



## Peter Bale: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Peter Bale

**Name of interviewer:**

Barry Paine

**Name of cameraman:**

Alan Griffiths

**Date of interview:**

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**Place of interview:**

Bristol, United Kingdom

**Length of interview:**

c. 110 minutes

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### 1. How Peter came to work for the BBC

*Int: I am sitting with Mr Peter William Kenwood Bale on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> March in the ARKive Theatre of the at-Bristol complex in Bristol. We are going to record Peter William Kenwood Bale, I keep wanting to slip Endeavour into that you know.*

PB: It's P. Willy Ken.

*Int: Is it P. Willy Ken? William Kenwood Endeavour, you know, more style I should have thought. That's an out of date joke 50 years from now of course. But never mind, however. Peter, would you like to tell us something about yourself and I believe you're going to start way back almost when I was scarcely out of rompers in 1942 or 1943?*

PB: 1943, a memorable year for me certainly, because, it was in that year that I joined the Beeb [BBC]. 1943 - that's well over 50, 60 years ago. It seems a long time. I was aged 16 and had been playing with radio, and with films and theatre, spending hours in the local cinema, up behind the screen, looking at how the thing



worked - how it all worked. And I just couldn't wait to resolve all this by going professional.

I had no idea what that entailed because I simply applied for a job at the BBC here in Bristol and was interviewed by Dickie German, I remember. There were two people in that operation, Dickie German, and Norman Juree, who used to come after he'd retired every day to get his Radio Times (1). It was a whole operation of delight that I arrived and I spent the first few weeks going round the building, checking all the clocks in the studio, because they were all operated electrically, yes, but off batteries, and sometimes things went wrong. But I quickly discovered that the BBC operated on the clock. Everything was brand new to me - a sudden awareness.

Now, my official title was a Probationary Technical Assistant - a PTA. I was given a stopwatch as I've already said, and marched round doing whatever I could. But at the time here in Bristol, there was a remarkable chap called Dailey [Gerald Dailey], who was the Chief Engineer. And I was in Engineering Division. Gerald was a remarkable chap because the first thing he said was, "Well, old boy, what do you want to do?" That was the first thing and I said, "Sir, of course I would love to get as near the microphone as I can." "Splendid, we'll see what we can do. But before you do that will you come round with Dave Pearce and I'll give you a little job." So we went round the corner into one of the roads very near Whiteladies Road, here in Bristol and he opened the door and he produced a brown paper bag with some sugar in it and some milk in it and some tea bags, supplied by Miss Lawrence who was the then Manageress of the canteen.

Right off we go. "Now," he said, "I've got a little job for you to do. You will put into this 3-storey house, gas, water and electricity. And it's got nothing to do with the BBC but you'll be happy down here. You look after me, I'll look after you." Well now, dear Gerald, long since gone, but he had gone to Broadcasting House in Whiteladies Road and had chosen the houses that eventually became the studios and the offices of the BBC. That was my start. I was with Dave Pearce another old-timer, same age range, and we did a good job, apart from the fact that we dropped rolls of electric cable through the gaps in the floorboards, which were a problem. But we succeeded and at the end of this, 3 months, I suppose, "Now you said you wanted to get near the microphone, my boy?" That was one of his favourite sayings. I said, "Yes please, Sir." And he said, "Right we'll send you off to Wood Norton and to Evesham for a course then you'll come back fully qualified and you will cease being a Probationary Technical Assistant, you'll be a Technical Assistant, Class 2." And I thought, "Right, fine."

That was the way things happened at the beginning. And you've got to remember that Bristol, there was no sign of television, no thought of television at all. And it was full of strange people from London, because London had evacuated. Schools broadcasting was here and there are photographs around of all that period. And Variety Department was based at Weston. They took over a hotel there. And the Winter Gardens became a studio. So my first thoughts were nothing to do with natural history whatsoever. It was the sheer magic of being in a theatrical situation with artists and creative people, doing nothing for the region - when I joined it was the home service, and of the course the forces programmes. That was all there was from Bristol.

It became eventually necessary as the tension of the war began to ease off - we were returned to normal, I suppose you might say. So the sand bags went, and it was pretty primitive studio work I must say. And then it was decided to shift schools broadcasting back to London. And of course, we sound effects operators, which I'd already become - sound effects mixers, dubbing mixers really - were sent up with them because London had insufficient staff to cope with half a dozen programmes a day: sound effects, spinning discs, balance and control. So about five of us went back up to London, and it was from there that I was called up. Because you're in a reserved occupation in those days until you're 18 and a half, so I had 2 and a half years and then it was up to London and I went in the army from London.

But my initiation was remarkable and very enjoyable. But of course, people failed to realise that the Engineering Department, or the technical side of the BBC was run by 16, 17 year olds really. The control room here in Bristol and in London was full of youngsters who saw an opportunity and jumped on it. It's one of the great sadnesses I have, that that sort of opportunity is going away or is getting more and more distant. Nobody wanted jobs, "What happens in the BBC?" they all said. These were the listeners. It was a kind of magic place and you looked up and saw Broadcasting House. This was a precious, important spot. And the way we presented ourselves, the announcers presented themselves, just echoed this. Slightly detached, rather pompous you know, sad really. But all that was going to change.

*Int: So you were in the army?*

PB: I'm in the army, yes. I was in the army and I chose to be a gunner, and offered my services. I was asked, "What do you want to do Bale? 14174876." And I said, "Well I'd like to be a gunner." Because, there's a smart badge and then I was slipped sideways and told that I had to go home for a week and they'd call me to serve Her Majesty, or his Majesty in those days. So I went home and then I was ordered to come to my regimental headquarters, which, believe it or not was the territorial army base opposite the BBC in Whiteladies Road. So I came home again, and the first thing I did was march into the canteen in all my gear as a Lance Bombardier. Very quickly they recognized the talent! So I was a Lance Bombardier.

The gun site itself was out at Portbury which is now the site - well there were three gun sites. The one I was on is now Sheep Wash Lane, Sheep Dash Lane - one of the lanes going out to Portishead. I went there for Officer Training. I don't know how I managed that, but I finished that, went home and was told to wait for instructions again. I was then called to the War Office and I thought, "Well this must be something very important." It was. I was being despatched to the forces broadcasting service in Italy where I eventually went and had a marvellous, my war was absolutely marvellous it really was, I didn't fire a single shot. Although I got near it once in Italy when the Yugoslav difficulties were beginning to come to a head. But it was wonderful running a broadcast station with 15 Italians, 15 army personnel. The interesting thing is the Italian technicians knew their job backwards. They were brilliant. But what do you do with 15 throw outs really, who were useless in any other function in the army. They were sort of slipped sideways, forces broadcasting. But we made a good run of that. And I was asked to stay on. Major Lack, in the War Office, Eaton Square it was, phoned me up because there was complete freedom of manoeuvre because you were in forces broadcasting. It was open house to almost anything that you wanted to do and they said, "Stay on, my dear chap, we need you out there, re-broadcasting the overseas service of the BBC."

