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Alexandra Palace Television Society

Interview with Aubrey Singer, John Vernon, Mike Henderson, Ronnie Reed

Outside Broadcast Productions and Chief People in BBC Who Advanced TV Development
Television Outside Broadcasters

Audio Wav file – 28/08/1993

Aubrey: I joined the BBC in 1949, on the 7th Novembers, starting from Marylebone Road. The date is engraved in my mind - I shall never forget it - and I shall never forget the place, the strange commissionaires and the lift pulled by rope. It was rather like one of these civil service things that you imagine the Secret Service ran, but I joined then, we were operating I think there were only two OB units operating at that time, one was the PYE and the other was what was called the CPS **(**Cathode Potential Stabilised**).** It wasn't. It used to peel off all the time. It was how I got there. I came from the film industry, I was making education films that were instructional. There were, I was told, some five hundred applicants for my job. How I got the job, I don't know, but two of us got it – I joined at the same time as Berkley Smith and the man I battled with on the Board was Peter Dimmock much more 'Peter' later because I think because I think he was a great leader in his way and, had we had more of Peter, we might have developed British television much more quickly. So, I think I was one in five hundred, I was obnoxious (I'm aware of that), I was the youngest producer at the time (I was 22 years old) and I was utterly disliked by my colleagues I suspect, but we got over that in a couple of years but not before I was nearly fired and that's a difficult thing to arrange at the BBC.

Aubrey: Oh, tell us about that, I didn't know about that.

Aubrey: Oh, well, I wasn't much good – in a nutshell.

Aubrey: Really?

Mike: I don't think that's what your colleagues thought. You're panning yourself down, really.

Aubrey: Well, Lobby thought I was obnoxious and I was obnoxious I mean, I had ideas about the film industry, I had ideas about what we should be doing in television OB's and I couldn't do any of them. I mean every idea I had, I found myself frustrated by this awful equipment we had. There was nothing we could do about it, I mean, I had to live with it which I did in the end.

Anyway, I'm talking too much, I have introduced myself and we'll carry on from there later.

Mike: Do you know what your starting salary was?

Aubrey: Yes. My starting salary was £700 a year.

Mike: It was worth a bit more in those days, of course.

Aubrey: Yes, it was but, even so, it was pretty tight living.

Mike: John, where did you start?

John: Well, I'd done a year at London University – not very successfully, because I enjoyed it much too much and, when I left, I wrote to the BBC and I actually wrote to the record companies because I knew I wanted to do something where the sciences met the arts. I was turned down by the BBC and I went away on holiday and when I got back in what would have been September 1946, I was written to saying that "You came for an

interview for radio, but we are expanding the television service up at Alexandra Palace in 9146. Would you mind coming for another interview?" So I did, and was fortunate and I joined BBC Television, I think it was in September 1946, and I joined as a Probationary Technical Assistant at £3 a week. And I think I must level straight away and say that I wasn't producing programmes until 1952, which is really outside the span of this endeavour. But, my recollections were all on the technical side because I joined in the studios and was a boom swinger for about a month, then I thought that outside broadcast might be more fun, so I got myself transferred and I was a Sound Assistant and my earliest memories are of those two big scanners that we started with after the War both on bus chassis and one corrected any faults there were by opening up the sides, the buses, during the daytime, lived outside Alexandra Palace in the car park and one's recollection is of a soldering iron in one's hand which kept one fairly warm while there was snow on the ground, and you were poking around in the innards of this fairly frail equipment trying to make it work. I started as a Sound Assistant and I then went on to Vision Control and ended up, very fortunately, as a Vision Mixer which, in the end, proved to be my way into the Production Department.

Uhm, that's probably enough for now.

Mike: In the Production Department was Studio Manager first, was it?

John: Yes, Stage Manager with OB's in, probably, The Festival of Britain which was '51, if I remember rightly. My good friend and colleague Steve Wade and I – he was a cameraman – we both transferred into 'Programmes' in '51, stage managing shows, Mike, for the likes of you.

