the current output, Michael Hay, of wildlife television in the United Kingdom? 60 channels dear boy. Give us a summary. And an assessment.

MH: Well, I think I can say with some justification that volume doesn't necessarily underwrite quality. And I think that most of the wildlife programmes that are made these days are entirely competent. Not a lot of them have very much heart, and I think I find it difficult to watch programmes that are presented on screen by people who I may not think have actually got the right credentials to do them. Many of these people are my friends. I dare say Saba Douglas-Hamilton's credentials are fine. Jonathon Scott's are fine. But are they quite the right thing in presenting a story of this kind to the public? And when I look at the logistics and the cost involved in putting those people on the screen, I wonder whether occasionally it might not be better to do the old fuddled Survival thing and just go along with a 'womb to tomb' job as it were.

But I think again one can be unnecessarily critical. I think that any wildlife film in a way is a good wildlife film because it's getting something over to the public. There may be a good deal of proselytising going on in terms of the environment and all the rest of it alongside those things, which I think's unfortunate because none of us are that dumb. I think we can get on the end of a good story by ourselves. I am not very happy with what I've referred to earlier as Coliseum fare, where there's an almost deliberate attempt to go out and make animals dangerous or be dangerous. Of course, animals can create danger but that's not in my view their particular intention.

Int: Do you have any particular regrets about current output?

MH: Yes. I think my main regret centres on the tendency to make wildlife into a Coliseum fare which I referred to earlier on. Animals in themselves are not dangerous, and there's an almost **anthropomorphic** drive behind some of these programmes to indicate that they may have some evil intent towards mankind. Actually it's probably the other around. And I hate it when people say these animals are dangerous. They're only dangerous if you make them so.

13: Aubrey Buxton

Int: Mike Hay, the father of it all really was Aubrey Buxton. Just tell us about Aubrey Buxton, please.

MH: Aubrey Buxton is truly a one-off, in the sense that he embraced for us a certain degree of diplomacy and ability to do deals, very quietly and in a very civilised fashion. To get on board any number of people in the business who might otherwise have felt he was competitive to them. But clearly his main value to Survival was the fact that he is a countryman through and through, and indeed one of the finest naturalists in Britain. And somebody else told me that and that was Peter Scott himself.

The thing I like most about Aubrey is that he was not a sentimental naturalist and enjoyed the same things as Colin [Willock] and I did which were shooting and hunting, and those sort of things, and put them in the same context as a love for wildlife which I think with certain people they correctly are placed. But clearly Aubrey provided a huge dynamic force with Survival and he did it in a usually quite humorous and gentle way. But if you got a steer from Aubrey you knew you'd had a steer and you got on with it. I used to thoroughly enjoy our threesome meetings because we could, to some degree, let our hair down and there were a lot of laughs in that as well, some of which arose from quite self-critical conversations, you know, at times.

But indeed Colin and I particularly loved Aubrey's code which is not to say some awful moral code but his manner of speech, a way of describing his relationships to other people and his way of dealing with you. For instance, if he ever said "my oldest and dearest friend" he probably meant a complete, b....y s..t. If he said "I'm sorry I should have explained that more clearly to you" he meant get your b....y ears syringed out. But he had that marvellous way of behaving and it was extremely charming as well as being very helpful. And I know that if Aubrey had a loyalty to you, you could count on it through thick and thin.

14. Advice for a young person wanting a career in wildlife television

Int: Mike Hay, from an 88 year old to an 18 year old. What would you say to an 18 year old who wanted to get into wildlife television?

MH: I'm not quite 88 yet.

Int: No, he is, that's Aubrey [Buxton], you've been talking about Aubrey, come one, come on. I might have made a bit of a mistake about the moneybags but I didn't make a mistake there.

MH: I beg your pardon.

Int: Yes, please do beg my pardon. I'm not at all sure we'll have you on this show again but do answer the question. What advice would you give to an 18 year old who said he or she wanted to get into wildlife television?