This is where the BBC began to re-emerge again because that's what we were doing for half the time. Half the broadcasting day was relaying the overseas service and, excellent. But I thought, no. The BBC have got to provide me, they have to take me back in the job, in the same job, or equivalent to the one I'd left. I thought, I don't want to throw up a career at the age of, well I was 18, 19 by then - 19, 20, I beg your pardon. I didn't want to throw it all up. So I declined and went back on the train through Austria, back onto the boat back home again. And back into London as a very still probationary or no, I was then a Technical Assistant Class 2. Which was a bit of a problem, because the Beeb [BBC] had to decide, what do they do with somebody who has been in broadcasting and was almost an office boy when he left - spinning discs and all the rest of it, this is crazy. And so I had to face that one, and then the jobs began to come up. I re-applied for a post at Bristol and within 6 months of returning home I was back in Bristol doing the same job as I was doing before. But, what a difference.



## **2. Early years at the BBC**

It's extremely difficult to know what had gone on over the 2 years, 3 years, but there was something in the wind. And that was really the telly: it was looming. And I can remember the days, when in order to get a glimpse at what television was like you weren't allowed to go to Alexandra Palace where it was all happening. They had a funny system in Broadcasting House in London, whereby you went down and asked for a 'ticket to view'. You applied for this and you were given a ticket and you went down into the bowels of Broadcasting House and there in the basement you opened a door and you went inside. And there was a large screen, 405 lines, grotty quality, but it was 405 lines and you could sit in front of this screen and be amazed with the first - that was my first glimpse of a television picture. But it was already spreading. Alexandra Palace was on the air again. And it was spreading. Sutton Coldfield was operational.

*Int: These weren't tests, these were—.*

PB: No, this was fully —.

*Int: This was live transmission from...*

PB: Sorry, I beg your pardon. There is this awful awareness at the BBC that you had to get authority to do almost anything. I mean there was no argument about it; you had to go in with a ticket. All you were doing was looking at a television picture, which was being transmitted at that time in London.

So I left London for Bristol with a firm awareness, solid awareness of the compelling attraction of the telly. And when I got to Bristol, this was when the fun started, because there were all the die-hard sound people. This is 1945, what am I talking about? 1945, 1946 - 1947. The die-hards in radio, with regional broadcasting opening up again and ideas for radio as it used to be, was suddenly being shifted sideways by a new crowd of people, a lot of them youngsters, saying, "Well look, that's old fashioned, that's the old way of doing things. We'll hang on to radio; yes we'll hang on to radio, but look what's just round the corner. We've got to have our feet in that, or hands on it somehow." The opportunity still existed though for me, and we used to do —. Isn't it funny how this goes on? I sort of run from one to the other. I must apply some stops - full stops. I'm sorry.

*Int: All I'm thinking is, this time with television in the wind, radio in full swing, but there must have been some natural history radio going on that you would have got involved in.*

PB: Yes. Well, could have done. But the trouble was, with the possibility of an outside broadcast unit coming to Bristol my interest just wandered from spinning discs for natural history programmes like *The Naturalist* (2) with Desmond Hawkins. Then there were a whole collection of them - very good radio shows, where I could do no more than be the mixer, or the provider of sound effects, play records, all that sort of thing. So I began to wander sideways again. And although it was a kind of family situation as well, I wanted to get as much done as I possibly could to experience everything. Natural history was there, but the magnetism of an outside broadcast, well it was a possibility. But before I got there I applied for a job as a reporter, here in Bristol, radio. As I had done a lot of broadcasting in Italy anyway, I felt I was in a position to cope.



And one day the Chief Announcer at Bristol. We had a Chief of everything then. A Chief Announcer, I ask you, said, "Well Peter, you've done a lot of this, come up and do a bit of announcing." And I thought, "Right, I'm always game." So, he said, "Right, today we're broadcasting the Camborne Town Band." I remember this: I thought this was just a regional operation. So I went upstairs, sat in front of the microphone in the continuity suite, all on my own, no one else there, with the knob in front of me. All I had to do was to turn it up and speak about six times during this half hour concert from the Camborne Town Band, who of course were down in Camborne. I was in Bristol, they were in Camborne.

And so I fade up my microphone, and in my, I suppose I was trying to imitate Hibbard, who was one of the key people, with my best possible voice because it was not now forces broadcasting where you could be very cheeky indeed. This was the West of England Home Service. I sat there and I did my announcements and faded the microphone up. Off went the band, played the first number. I go again, do my bit, the next band. At the end of it I walked out shaking a bit, but thinking, "Well, I haven't done too badly." I went downstairs to see Maurice Beafield, who was the announcer, the Chief Announcer at Bristol. And, he said, "Excellent, excellent, Peter." The phone went, and it was John Snagg. No lesser person than the Chief of Presentation very near the Director General really in authority. "Get that voice off. Don't ever let this happen again." And Maurice said to me, "Well, how did you know?" Of course what I'd overlooked and so had he, is that this local, West of England broadcast was being simultaneously broadcast throughout the country. Here was this whippersnapper in his 20s, when the oldest announcer must have been, professionally, about 60. You know, here was I moving in at the bottom.

So that was the end of my brief career but it started all over again as a reporter, because things were expanding and I had a marvellous 18 months doing that, based in Bristol, with one or two very good experiences. One was the —. There was the Avonmouth oil fire, where this oil, half the oil tanks went up in flames. I was marched out and I returned with smuts all over my face and everybody offering me cigarettes, "Oh, you've done so well." And I had talked out there to the Chief Fire Officer and I got a good interview. And I returned to Bristol. Because everything was recording cards, remember, disk - acetate disks. And Jimmy Corfield, I remember was the recording engineer, whose son is also in the BBC, doing the same job. And Jimmy came up and said, "Great." We rushed back to Bristol. I had one disk, which I put on the turntable and said to the Programme Engineer, "Start there, it's roughly there - you'll have to find it. After I've done the introduction, I'll give you the thumbs up," you see. So we went on the air for Points West (3) this was, still the same nightly news programme.

*Int: Points West (3) in 1950?*

PB: Points West in 19—, yes indeed. What else can I say, because it's like?

*Int: What happened when you got the disk on the —?*

PB: Well, yes, I said, right - thumbs up through the glass screen, and the needle went down and there was the interview, with me asking all sorts of relevant, I hoped, questions. And, it was 'make do'. But you see all around you, you had this gathering of people, who you felt very sincerely were on your side. And I think this was echoed right through my career that there is this huge degree of support for a good group of people who want to be as professional as they can be and are given opportunities to be like that. I mean, why should that announcer, unless he was trying to make a fool of me, and I don't think he was. But he said, "Come on, try." So I tried.

I've done just about everything else because, mixing, introducing programmes. I can remember appearing on



a Children's Hour (4), because remember Children's Hour (4) was running as well. I sort of played the piano for schools broadcasting, who wanted an example of a rampaging youth in a club, playing as best he can. Well I could do that quite easily by playing as best I could, which wasn't very good. Where do we go from here, now?

*Int: Can I just take you back for the moment to the Points West (3)? Because was there television actually. Points West (3) that was television? You did a radio report, was it, this oil fire?*

PB: That's right. There was the weekly programme, which was the Week in the West (5), and there was the nightly news. This was only radio. Nightly news. Which was the West of England News. I remember how it was introduced. I think it was Points West (3). I'm a bit distant over this.

*Int: You think they called it —.*

PB: I'm pretty sure it was.