Mike: This was, in my experience, more possible in the early days of television than it was in radio for an engineer to come into the production side on radio is not as common. Bill Ward, for instance, moved from Cameras to Entertainment.

John: Yes, yes. Well expansion then was so fast, you see. It was a growing service and anybody who actually was fortunate enough (and I was desperately fortunate) to be in on the ground floor had much more opportunity than there is nowadays, and when you consider the stroke of luck of being turned down by radio! I really was extraordinarily fortunate. I mean, other people took years to get out of radio into television.

Mike: Later on, yes, yes. But, in those days, television was the 'Cinderella' as far as Broadcasting House was concerned.

Well, I came out of the army after six years and the War and, for some reason, decided I didn't want to do a couple of other things and decided I wanted to be in television OB's. Heaven knows why! I had been in a tank surrounded by about six wirelesses and I suppose it felt comfortable with a microphone in my hand but I applied and got a nice letter back from Ewing saying that saying that they had only just started and there weren't any vacancies but, hang around, and my qualifications sounded reasonable and I could apply for the next Producer vacancy. So, I made some enquiries from some people I knew at the BBC and was told the best thing to do was to get in anywhere and you'll stand a better chance of a transferring off the Notice Board because they go up there first, rather than the Press. So, I applied for the first job which was a Studio Manager at Bush House, within three months I was a newsreader and I was also playing rugby because I played for the University and was playing for Rosslyn Park Firsts and I happened to (that was when I wasn't on a shift at Bush House) sprain an ankle and so I was off from work so I went to Twickenham with the idea, because I had realised it was being televised (the Harlequins v somebody) and being a brash, young man I wandered down to the scanner to see what was going on and there was a cameraman there on a tripod pointing a camera at "Team Captions" and I happened to notice that the team captions had a couple of names that were wrong because two people had been injured and weren't playing. I said this to the cameraman and he said "It's not my business.

Knock on the door and tell the producers". So I knocked on the door and Ian Orr-Ewing presented himself and he said "Oh, thanks very much, we'd better not use that caption" and so "Would you like to come in and have a look?" when I explained that I was with the BBC and then he said, "Well, you seem to know a bit about the game, would you like to come at sit in the commentary position?" So, I went up there and a chap called Ken Best, who was the Staff Producer for all commentary and he was really a swimmer, and it was quite clear to me that they only televised the first half in those days because there wasn't enough light and by half-time when he signed off, I realised he really didn't know a lot about the game. Then the next thing Ken Best said to me was "Would you like to put earphones on, the Producer wants to speak to you." and so he said "We're going to televise some closed circuit for part of the second half because there's enough light for us to operate on and it will give me practice at producing, it would give the cameramen a chance and everyone will move up one - Camera 1 will move up to Camera 2 and give him a chance to get the experience and it would help us all if the commentary happened. Would you like to have a go?" and so I had a go, and at the end of it he thanked me very much, Ken went down to the bar and for the next fifteen years I was the commentator!

I'm sorry to go on at such length, but it just shows how it could happen.

Aubrey: That's a good one! I've never heard that before. That was fascinating.

Mike: Well it's true.

Ronnie: Well, it's a case of being in the right place at the right time, really.

Mike: Grasping an opportunity. What I called, what was it? - "an organised coincidence" – I knew what I was after, but it looked as if it was a coincidence.

Aubrey: John, could you pass me that recorder. I just have to make sure it's not running out of steam.

(Shrill, piercing sound)

John: Ooh! Don't get a howl back. This is the singer copy. I hope it's the singer copy.

Mike: It's like all these bigwigs nowadays days, they have their own tape recorders.

John: Yes, yes.

Mike: I just put in on in case, as we discussed on the telephone. Like Tony Benn – you can't interview him without him having his own recorder.