MH: I would say the first thing is to make absolutely sure that that's what you want to do. If you want to be a wildlife filmmaker make sure you know as much about wildlife as you possibly can, and what you don't know find out. Make absolutely sure that you have the best possible, most up-to-date, technical training, so you can carry out your duties and you can relate to people who are carrying out their duties with you. There's no point in basking in ignorance if you're going to make films when you don't know what a film editor's job or a cameraman's job is all about really. So that all-roundership I think is essential.

Sadly I think the potential for being a wildlife filmmaker now maybe a lot more limited than it was in the past, and I think that that's tragic. But I do hope that there will be future outlets and to some extent I think it may be with things that are pumped up at the moment, like the Internet perhaps. And of course, it does provide a new method of communication and after all wildlife filmmaking is just one of those books in the library of communication.

Int: Mike Hay, thank you very much indeed.

MH: A pleasure, Jeffery, thanks for having me.

15: Funniest wildlife film story, favourite species and the people Mike was most pleased to have met

Int: A couple of supplementary questions or indeed three. When you were with friends or at a party, it says here, not my question, someone asks for your funniest wildlife film story. Which is the one you're most likely to tell?

MH: I've given this a lot of thought as really and truly I have to disappoint you slightly because it's not a really wildlife film story in that vein. But it is a story to do with my activities in wildlife film making. I went out once to Kenya to help resolve some problems on a film we were making with Richard Leakey, and indeed to help with some work on Alan Root's Balloon Safari programme (13) as well. But I happened to take that particular VC10 flight that leaves late in the morning I think, if I remember rightly, and goes to Entebbe and then to Nairobi, and flies on to the Seychelles or used to in those days.

And when I got onto the plane I realised that the guy sitting across from me was none other than Peter Sellers, and I thought I'll make something of this, big wheeler dealer, talent finder, etc, etc. So at the first opportunity, over the free glass of champagne I went over and said "why don't you do some work with Survival? It would be nice to have you on board, particularly for the American market." "Oh no, I'm not interested in that," he said, "why don't you go and see my friend Spike [Milligan]?" Well, we did many years later on.

But to finish this story as quickly as possible, we landed in Entebbe, and this was during the regime of Idi Amin, and so things were a little touchy. Also on board, a few seats away, was Robert Halme who you may have heard of. Bob Halme ex-life photographer and filmmaker. And he was going out accompanied by a 14

year old executive from Warner Brothers or one of the studios, to set up a film as well. When we landed in Entebbe we were warned that we wouldn't be allowed off the aircraft, etc, etc, etc. But by that time Mr Sellers had actually been indulging in some quite interesting substances, and somehow while we were on the ground there, or as we were about to land in fact, he got hold of the PA system [public address] and started to do what we can only believe was a rather non-PC impression [politically correct] of Idi Amin welcoming us to Uganda. And of course, everybody was slightly alarmed, we all thought it was tremendously funny. But the look on Bob Helmey and his 14 year old executive's face was to be seen to be believed, they thought they were for it this time.

And indeed, as we landed the first person off the aircraft was a rather large and angry looking, probably a colleague of Idi Amin. And I prayed then that the African telecommunication system would live up to his reputation, and that communications between Entebbe and Kampala would be as slow as ever.

Int: For you to pray in any circumstances would I'm sure please your parents, your late parents. Another question, Mike. Which people are you most pleased to have met as a result of your work and which species please you most, other than human species? Which non-human species pleases you most?

MH: You want me to answer the first one first?

Int: Yeh, why not? We'll keep them in the same order.

MH: Well I've been very, very fortunate to have met many, many people, eminent people, in the world of conservation, science and indeed wildlife filmmaking. I think apart from my colleagues, the wildlife cameramen - Alan Root, Dieter Plage, Des Bartlett and many, many others - it was a great joy knowing and working with Peter Scott because he was on our board of directors at Survival Anglia. And indeed to have worked closely with Chris Parsons at the outset of Wildscreen. In fact, to some extent I flatter myself in saying that to think we actually made that work between us in the way we wanted it to work as wildlife filmmakers.