*Int: This was the BBC News from the west of England?*

PB: Yes that's right. And remember we were covering a huge area that included from Lands End round to Bournemouth and up to Cheltenham. And it was a huge area.

*Int: As far as Brighton, possibly wasn't it? Right over into the west, curiously, the transmitter coverage?*

PB: Radio, there were several. But for radio first of all. Yes, true. There were transmitters in various areas, but they were linked together and they all transmitted the same thing. Until there was separation but that came very much later with the arrival of the telly.

### **3. The transition between radio and television**

PB: One story I'd like to tell which bridges between radio and television. As a reporter I was sent down to Cornwall to Truro Cathedral to get the story out of the steeplejacks that were working on the tower, which was beginning to fall apart. There was a lot of maintenance to do there. And I went there, and brandishing a microphone went up to one of the team, family in fact, of steeplejacks and said, "Interview?" "Yes, delighted." And I said, "Right, fine, now let's do the story." And he said, "Oh no, not here, up there." And, I looked up and I said, "What do you mean, the tower?" And he said, "No, right on top. If you get there, I'll give you an interview." Well this very challenging. Again it was Jimmy Corfield as the engineer at the bottom. So with a series of ropes, I just watched all this from the ground, they hauled the microphone cable all the way up, up to the top. And then I said, "Are you sure that's where I've got to go?" "That's where you're going. No interview if you don't."

So we climbed up inside the tower of Truro Cathedral and then into the open air. And then I looked up and there was the spire. And of course, as you know, with all spires, they're like that [makes spire shape with two hands together] but they bulge out there, and these ladders were going outwards before they went inwards.

Well, I found the tower fairly easy to cope with. I was a younger chap because now I'd be horrified. And the steeplejack was right behind me. I must say, he was a good man, because I knew there was a degree of safety. But he helped me up onto the top. I sat down, picked up the microphone and spoke to Jim and said, "Well, I'm here. Are you ready?" "Yes, go." So off we went. I was then told, "No, it's not to be standing, you've got to sit on the cross." So I had to sit on the cross with the microphone and interview this chap. Remember again, there was very little, because of the size of the region, it illustrates how difficult it was to get material like that for a weekly magazine. It meant every week the couple of recording cars had to get back to Bristol with the goods that you had picked up during the week.

So I travelled endlessly round the West Country. The interview itself was: an interview. But I got my photograph in the local paper down there, and I don't know whether I did myself an awful lot of good. I'd never do it again, because I've got a sort of horror of heights, really. But we did that.

*Int: And you had to paint this picture of sitting on the cross of the cathedral?*

PB: Absolutely, yes oh, yes. But your imagination runs wild, the adrenalin runs and you say, "Here I am." All this was a good support for making me feel that I knew something about what I was doing and that I could do all sorts of things. I didn't know where it would end, but I'd have a go.

And then of course the final stage, it was a matter of weeks later after that story, when Pat Beech, I can remember saying, "Right. You've applied for the job of Stage Manager with the outside broadcast unit. Now, you can start off by going over to Wenvoe and getting a three minute piece on the arrival of television in the West." This is not a television camera you understand. It was just that Wenvoe was going on the air. Nobody had any cameras anywhere. All they had were the old fashioned microphones. So I went over to Wenvoe and did a powerful piece, colour piece, about the arrival of television which hadn't arrived and the excitement that everybody would feel by being able to tune in and see a picture in your home, even though it was 405 lines of relative, compared with the quality now, very poor images.

*Int: And the BBC owned the transmitter.*

PB: The BBC owned me, the cable we used, the car we used to get there, and the transmitter, of course. Everything was owned by the BBC. Because there was nowhere else to go at that stage, you were alone. I did a powerful piece. And interestingly, I can remember including in it, because it wasn't recorded - this was live into the news, into the West of England News. Because I looked across North Devon and West Somerset and there was the biggest, greyest, darkest, blackest cloud I had ever seen. And of course, that turned out to be the night of the Lynmouth flood disaster, where the heavens opened and lives were lost.

But you see, here again, as a result of that, it was not I or other reporters, who were sent down to cover the Lynmouth disaster. This had to be a London man, because this was a national story. We could do what we wanted locally in the West with our own transmitter, our own reporters, our own news bulletins. But the moment anything really big happened you were removed from the scene really and the London man came down. So it was in that climate that I moved into television.

I became Stage Manager to Nicky Crocker, who was the Producer. And it was that - Television Outside Broadcast Producer. And I was television —, we belonged to London in a sense. So it was great big arguments going on in the background, which is politics again.

#### 4. Early outside broadcasts for the BBC

*Int: We had a coronation coming up didn't we?*

PB: Absolutely. And everything was geared for that. I was not wanted as a Stage Manager. Nicky was not wanted. It was just the gear that they wanted in London. So it was a bit of a struggle trying to work out how programmes like Out of Doors (6), I remember, Jeffery Boswall. Out of Doors (6). Now it wasn't out of doors - it was Out of Doors (6) indoors. I don't think that's my line, I think Tony Soper used this line.

But you see we moved the cameras, the best we could do was to move the cameras into the studio. And even then, there was a limit to what you could do. Technically the apparatus was primitive in the sense that there were four lenses on the front, and you had a handle in the middle and you had to swing the lenses. You either had a wide angle, a narrower angle, or a very close up, so you could get close up. But this was swung by hand by the cameraman and it went, "Click, click, click. Click, click, click." It had already happened on film but now this was one of the burdens we had of technical equipment taking priority over everything else. The engineer, the technician was all-powerful because there was this delicate piece of equipment that had to be used properly or not used at all.

And remember again, it had doubled the staffing of the BBC at Bristol, which was another problem: from 50 or 60 people in sound-only days - doubled straight away. As the unit moved out to an aircraft hanger at Whitchurch airport, which was their first home. That sounded great, but there was another problem here, which was the Unit had to be shared with Wales. Half the time Wales were going to do their thing, sometimes in Welsh, and then we'd have it back and we'd do our thing.

And I think we all knew that the big symbol of success was going to be Slimbridge, because Peter Scott was there. He'd done a lot of work in the studio, mainly in London in those early days before we had the cameras. But the moment the camera and the mobile unit was available it was selected for obvious things. Badminton Horse Trials, one example where they would fix points in our schedule, where the **OB** unit was booked, really, and you had to do the best you could around that, to do the things you wanted to do. Natural history programmes was high on that list if you like. But of course you could never do more than have a studio. So that you could put the cameras into a studio, Peter Scott could introduce film clips, or film stories, or they could interview - they could do all that sort of thing, that was fine.

*Int: This was where Desmond Hawkins had come onto the production scene?*

PB: And of course, Desmond, who was, absolutely right, the key man in all this, without a doubt, was Desmond Hawkins. Who had turned natural history into a kind of brilliant speck on the horizon of radio, particularly within in the West region. His very subtle way of getting people like Ludwig Koch, I remember and his marvellous sound recordings of, "Ze waves, breaking on ze beach." This fascinating man. And Desmond took it all and turned it into a kind of magical experience. Natural history became available through radio, but it became something entirely different and eventually very commercial when it got to television.