Ronnie's turning the machinery for us and also keeping an eye on us to make sure we don't say anything absolutely absurd.

Ronnie: Oh I haven't even told you how I started. Am I the odd one out this morning, because I was an engineer and was an engineer when I started and an engineer when I finished. But I joined the BBC way back in 1943 as a young boy, straight from school aged sixteen-and-a-half and I was a bit lower than John. John was a Probationary Technical Assistant, but I started a bit lower – a youth in training and I started in the Overseas Service in the BBC. Salary - £27.06 a week, plus £4.06 a week cost of living, so it was about £1.50 total. Then I got joined up into the Army, I worked in Forces Broadcasting then I came back, joined the BBC in time for the Olympic Games – I was on sound broadcasting – I tried to get into television, the Olympic Games finished, I was almost redundant because there were too many of us coming back from the War and I had already asked to join television. I got in, I went to Alexandra Palace at 10 o'clock on a Monday morning, we spun up I think there was about eleven of us, and I wanted to go

on OB's and so did about six other people. Anyway, given that my name was Chown and I was at the beginning of the alphabet I spun up and I won and out of the other five people, the Queen came down right every time and I got onto OB's and the other one was Ken Moorman and I then went to join two OB's and we had just moved into the Palace of Engineering not the Palace of Arts and that would have been September 1946, was it '46? No, 1948, and I didn't leave television until the end.

Mike: Well, that's got us all identified I hope. Aubrey, I was interested in when you first arrived, you probably found us in OB's (as I was recording it while you were talking) as being very largely sort of sport and sort of event-orientated and you were probably wanting to make programmes of a more factual and documentary nature.

Aubrey: Absolutely. That's is why I tended to try and specialise in feature programmes where I could, but one had to muck in with the rest and I was no good at sport at all – absolutely useless at sport. I think probably the worst thing in the world was to put me on a cricket match and I remember going on to a cricket match with Swanton – E W Swanton – doing the commentary and he said "And now if we could look at the third leg" and I had no idea what a third leg was (laughter) and so I said "Camera 3, pan to third leg" and he didn't know where it was either and so, gradually, Swanton wouldn't let this go. He came down threatening doom to me and I had already had enough doom being threatened and that was that and I never did another cricket match, thank God!

John: May I tell another story in a similar light? As you say, we all had to do everything and I found myself directing cameras for boxing and went into the office the following day, was summoned to Peter Dimmock's office, who said to me in the nicest possible way, "John, you don't really like boxing do you?" and I said, "Well no, Peter, quite honestly, I don't." and he said "Alright the, we won't ask you to do that again". It was a gentlemanly business in those days.

Mike: Well, I'm going to reveal my one. The worst programme I ever did, without a doubt, was when I was put on *"Come Dancing"* at Streatham and it was an utter disaster, it really was because I just had no feel for that sort of thing at all and, actually, the great British public had just caught on and coincided with poor muggins (me) - we were allowed two BBC commissionaires to control camera hogging – but they had suddenly discovered it and the whole thing was utterly swamped from start to finish by people waving at the camera and that was my first experience of that and thank goodness, I think Peter also realised although he thought I ought to have my turn on *"Come Dancing"* it was better not stay.

John: I did the very first *"Come Dancing"* with Peter. That was quite an experience because Dimmock had invented this format with Eric Morley – the two of them had got together and Dimmock, as frequently happened, decided that he could not devote all his time to this and so he said, you'd better come down and do this. It was – you had to have one really good row with Peter in order to get on terms with him and we finally had the good row in Control Room when he was saying "Cut to this, cut to this" and I was producing this thing and so I suddenly took off the headphones and said to him, "Peter, if you want to do this, you do it. If you don't want to do it, shut-up!" Well, that was fine, but it was a weird set-up that *"Come Dancing"* set-up because Morley was after the birds, that's why he did it. Dimmock was not unknown to have a roving eye, put it like that, and so it was very funny that first *"Come Dancing"* but it's at least, a notch under one's belt. Sorry, I've digressed slightly.