But many other people came into the picture including Richard Leakey who I worked with and later went on to head up wildlife in Kenya, and indeed Sylvia Earle and people of that kind. I can't remember them all right at this moment but many, many people. I'm very fortunate and honoured to have known them all.

Int: And which of all the different animal species, that are not human, have you been most fortunate to know, please?

MH: Elephants.

Int: Really?

MH: Yes.

Int: Why do you like elephants, please?

MH: I think if you have ever sat at dawn on the banks of the Luangwa river and waited for the kinship herds to aggregate on the other side in the controlled hunting area, before they come across the river, you realise how calm, well organised, intelligent these animals really are and co-operative which is the remarkable nature of it. Because although I'd observed this since boyhood, in fact the truth of their communication only came out very much later on. What we used to call their tummy rumbles and all the rest of it were something perhaps a little different. But I think that set in my mind a lasting impression of their value and indeed riding on Asian elephants in Chitwan National Park, and that sort of thing, also makes you realise how wonderful these particular animals are.

16. Oral histories that should be filmed

Int: If you were Derek Kilkenny-Blake, who's in charge of this wildlife history project which embraces, among other things, these oral interviews, who would you suggest we ought not to leave out? We're rushing up to Aubrey [Buxton] before he dies frankly.

MH: Yes, sure. Well, I don't know if he's on that much of a knife edge. He's a tough guy.

Int: No. But every letter says I'm nearly 90.

MH: I think film editors and film sound editors should really be part of that because they make an enormous contribution, quite often unsung.

Int: That very tall chap died, didn't he? What was his name?

MH: Les Parry.

Int: Give me a couple of names then, can you?

MH: What about film editors? Well, there was Les of course himself and there was Ramon Burrows and indeed one of our film editors, Richard Kemp, became a wildlife filmmaker himself.

Int: I didn't know he'd be, that's Richard and Julia [Kemp] who did the genet (14) film in Spain for example, nice couple, charming people. He was a film editor, I didn't know that, and for Survival.

MH: Yes.

END

Glossary

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

Apogee: The highest point or climax.

Cutting room: The room in which the editor works.

Kodachrome: Brand of color reversal film made by Kodak.

Limited liability company: Condition under which the loss that an owner (shareholder) of a business may incur is limited to the capital invested in the business and does not extend to personal assets.

Matriculation: admission to a group (especially a college or university).

Nyasaland: Country before Malawi which gained independence in 1964.

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

Rushes: The first, unedited prints of a film.

Womb to tomb: Film tracing a species life history, from birth to death.

Zoosome twosomes: Wildlife camera teams, normally husband and wife team.

References

1. *Disney's True Life Adventure* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1950-present)
2. *Tarzan films* (various from 1918-1999)
3. THE SEAS AROUND US (RKO, 1953, original book Rachel L Carson).
4. LONDON SCENE (Wildlife in London) (Anglia, tx. 1 February 1961)
5. *Countryman* (Anglia)
6. SERENGETI SHALL NOT DIE (Okapia films, 1959)
7. *National Geographic magazine* (National Geographic Society 1888-present)
8. *Animals in Action* (Survival) (Survival Anglia, 1988)
9. *Miami Vice* (Shown on BBC1, 1990)
10. *Life on Earth* (BBC, 1979)
11. *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* (NBC, 1963-present)
12. SECRETS OF THE AFRICAN BAOBAB TREE (Survival) (Survival Anglia, tx. 1971)
13. SURVIVAL SPECIAL: SAFARI BY BALLOON (Anglia, tx 24 December 1974)
14. Genet film

Copyright

All material contained in this document is © Wildscreen or its contributors.

For terms and conditions of use, please see www.wildfilmhistory.org/termsfuse