The first programmes I admit, that we did, were, pretty basic. Let's take Slimbridge - the first broadcast from there - live **OB**. Remember nobody could record anything. If you wanted to record it was done on film, in one place, which was in London. So if you had a live show, Badminton Horse Trials, is a good example, where you went on the air but you wanted to repeat it, as a pull together on Saturday night say - that had to be



recorded on film in the bowels of Lime Grove.

*Int: 35 mm?*

PB: 35 mm. Miles and miles and miles of 35 mm, much of which went down the drain, either because the quality was poor or it was unnecessary, because it didn't show the winner. Because again, three cameras only, Badminton Horse Trials, and a very limited run on the cable. So nothing like radio cameras they were unheard of. These were all plugged in on a cable. And the cable used to get wet and muddy and nasty out at Badminton. Year after year we had the same problem - of trouble with the camera, because of the cable. These were the kind of hazards.

And it wasn't only from the BBC's point of view. Peter Scott had in those days a very small set up. There was no big house out at Slimbridge. They were certainly living there, or in the houseboat on the canal, and there were one or two huts and offices there. But there was one electric cable snaking its way on a post, on a series of posts, up from the village to Slimbridge. And of course there was not enough energy in that simple, single wire to provide everything for Slimbridge and everything for the BBC. We needed a bit of juice too to make everything work. The outcome of all this though, was collusion, between the engineers and BBC technicians and with Slimbridge. And our line was, BBC's line, was, "We need more power - do you realise that this important function out at Slimbridge is being held up, hazarded, by the inability of - I think it was SWEB - to supply the right kind of power in the right place."

We got the power, certainly it arrived, but it was still very hazardous, because the cable length was very limited, and, let's face it, flocks of wild geese - Canada geese, classic example, are not particularly happy about men trundling heavy metal gear down, and lifting heavy cameras and putting them up. It was all, it was far from satisfactory, but it had been done and it opened up a whole new area of awareness, I think, more than anything else. That one broadcast changed everything and it also meant that rather, David Attenborough for example was going all out at his end, in London. But again they'd already had a studio up there which they could use, and he could do his live introductions to the various safari operations that he was doing. So there was support there all the time. You felt there was someone in London who just looked on and was full of encouragement.

And we did something for him as well by saying, "Here is live television, this is what you can do." I think for many of us though, it was quickly aware that this wasn't the way to get natural history on the air. If you had an animal, apart from elephants in the studio, which happened. You could bring a horse in, you could bring big animals, small animals in cages. It was somehow false. There was, it was the wrong place for these creatures. They were living in their world, and in order to show what really happens we had to get out to that world. I don't think outside broadcasts would ever, could ever, do that. We could go to zoos - we did a whole series of Great Zoos of the World (7), great wildernesses of the world, great parks of the world. You could go on and on.

*Int: Ah, but you're moving into film now aren't you?*

PB: This was exactly it. This was obviously the answer: film, film, film. So there was a degree of disappointment I think that these outside broadcast cameras were too heavy, solid, really to have —. How could one make better use of these things?

## 5. Developing new techniques for natural history outside broadcasts

*Int: So there you were doing Songs of Praise (8) and the Natural History Unit was filming.*

PB: Absolutely. But the Natural History Unit had to get —. There was a film unit, but again it was black and white, so we still weren't there. And even when colour outside broadcast cameras came along, and it was finally possible to move the cameras into the studio for the first time. Because we turned one radio studio, in which during the war by the way, Sir Adrian Bolt had conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra, during a blitz. And the lamps, I never saw this, but I'm told, the lights were swinging in the roof as the orchestra played merrily on. That studio became a television studio and it meant that orchestras, the West of England Light Orchestra for example, could no longer perform in there, because the floor had to come up. We had to take this rather nice wood block floor up, because of course, you move a camera forward, on wheels, as the cameraman here knows only too well, it starts all this - and we had primitive dollies, I mean they were unbelievably dreadful, and they'd squeak and the parquet floor would rise and make life embarrassingly difficult for the cameraman, and for the producer for that matter.

But, they survived and outside broadcasts went on. I still have to admit to having a sneaking regard for live television. It's not for me to talk about film, because there are others who have used it so well over the years. But let's face it. Put something on film, or on tape and it's history. It's not for real. This is the one thing the **OB** camera did and so it was with great pleasure that I sort of puzzled over this, wanting to get live programmes back on the air if it was possible within the Natural History Unit. Film was ok, you had complete control, you could do what you like when you get back to the cutting room. But as we see every week for the moment, from Planet Earth (9), it's having the right gear in the right place. The right piece of equipment in the right place, at the right time. There's nothing to touch it from the point of view of presenting natural history.

Then I was walking round —. I recall walking round the studios here in Bristol again and noticing some very primitive black and white cameras, which were in a store. And I thought, "I wonder, I wonder what would happen?" Because people were beginning to use old cameras, black and white cameras, for surveying difficult places in the city. You could have a camera focused and you could see what was happening and catch ne'er do wells basically. And I was wondering whether we could use this. And I spoke to my colleagues and we had a good old chat about it and came to the conclusion that it might be possible to use these old cameras, at no additional expense, because the BBC was beginning to get sensitive about spending of money. Absolutely right. But here was something that had been rejected and we might be able to use again.

I was doing a programme with David Macdonald, this was in The World About Us series (10), about foxes (11), and he had a huge tennis court area in Oxford. And he was observing the behaviour of wild foxes really. And he had one area where, Niff was her name, that's it, that's what I was hunting for. Niff, was the name of the fox who was pregnant, and he had her in this vast enclosure. But of course, the moment night came, we could do nothing. It would be easy to film during the day, or we could use a live camera if we'd wanted to, but that again was far too expensive.

We created the first ever night shot of foxes, by having the camera mounted on an electrically controlled panning head, so we could do vertical movements and pan as well. And eventually we were able to zoom as well. But that was far, far ahead. And we got these first recordings, these were not live, these were recordings using an old black and white camera, looking more like a very primitive infra-red camera, because they were very sensitive to the infra-red range. And we got splendid behaviour from foxes for the first time. But, it was on tape.



*Int: This is the big tape, the tube?*

PB: Well, actually. Here again, this is how —. Again it's an example of how the Natural History Unit particularly was able to fudge the system, to use the system. We were not allowed to use anything other than Ampex, or its equivalent for recording professional material. And it then had to be edited and all the rest of it. You had to present a case if you wanted to put that material onto the old ¾ inch, 1 inch tape, which went spool to spool. We had several of those thrown out from Alexandra Palace, of these recorders. We managed to get one of them up to Oxford. So we were completely independent of technical worries or of unions, or anything else. Quite easy, we recorded miles and miles of this behaviour. Then we had to fight the battle of getting that onto, transferred onto, Ampex - wide tape, for future use, so that we could put it on the air.

And I can remember spending quite some time at Alexandra Palace - it was mainly unions who were worried. They saw a dilemma here, and in a way I understand it. We were getting footage, without the excellent support of one, a cameraman, because you know we could operate that thing ourselves, why would you want a cameraman? And then getting it on tape and saying, "You know, we don't want the video tape man, you can go away. It's already there, it's already done." Because, we had it there, all you've got to do is copy it for us. Not easy. But as we only wanted a very limited area for the first programmes it was agreed that we could take x minutes' worth and transfer it. So we had to battle, again the climate of opinion at Bristol, and because it was natural history, there was a sort of - you could use an extra lever all the time.