Mike: No, no. Would it be right to say that Morley had an eye on television's help in getting the Mecca empire going?

John: Of course.

Mike: I think that the *"Come Dancing"* undoubtedly helped the spread of the Mecca empire.

John: Of course. There was that incredible guy who Morley worked for called Karl Hyman and there was Fairley, the other Scottish fellow, they were both strange gangsters actually.

Mike: Yes, yes. One wonders whether there was anything in it financially for anybody else.

John: The *"Empress Four"* mob. I mean, Derek xxxx tells a story not from Morley, but somebody put £50 in his top pocket, you know.

Mike: Well, I had this happen, believe it or not, actually at Marylebone Road, we were talking about there, and Maggie Matlin ..

John: Oh, yes. Do you remember? I don't know whether she's still with us, and I had a chap called (I better not say who he was), but he played table tennis for Middlesex and was also their Secretary and he was the one that one had to deal with in table tennis matches as we were forced to do in those days to fill in space – it was rather different in those days, and he was obviously out for getting more television for the Middlesex table tennis, but he was also wanting more money. Well, it was a bit silly because I think the whole programme, for an hour, one was allowed £25 in those days, of which the facilities fee was £15, and what he was trying to say was (and I eventually got him to spell it out for me) .. I said "What are you trying to say?" and he said "If I can up the facilities fee to £25", he would split the difference with me, you see. So I said, "I'm sorry, but I don't work that way and you better not mention that again". The next thing I knew was, Maggie (which is why I mentioned it earlier) about two days later said "Mr Harrow has been offering me nylons, and I thought I better ask you whether I could take them or not" and I said "I'm awfully sorry, but you must not". Anybody else had that sort of thing?

Aubrey: Oh, yes. We've all had it. I had it from the Americans from time-to-time when I was in America.

John: I don't think I've ever had it.

Aubrey: You were too honest, John.

John: I've had the odd present, much, much later. You remember a fellow called Boch?

Aubrey: Oh, yes.

John: That was so much later. He sent one Austrian Christmas cakes which, actually, I didn't like at all, but you can't fling them back. Well, I thought, that's alright, you can take those.

Mike: But, what was the first programme that you were really proud of?

John: Do you know. I was quite proud of the "*Opening of The Festival of Britain"* service which was the first one that really came off for me. The trouble was that it got me type-cast as a service producer but, I had this wonderful idea - I had one of the image orthicon cameras, which was one of the first ones, and they gave you an enormous advantage and so one could have this camera on the balcony and position the trumpeters up there and so the first shot was a great shot of the fanfare and McGivern, who actually deserves a bit of talk, McGivern actually liked that and thought that this was the first time Singer was realising his potential. From silly things like this does one get fame. But, then, what programme was I then most proud of?

Mike: A documentary, perhaps, later?

John: I did a show with David Dimbelby from Kodak's on photography which I was quite proud of and I did various things from, umm, nothing in those first five years really made me proud.

Ronnie: There was something I remember, and that's a programme that we did with image orthicon in TR7 from the Science Museum in London.

John: Oh yes.

Ronnie: I remember one of the things that happened there was that we were looking at a showcase and this was covered in dust and we were going to either clean it or get it open so we could see, but we focused through it and it was the first time that something like a teleprompter could be used because we found that because of the glass, we could either focus on the reflection or we could go right the way through and focus on the thing that was in the case. That was the first time, I think, that we realised that by putting a piece of dirty glass or smoked glass, as they use today, we could get two pictures for the price of one and it was the start of, I think, the teleprompter service.

John: Yes, that's right. I did a whole series of programmes from the Museums – the Science Museum, the V&A etc, etc. They don't stick in the mind, except for the V&A one where we had to fire one of their guns and I had to buy a pound or quarter-pound of black powder which was an enormous negotiation, then Lee Ashton firing this gun and looking as far away from the thing as he could (he was the Director then), and then the police coming around to my house two weeks later to ask for the black powder back, I mean they were chasing this all over the place, but I mean those were minor details. What I really recall was this sort of allegiance to this almost military organisation that one had. I think was spelt out by the BBC's use of initials. I can't imagine whether that happened before the War or after the War.

Mike: I think, actually, this was more so in television OB's that it was in the studios, Aubrey, because it was interesting, Philip Doherty and Ian Orr-Ewing had both been together in the RAF in radar, and then there was Keith Rogers who'd also been in there, Peter Dimmock and there was Alan Chivers who had been a Battle of Britain fighter pilot, and there was myself who had been in the Army Division even Berkley-Smith was in the Navy and, therefore, you were probably the only one who hadn't been in the service ….. all service personnel and we all sort of ticked along on that basis.

(everyone talking at the same time – inaudible)

John: And I remember, Varrick coming up to me and saying "You're a disgrace!" and he meant it too! I said, "What do you mean, I'm a disgrace?" He said, "Look at your hair - you ought to get a haircut?" and I said "Thanks!"

(Laughter)

John: It was an incredible conversation, but it didn't matter a buggar, but there we are – he obviously detested me, but that was alright, it settled down later.

Aubrey: That's Barry's leg-pull, you know! There was always the mixture with Barry of the serious and the leg-pull.

John: Yeah, well, that could well be.

Mike: I'm sorry you got the impression that your colleagues didn't appreciate you. That's interesting.

John: Well, I always felt I was on trial and Lobby made it absolutely clear to me that I was on trial for the first year and then the second year, so I was always being threatened with being put onto contract, chucked out.

Mike: You, in fact, were pushing out the frontiers more than anyone else Aubrey. Everybody else was much more into straight reportage

Aubrey: Except Keith, in fairness.

Mike: Yes. Keith was very good. He was the one actually before you arrived, that was pushing out in that direction.

Aubrey: Yes, yes, that's true.

John: What we called "The Bilko Beeb".

Aubrey: Just to explain to everybody, the actuality was going to Wimbledon and the Boat Race, that sort of thing, but the "Bilko Beeb" was something you had to sort of pre-plan. One of Keith's early ones was *"Other People's jobs*", do you remember.

John: Yes, I do, I do indeed.

Mike: It was a very good series.

John: A very good series, indeed.

Ronnie: Talking about pushing out the frontiers – I remember that we had to go and open up Holme Moss, the television transmitter up in the North region, and then the next couple of days we were up on the Blackpool Tram – we're talking about 1950/1951 – and we got two cameras on the tram, but we hadn't got any sound and it was Dimmock who complained to Bridgewater because W D Richardson who was the engineer in charge (the engineer looking after OB's) said "I can't give you sound and pictures" and so Dimmock just went up to Bridgey and said "Oh, we're getting some marvellous pictures off the tram. It's a pity we can't get sound". So, Bridgey turned round and said, "Why not?" Richardson said "We can't do it". We had some lovely programmes, with sound – no problem whatsoever - Bridgey just came along and said, "You will get sound". This, I suppose, in some small way was pushing out the boundaries.

John: I think so. I wonder if, actually, when you get back the slowness of television development was rather aligned with the decline of Britain.

Ronnie: I think it was the engineers that held things back, although I am an engineer. I think the production people said "Let's try this", "Oh, we can't do that!", "Well, try it. And let's see what happens". We always had this brick wall which you pushed us through.

Aubrey: My feeling was in those days we moved very fast. We were always well ahead of the studios. I mean the studios followed us in talent lenses and all that. It was a combination of push from the likes of us, and Peter particularly, and the willingness of Bridgey, in fairness, to as we've just had illustrated, he had a difficult one because he had to maintain the high BBC standards of engineering insisted on by BA and yet, at the same time, be prepared to take a risk.