The next, it was not long before we wanted to do, and this is mainly my colleagues, it was not long before we wanted to do a live show using this equipment. Because things had got better, we had better infra-red lighting. It was more readily available; we could use two cameras, which helped. So we could have one on a wide angle and the other to zoom in because we had zooms by then to zoom in onto some particular behaviour. And that's how Badger Watch (12) was born.

The reasoning behind this was that we needed a limited area over which we could operate the cameras. We couldn't do a whole field; we had to get into an area where we knew there were badgers and where we could operate through the day and through the night as well. So these remote cameras and the lighting was all fixed and all the controls were moved into a van, which was in fact an old sound vehicle, up in the bushes behind. But we had cameramen, the cameraman was needed to operate the camera. But he wasn't operating in the immediate vicinity, he was 300 yards away. The lighting was good and we could see the whole thing as dusk descended and the artificial light came on. And the great thrill when we were beginning to see movement - you would hear scuttlings and then you would get stuff. And we had, I don't know how the planners managed it, but they would say, "Yes, alright, we'll allow you 15 minutes." Or was it 20 minutes? I think it was. Every day of the week. We ran Monday through to Friday, 20 minutes a night.

We were able to record then, of course, on wide angle, wide tape, proper tape, and we could transmit that from the outside broadcast location. So we had control of that. And then, just before we went on the air, this is Sod's law isn't it, just before we went on the air we noticed some ruffling in the beech tree in front of us. And there was a baby owl, not a baby, baby owl, but a baby owl climbing up - it had fallen out of the nest and its mother was up in the nest with these great big eyes, trying to fathom out what was happening. And we saw this bird, it's the first time this had ever been involved - that a fallen baby owl can in fact get back to its nest.

And of course some clever guy in the Daily Mirror (13) took this shot off the air. He was, I think, hopeful. Probably it was just a chance. This was on the Monday night - we'd recorded it there and showed it again

[www.wildfilmhistory.org](http://www.wildfilmhistory.org)



within the programme. And he took this photograph and we had an article - full half spread just where we wanted it in the Daily Mirror (13) on the Monday night. Probably short of a story, but it filled the gap and did an awful lot for us, because the audience went up on the following night.

People will always argue, "Why should you have done that for a badger?" Which, let's face it, when we look at the arguments going on now, here were we showing lovely animals behaving very happily, you know, breeding away happily and causing no offence. And yet we knew at the time of the broadcast of course, there was a simmering underneath about the future of the badger population. Now, I would argue that we did exactly the right thing by highlighting this. We weren't going political at all. We were just saying, "This is happening around us. You can repeat this sort of thing in badger sets and around badger sets throughout the country."

I think it became a very good example of the way in which natural history programmes on television can present, not all the facts that surround the life of those animals, but it can also raise important issues. Which continues to be very important. And I think that element of live outside broadcasts - live stroke recorded outside broadcasts. I think they'll always be there because I do have that special feel for live rather than history - of now rather than history. I agree it's got to be balanced - you have to balance the two. But I sincerely hope that it will continue.

## **6. The introduction of colour**

PB: Black and white was always a part of a developing story: it was never an end in itself. Monochrome television was just half way there. It had been used quite well, or to the best of its ability, it had been used by producers here, cameramen in the field, and one thinks of Armand and Michaela Denis, who, I mean it was not the kind of broadcasting that any of us wanted to emulate, but that was purely in the production of the material in the camera. And I think most of that was shot in colour, I seem to recall, in South Africa. But, it was, most of it was shown in black and white over here because of the lack of colour transmission. So everyone was seeking all the time, "Let's get colour, let's get colour, let's get colour."

I have to say that this was nothing to do with the outside broadcast cameras, because we were still really —. The cameras themselves and the **OB** unit were really a part of the BBC network. They were used according to which football match had to be played, what about Come Dancing (14), of which I did so many, they were great fun to do, but they're nothing to do with natural history. Well it's another kind of natural history if you like. They were fun to do, always, and very popular. But it would have been so nice to be able to get natural history, for which I'd always had this sort of soft spot. I'd always felt that I was on the perimeter of natural history because of the background that I've tried to indicate of news reporter, everything you can: a sound engineer, a cameraman, at a time, for news, purely by accident but that's what had happened, and I'd seen all that happen. And here was black and white, "What do we do? What can we do?" Eventually I was sidetracked into film, we all were really, because we knew film was so convenient. It's the ideal way of doing it. My own view is that I don't think it'll change.

*Int: Did you ever have to be instructed about colour? I mean, I was. I had to go on a course at Lime Grove.*

PB: No, nobody ever told me how to do anything.

*Int: Well you didn't need it really Peter, did you? You were a natural.*



PB: This is how you, I mean imagine now, I've seen, since I left the BBC, I've suppose I've been visited by half a dozen youngsters. I can think of four particular ones who have said, "Peter, how do I become a cameraman?" And as every cameraman knows, you don't learn how to do, how to become a natural history cameraman, or any other cameraman, or a sound recordist. You just hang around film crews. This is how you discover the real world. That's how I discovered broadcasting, really, long before I joined the BBC I was hanging around the cinema trying to find out how film works and how you project images onto a screen and that the sound is related to, you know, is ahead of the picture, and all the mechanics of television. But nevertheless, colour made a world of difference.

*Int: And that would have come as OBs first, did it operate on the drive-in principle? Was it a colour thing - they had colour cameras which would be —?*

PB: For a while we had colour cameras on a drive-in basis in the studio. I'm thinking particularly of Life (15), was one series wasn't it? And various children's programmes. But in the outside broadcast context, I don't think colour played a significant, or rather television outside broadcasts certainly couldn't make use, to huge effect of —.

*Int: Apart from snooker, I suppose.*

PB: Snooker is a classic example, isn't it? Yes, snooker, absolutely brilliant. Tennis, I suppose, was made – sport, generally, was given a new dimension. But again that was only half of my life with television. I still felt very much on the edge of the Natural History Unit. But then I think it gave me perhaps an opportunity to say to myself, that sounds interesting, or that looks interesting. I'm no specialist. I have no special knowledge of natural history at all. I drifted into it through asking questions I suppose really. Just saying, now why is that so? What happens here? I wonder if we could do so-and-so to get so-and-so? This was the kind of thinking that went on. I think with large numbers of people were thinking this way.

*Int: And you were a people person – so you knew how to put people on the screen.*

PB: I suppose I was.

*Int: Thinking of Animal People (16).*

PB: I was much happier with you than, you know. Yes, now, wait a minute. We had a series, thank you very much. You say I was a people person. One wonderful guy I had known for many years was Frank Sawyer, a river keeper on —, in —. I'll begin again, because there's no point in telling a story all wrong.

*Int: Hampshire – was it Hampshire?*

PB: No, Wiltshire, Hampshire, well it starts in Wiltshire.



There's one remarkable story (17), I think, which I cherish very much, which is a particular chap. I am a people person, I agree. And this guy was called Frank Sawyer. Frank Sawyer was a river keeper on the Wiltshire Avon, which eventually went into the Hampshire Avon. A remarkable man, self-taught of the art of river management. And a delightful countryman, quiet, restrained, spent his life out of doors with his dog on his stretch of river. Frank had been used quite a lot in radio because he had this soft Wiltshire edge, countryman Wiltshire edge, to his voice and he'd done quite a lot of broadcasting. But he was very nervous about it, hated it. He didn't like projecting himself in this way. It seemed artificial to him.

But the moment we got a picture there, and I did two live broadcasts with him on the River Avon, and he was quite at home. The moment he got to his river, he was fishing, and he would do you a powerful piece. The sadness was that with all these camera crews around, imagine what any fisherman would say, "Well, look, come on, clear this shambles away. You're cluttering the works up. I want to catch a fish," you know, "and I'm not going to do it this way." Sadly, whilst we were doing the two live black and white pictures, **OB** shows, with him - he never caught a fish. And this always added up to disappointment, frankly.

And then later on there was this series of Animal people (16). And I suggested, "Well we must do Frank Sawyer." And we shot that film in three days on the River Avon on his patch in superb weather. And we could just afford to have a helicopter to get an aerial shot. And we put him at one point on the helicopter, this is Frank on the helicopter, to show him the river, and —. Okay fine, but do you know, we were not allowed to use colour film. We could put colour film in the camera. Maurice Fisher was the cameraman. But, "No, you cannot use colour because it's in short supply because we've run out of money." It's finance, basically, that was doing it. So there were restrictions all the time placed on you in those early days. I mean it's laughable now when you consider the improvement in stock. The tape has revolutionised life.

## **7. Technology of outside broadcasts**

*Int: Your next sortie with the Natural History Unit. Was that then Great Zoos of the World (7)?*

PB: Great Zoos (7). Yes, it would have been.

*Int: Lots of Come Dancing (14) and lots of Songs of Praise (8).*

PB: Songs of Praise (8), Come Dancing (14), News from the Zoos (18). Those were the black and white ones, way back.

*Int: That would have been with James Fisher, I think, was it?*

PB: News from the Zoos (18) was with James, a very primitive version - mostly black and white I seem to recall. Where we were using Bristol Zoo, long before Johnny Morris turned up obviously, because that was just a mile and a half up the road. And I recall, because it was just a mile away, they could send the picture back for recording over a telephone line, or a series of telephone lines. Because the restriction of getting your picture and sound back from the **OB** location into the television chain was totally aggravating in those days. Very different now, because you use satellites, just one up and one down.



*Int: It brings to mind the fleet review actually that you did. Now that was a lot of pictures going from ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore. The technology was getting very sophisticated.*

PB: You were there

*Int: I was there.*

PB: You remember. This was a wonderful visual occasion using a London outside broadcast unit because it was the only one that was free. Which was lifted onto the deck of an aircraft carrier onto the lift, which brings the aircraft up, and it was taken down safely. And we operated as a normal outside broadcast. And we went to sea. And this was the review of the fleet by Her Majesty the Queen Mother.

She always had a very special relationship with the sea anyway. She loved the sea and she was a marvellous sailor, I mean she did amazingly. We went down to Torbay where this fleet would be reviewed, and it was drawn out in a line five miles long I suppose, something like that. And a storm blew up overnight and we honestly thought we would never get back to the ships, because we all came ashore overnight after setting everything up. And I remember we had one of the atomic submarines lying alongside the aircraft carrier. So it was all happening.

And, in the morning, Ted Bragg was with the London outside broadcast unit and we were going to be at sea sending our picture back by radio, sorry isn't it funny how the – sending our picture back by transmitted picture to - was it you? No it was Peter, who was on the mainland. Start Point, was it Start Point? One of the —.

*Other: Berry Head.*

*Int: Berry Head - who can forget Berry Head?*

PB: Berry Head. I'll go back over this again. It was quite a simple operation to get the picture and the sound to the mainland from an aircraft carrier, sort of out sight from the mainland. I think we could be seen, but it was very distant. And we had three cameras - they were all on the aircraft carrier. After this storm, where we thought we wouldn't get out to the ship from shore. But it was managed and we all clambered aboard up a net over the side of the aircraft carrier.

And I remember Ted Bragg going in and did the one thing that no television engineer should ever do, which is to press all the switches, "Bang, bang, bang, bang." High tension, low tension, the lot. He switched everything on. There was a flurry of images, and everything was working. And within five minutes we were sending a picture out. But one of the riggers was on one of the cameras. There was a sound engineer operating another camera because we'd had to leave some of the crew behind. And we struggled through. But the outcome was the most marvellous quality of image, due I think to the fact that the storm had cleared. And after a storm like that you tend to get this vivid light and you could see for miles. And people were remarking about the quality of the pictures. It was nothing special about the cameras. They were the best of course. But it was a marvellous experience.



*Int: But all the links had to be at virtually line of sight didn't they? I mean you had no satellite systems or anything like that.*

PB: No satellite – although I was in on the Telstar. That was when Telstar was first.

*Int: 1963*

PB: There was no way. You had to get line of sight to shore and then hop your way into London or wherever the next simultaneous broadcast point was. It was no good going into the nearest BBC transmitter because they still had the problem of getting it back to London to send up to Birmingham and the North. So it was never easy.

## **8. The use of film**

*Int: And then you were off into film really, with the Great Zoos of the World (7).*

PB: The Great Zoos of the World (7). That again was a kind of defeat for me. I mean, I was hauled over the coals by the outside broadcast crew for several years over my abandonment of outside broadcasts. I did my best, and a good example of that was Fox Watch (19), Badger Watch (12), Bird Watch (20) as well up to a point began to —. We were still trying to use it. But somehow the excitement had gone out of it because everyone had seen all this, and said, “Oh! Ah! Look at that picture. We knew that one. We’ve been there.” And it was in a way a disappointment that the live bit vanished or began to reduce in desirability. It was also expensive, and it’s important to make the point that you can go around the world with a live outside broadcast and it’s going to cost you to hire equipment half way round the world.

I remember doing a long discussion with SABC in South Africa about the possibility of going live from a water hole. We had chosen a water hole and selected the way of doing this. And of course then the unions clamped in because of the political apartheid influenced natural history. So we must always remember that natural history is a political tool as well as entertainment.

*Int: There was one attempt called In Deepest Britain (21) which was a little experiment.*

PB: Chris Parsons and I have always felt the same about - instant, getting near, upfront as you can. And he was stuck, I mean he admitted it to me, he said, “Look, I’ve got a 50 minute gap in summer.” It was a summer programme, “You’ve done several In Deepest Britains (21) where you’ve gone out for a one day stand. Why don’t we do a 50 minuter and use another crew?” So we’d use three crews - film crews: film, film, film. And we started each end of a walk. We’ll choose an area, somewhere in England, and we’ll film our way through with a couple of experts, or a couple of observers, really - people who are knowledgeable about the countryside and can speak about it. So Chris went from one end into the middle, where, conveniently there was a pub, by the way, and I started at the other end and worked, conveniently, to the pub.