John: He did take a risk, as you say.

Aubrey: He took lots of risks.

John: Bridgey would take risks. Richie wouldn't take many risks. On the other hand, I still think that in those early days, we put too much emphasis on our elite status because of

our technological superiority. We were the people who could get out. We were the only people who could get out. We controlled the equipment. We scheduled the equipment, basically and, therefore, we had this prime position in the television service. Once anybody could schedule an OB unit, that was the end of the department, basically.

Mike: Just while we are talking about that, so that we don't forget, can we talk about Cecil McGivern for a moment because I would very much like to, like you said, pay a tribute to him. Perhaps you'd like to start. I mean, how did you see him when you first came in.

Aubrey: Well, I was asked to go for several interviews before I got the job and one was with Cecil and I remember him saying "You have to understand, Mr Singer, that the BBC is a social organisation", and I said "Yes" and he laughed at that. He said "Well, we are. We can't afford to spend a lot of money, but we rely on people to give of their best so they can do things here that they can't do elsewhere" and we then chatted for a time and I told him a story or two about my previous life in South Africa and he then said "Go for it." And I got the job as a result of that.

I admired Cecil and Lobby, but I admired Cecil because he was a really creative type. He really pushed the frontiers and was for pushing frontiers, and he pushed himself beyond the frontiers, he pushed the service beyond the frontiers, he certainly pushed himself beyond the frontiers and, of course, he hit the bottle and was, in effect, chucked out of the service for that. And that was sad too, when he was sort of dumped and sidelined in that way. I felt that Cecil was a great man and I still think that in any history of this service, or of the BBC in a way, because his work in radio features was outstanding, he deserves a mention. He was a great features producer and he understood what producers wanted to do. He didn't really understand organisation of services much, but he understood what producers wanted.

Mike: He really made people want to work for him, I felt.

Aubrey: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Mike: The sort of thing that I liked was that you would suddenly get a phone call about six o'clock, "Oh, you're still in, are you? Come down and have a drink", and he had reached where he wanted to drink and you would just go down and you'd have a chat and I admire a boss who can do this with juniors and not feel that he is going to be treated familiarly or anything, as some people think. I had the highest admiration for him and I feel that he got sort of ostracised before he had the drinking problem, really.

Aubrey: Yes, I think he did because he was ostracised by the "Organisation" in a way. He had to have Joanna and Joanna finally had to pull some organisation in place, and with that Cecil was, of course, phased out. Very, very sad. I think that he was a great man.

Mike: I suppose he couldn't have been seen as advancing up the hierarchical ladder which the BBC likes. I mean it would have been marvellous if he could have continued on as Artistic Director of Programmes really.

Aubrey: Well, that would have been one step in the right direction but I think that by that time, he'd shot his bolt really and it was terribly sad. I mean, he wasn't looked after, was he? He must have laid out at the door and whoever it was who was senior to him and, surely, that was George Barnes and Collins before and then the guy from West Region, Beedle. I believe that Cecil was, actually, one of the great founders of the British television service.

Mike: I would go along with that.

John: I do too. I think it's a very short list of the really inspiring programme leaders. I mean, let's just put them down because it's rather fun. I mean certainly, McGivern would lead

the list. Wheldon would certainly be on it, no question. David Attenborough, would certainly be on it and then I start to run out and that's a terrible comment.

Mike: That's right and by now, by the time you get to today they have nobody then can appoint as Controller of BBC 1.

John: That's right. Alan Yentob on both.

Mike: Well, can you blame anybody for not wanting to take the job, nowadays?

John: Oh, it's a wonderful job. It is.

Mike: Well, think of who you're having to work with these days.

John: Yes, yes.

Mike: Anyway, I think Lobby was a great leader too.