And it was an awful risk, because, again, you take a chance, you see - is it going to be raining? You’re committed to transmission, which I remember, was five days later, so it was a rush job anyway. We had to get the film shot, back in the cutting rooms, off to the laboratories for processing. We were still processing

film in those days, join the whole thing together and hope it would work. Oh, and put the titles on and superimpose, you know, all that.

We chose an area - I'm just trying to think of the name of the —. It's on one of the canals in central England, just south of Birmingham. But it's in the heart of the countryside, with just about everything you can think of: streams, bird life, huge, huge bird life. And we didn't communicate at all during the day. And we shot, on no occasion did we shoot parallel, did we both shoot the same thing at the same time. It's another way of doing economical programme making, because you don't use a huge number of staff to do that. You've just got two or three. I remember Maurice Tibbles was the third cameraman. We sat him on his own in a sort of reed bed, and he had no sound at all. "No, we won't overburden you Maurice," we said to the cameraman. "Now, just film whatever you can here, just enjoy yourself." And he did remarkably well, and he added his voice afterwards, because we knew it was going to be a pukker job. And, dear Maurice, yes. So that was —.

*Int: So it was a curious hybrid sort of - it was film emulating an **OB** or the other way round wasn't it?*

PB: Yes, except we couldn't have moved.

*Int: You had to sort of hope things were going to happen.*

PB: Yes, but you see now you could do it again actually, with a hand held mobile camera, if you could get over the business of how you get a picture out of undergrowth with a live camera. I can't really see it happening. But you could certainly record - but recording is history, that's all. We were historical with that concept. I'd have much preferred to have been live. But whether we would have just been excited by it ourselves, whether the audience would have spotted it, difficult to know. I still think they do.

## **9. Canal films**

*Int: You mention a canal, so now I am determined to get you to talk about the canal films that you did.*

PB: Ah, that was marvellous. There was one chap who rings now in my mind, and that's the father of the editor of The Telegraph (22), Mac [Macdonald] Hastings. Well he was. I begin again - sorry, that's a jumbled way to start, no help to anybody.

There was a journalist, now long since dead, Mac Hastings, who appeared on television endlessly during the early black and white days, from London - do we remember Tonight (23)? Donald Baverstock, who came to me after I'd made this series of six programmes about the canals using Mac Hastings. Donald came to me and he said, "Right, boyo? I wish I'd got there first. I'd have done that better than you did." That was praise indeed in those days.

But Mac had this quality of brilliant journalism. He was a war correspondent as well. And you only had to present a series of situations to him and he'd look at it, observe it, and write notes. He was always very particular. He'd write, not the whole word for word, but just headings. He'd then go away, think for a moment, then he'd say, "Right, I'm ready Peter." Well you have been there, you've seen him work. And there are two occasions I can think of. One is in a narrow boat, which was onshore, as an example by the inland

waterways to show what life was really like on a narrow boat on the canals of England (24).

I remember taking him into this and saying, "Well there you are Mac." And he'd look at this and say, "Marvellous. All I want's a camera here, and I'll be ready now. No notes, I'm ready to go." And he told a superb story just, straight to camera, on a wide angle lens, inside this living boat, showing how the beds folded up into the wall, how madam used to boil her food, boil her water, and the containers where the food was kept, where the family slept, where the children slept. And he did a complete four-minute piece I suppose, because it ran over. It's that sort of quality, again it's an example of my big thing about going live. He did that virtually live. I know it was recorded, but no inter-cut, we didn't cut anything, we didn't shoot anything extra. It was just Mac in exactly the right situation and a good journalist at work - hard to beat.

Now there's one other story with Mac. We were going into the Standedge Tunnel. This is one of the canals up North, and Mac had a particular thing about the countryside and the country, he was a countryman, but he was a countryman in the sense that he shot things. He had his rifle and he had his binoculars and he had his shotgun. And he would march out with all the gear: the boots, the hat - marvellous. And he wanted to impress us with the fact that the tunnel, of which we were just inside - we were going to go through and we did too. We went through, just inside, he said, "This will give you some idea of how long it is." And he got his rifle, shotgun, put the gunpowder in, he stuffed everything in, held it up like this [raises hands up], and we all turned away. And "Bang!" And of course it echoed and echoed and echoed and echoed. He was so delighted, like a small boy, just thrilled to bits with the whole thing.

And it was on that same tunnel where, again he did this brilliantly. This particular canal was used for the building of the railway line that ran alongside it. And so in various places they'd shoved holes through the wall in the building of the railway, so they could offload all the waste and the stone and the earth, into barges to take it out and dump it. So that at one point, or several points actually in this canal, you could look through into British Rail doing their stuff. And it shows you the sort of impish, childish, perhaps it was me as well, way that Mac had. He did, "I'll do a piece," you know, and you cue in, and he goes off and he simply does a piece to camera. And I forget the exact words, I couldn't be expected to remember, because it's all wasted now, it's gone, never be seen again, which is sad. He said, "But there are other things going on deep underground, there are other sounds. Listen." And he'd turn to look through this, and of course we then cut a shot of a 'Whoo-ooo-oooo' of a diesel, coming up hell for leather. Which he loved, and, and it's just the magic enjoyment of those sort of live moments, because that to me was a live moment. Just as we had just completed the last programme in the series, we were at the top of the Leeds Liverpool canal. And there's a - I think it's a five-rise lock.

*Int: Bingley.*

PB: Bingley.

*Int: Bingley five rise.*

PB: You know it?

*Int: I was with you. I was there.*



PB: Was this all part of the same? I thought it was another programme. And he did his closing piece - slightly nervous - because if he was rattled, or things weren't exactly as he wanted, he could be awkward. And he did a powerful piece standing at the top. And then right in the middle of this take, there was - on a very grey day - there was a roll of thunder, in the distance. And he mastered it. I thought, "Don't stop, don't stop, let it go." And he did, he just allowed it to happen, and rode on through with his words - again, make the most of every moment as we all do if we possibly can. But that kind of journalism for television is to my mind much misused and in fact, all too often, it's not used at all, much to the disappointment of people like me.

### **10. Farnborough Air Show story**

In reincarnation, may I tell you one slightly rude story, ok? I'll do it again if you want to get it Mike - up to you. Liz has heard this one, so I'm not fussed. Right, one of the outside broadcasts every year, for me and Jack Belasco, Jack was an aircraft man, he was one of the senior engineers in charge of the **OB** unit. And he and I always used to get together by making sure we could take down to the Farnborough Air Show, the largest number of cameras we could find. This is live **OB** cameras, including those that were supposed to be maintained. So that we could get all the coverage we could get. And there were very often two units to cover the Farnborough Air Show.

Jack and I set off and agreed to meet at the pub. We were on the way down to Farnborough, which was due to go, go, go the next day. And we arrived at the pub very late, and decided that there was only one way round this and that was to stay overnight, and move on again, and because we had a very heavy day the next day. And you know what producers are like, they get tired easy. And, "Well I'm sorry sir, we've only got the one bedroom." And so I said, "Well, that's alright, two single beds," I thought, "Fine, that's alright."

So up we go and settle in, reading, chatting about the following day and all the things we hoped would happen. Because that again was a live situation. And so we did. And I was aware of movement in the middle of the night. And there was Jack, up and out of bed. And I thought he wanted to go to the loo. He seemed to want to go to the loo, by his mumbling, "Where's the door?" This is summer by the way. And anyway he comes back, obviously much relieved, into bed, and off to sleep.

Next morning, we go down for breakfast, and all is well, pay the bill, out to the motor car, and he had his car, I had mine over there and he had his there. And he looked at the top of his car. And of course, he'd done the most terrible thing that any bloke can do - he'd peed on his own car through the window. I mean, you can't —, well it's true. Jack and I will remember that forever. And there was - he had to have it re-polished and everything. Dear Jack. But that's going back fifty year mind.

### **11. Peter's view on natural history programming**

*Int: One question I could say to you - you've got a very broad experience of broadcasting.*

PB: Too broad

*Int: No a very, very broad experience of broadcasting across.*

PB: Politics.

*Int: And you brought that to natural history. Now do you think that helped you more than —?*

PB: Ah, now that's an interesting point. My reaction when joining the Natural History Unit, getting more and more involved with it, with the exception of a few - you're one of them, dear Chris [Parsons] is another. I was aware that there was a high degree of specialism, which I couldn't begin to match. If I had a specialism at all it was out there with, trying, show business, trying to get this rolling, which I think it sadly lacked, because I was also aware of a specialism leading to vested interests which would, it's almost, "Well that's my bag, you can't touch that, I'm doing that next week on so and so."

There was a degree of that but it also became a very introverted atmosphere, where people were thinking of themselves all the time, rather than their audience out there, which we should really give a lot of attention to, more than I think is very often offered. But anyway, that is one of the worries I certainly had and it stayed with me I think until we were able to go live and then I was the one who was criticized really for doing this. I mean, one's colleagues would go around saying, "You're crackers, you're daft. What a waste of money. What a waste of time and effort. You don't know what you're doing," you know.

Well perhaps I didn't, but I enjoyed it and I felt it was right. And I think it's influenced some thinking. It's very difficult. Well it's one of the considerations certainly that one has to use as a producer. But it's all different now. Planet Earth (9) is stunningly interesting. But it does illustrate, and I've only seen two of them, how for the first time David [Attenborough] is slipping into a middle distance. I don't think this is conscious, at least I have no reason to think this. And I would tell him this as well, but he is, I wasn't interested in the words particularly on number two. I was suddenly aware, that unlike Life on Earth (25) where I was dependent totally on the information that he imparted to hold the whole thing together, suddenly it was the pictures that were holding that show together. I have no reason to suppose it won't be true of the series as a whole. But I reserve judgement.

*Int: There's also a strong emphasis on how it was done.*

PB: Yes, I'm always unimpressed by that. I don't, I think the revelation within, once you've set, you've seen the camera, this again you see, you see your gear not the personalities. They're all there, you know, the cameramen, they may be very clever cameramen, but they are not the most important thing. Natural history is having the right gear in the right place. Do that and you're half way home in my view. Planet Earth (9) is stunning, a visual stunner. Yes, end of message really. There's hope yet. Where we go from here though, goodness only knows.

*Int: People listening to this know where we went.*

PB: Well, in fifty years time they, yes will know, yes they will know. I wonder if there will be a Natural History Unit. It's very difficult to know what will happen.

*Int: I wonder if there'll be a BBC*

PB: Well I think that's also questionable. But certainly these 50 years of the Beeb [BBC] and it's development through into —, has been impressive. Let's face it, we've shown the way, not the only ones, but who is going to be able to present the money up front to do another Planet Earth (9) or equivalent. I think it's only the BBC with its contacts, and this place. Everything that has risen out of Bristol - it happened, it started here in Bristol. Wavered, went off a bit here, there and everywhere. But it still pulled back. Wildscreen has got a lot to do with it, I max I suppose. You see I max is another example isn't it of having the right piece of equipment in the right place at the right time. But once you've done it, you begin to say, "Okay, I've done that bit. I've seen the inside of a space thing and I've seen that and I've seen those animals, I've seen those elephants." But it's not quite the same as being there and saying, "Golly that's good." Maybe a live I max - who knows.

## **12. Wildlife on One**

In the last few years before my time came to an end at the BBC, I was talking to Mick Rhodes one day, and he said, "Oh, I wanted to see you. We haven't really talked at all since I've been here as head of the Unit," or Senior Producer, or whatever he was. He said, "I think you ought to have, because I've got no one else to do it, I think you ought to take over Wildlife on One (26) and run that. I mean it's only just twice a year for a few, just a little while, see how it goes - it's all yours."

So I thought, "Fine. Editor, Wildlife on One (26), that's a broad title if ever there was one." It all depends what you mean by editor, but in my eyes, it meant that I might produce one a year, or direct one a year, but I would try and stick to my duty of just saying to those around me, "By the way, while you're in Australia," shall we say, "Will you do an extra three weeks' work on a Wildlife on One (26)?" or, "What ideas have you got?" Well the ideas began to come in and I thought the one thing I could do with this series is to make sure I stick to my guns, mentioned earlier, about making sure that every opportunity's made.

I think Wildlife on One (26) gave me the chance, to bring bear on these programmes, this favourite phrase of mine of making sure that I reach the audience. This is really, to make sure that you've got to go out there and seek them. You can have those who are totally involved with natural history. They'll be there anyway. They'll go with you and say, "This is a very good story," or a very bad story. But it was that plus good story telling, which again, perhaps I inherited from Mac Hastings all those years before. But if you tell a good story and you tell it well, with the right gear and make it exciting all the way, you're into, you're after success. You'll be there.

And to give you an example of this. One of the first films we made, I think it was Richard Brock came back from, South Africa, Africa anyway - Africa. And he said, "I'll do you a story out there." It's only 25 minutes - they were relatively easy to make and short enough to be simple. And, fine, he produced the goods. He came back and he didn't even look at the rushes again. He just said, "There's your material." And Tom Poore was the editor and we went through it, and made the film, which was a complete story in its own right - it was ostriches (27). I hadn't mentioned that but it was the story of the ostrich basically. But there was one shot in there of an ostrich belting along at, what is it, 70 miles an hour? Something like that. Right up against the Landrover, so on a wide angle lens the cameraman had got the shots. And then it ended by slowly moving away into the desert - brilliant shot. And I thought, "That's a corker."

Then came the crunch - how do you use a good shot? In fact, probably the best of the lot. I thought, "Yes, I know what I'll do. I'll put that right up front." You don't waste time with that one. You say, "This is going to get you folks." And it was the first of my series that I was doing, and we'd booked a preview at the theatre in Bond Street, you know. So we went up for that, and I spotted straight away, that that shot, coupled with some fast moving music was an absolute sure-fire job. And I think I use that every time as one of the key issues in any film. A classic example in Planet Earth (9), you know all these years later, that brilliant shot, ending on an

eye. I mean, of course, what else? Well thought out. Interesting to know how that happened.

Wildlife on One (26) was 25 minutes of easy viewing, where the accent was always on the visual and of course it had David [Attenborough] there as well. And that fitted in with his outlook as well. We used to do two programmes, dub, two programmes a day. They were meant to be quick return, fast, speed them through the system. I see nothing wrong with that. I've been criticised, but I saw that as a part of the story, that has made up this remarkable story of the Natural History Unit.

**END**

## **Glossary**

**OB:** outside broadcast

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