John: I was just talking about the people who got to be the programme director office, you see, Lobby was never really that, was he? Lobby left us to go to the West as I think just Head of OB's. Well the important thing about him when he went was that he was Head of both OB's. That hasn't happened since.

Mike: No, no. They tried it with Gielgud, if you remember, in Ghana and this was thought that this was the direction that VH was going to go and it didn't work in those days and I don't think it will again.

John: I don't think it will.

Mike: It's to do with the logistics of the thing. Radio is so easy. I mean, to be doing this in television ….

(Mumbling)

Mike: Well, can we just talk about Lobby. I was going to say, I mean I know that it was his way of sort of enquiring, but Lobby's two words were "I'm a little puzzled" and "I'm in a state of puzzlement about" and looking back at it, to me, coming from radio which he really knew backward and was really respected, he moved into this rather brash outfit and he was in a state of puzzlement. He didn't understand cameras and things and yet he had an awful lot to offer us, particularly speaking as a commentator, I learnt a terrific lot from him.

John: He brought an intellectual approach that we had been seriously short of. Of course, the other favourite Lobby phrase that I shall never forget was "sign posting" – "Now, John, that was a very nice programme, but it just wasn't adequately sign posted." and, of course, the more you think about it, this is the editorial job and he was the first person who would put his finger straight onto a programme weakness in that kind of way and do it in a gentle and inspiring manner.

Aubrey: I found that Lobby changed me and my life, totally, in that he was so rigorous in this discipline and I was so unrigorous and he bullied me mercilessly. On the other hand, it was perfectly fair and I worshipped him and I think we all worshipped him and we all wanted to do a good programme for Lobby and you could always ring up after the programme and Lobby would always say that he had seen it and always give you an opinion. Now, you try ringing up any of our so-called "bosses" today and you won't get any of them having even watched the programme, they'll all have a VCR sent home later or something.

So, I think Lobby was great, in one way. In another way, I don't think he was so great. He was very good on the rigour of broadcasting. I don't think he was all that hot on the imagination, on the programme imagination. But, I don't think that matters. I think that we got by without that input from him.

Mike: Of course, that phrase you used involved, in those days, extending the horizons technically and engineering-wise. I think he was right out of his depth on that side as well probably, don't you think?

John: I think he had an enormous political problem, really. He had to keep these units out of the hands of others. He had also to keep happy with the Broadcasting House bosses because there was this divided role and radio still had a very important role.

Mike: And he also, let's face it (perhaps I'm treading on corns here that you wouldn't agree with) but I used to be rather embarrassed by our weekly meetings in the days when, quite clearly, Dimmock thought he ought to have got the job after Ian Orr-Ewing, not Lobby, and was doing his best to make sure that he got it as soon as possible.

John: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Mike: And, I used to find those meetings really rather embarrassing at times with Dimmock attempting to put Lobby down in certain directions.

John: Well, I don't know. I really didn't witness any of those meetings, I don't think. I must have done, but my mind was so unsubtle I didn't really take on board that Dimmock was fighting to depose Lobby. I thought that was happening in the natural order of things, anyway, because Dimmock was obviously so head and shoulders above the rest of us that, uh ….

Mike: He didn't think so. It was interesting, I remember at Alexandra Palace, him coming in with Keith Rogers and myself sharing an office and he said were we applying for the post of Ian Orr-Ewing's Assistant Head of OB's, and he was absolutely amazed when both Keith and I said no, uhm, because he thought we were going to be in competition there and we said we want to make programmes, we don't want to be somebody who sits on committees and so that was his first step. I think he still thought that it was going to be within the outfit and that, perhaps, some of us would be competition for it. I don't think it had occurred to him that Lobby was going to be brought in. I think that he was looking within ….. he was ahead of his time, Peter, and in present day context or even later, he was an entrepreneurial spirit which was ahead of its time at that time I would say, wouldn't you.?

John: Absolutely. Dimmock worked on what, I felt, was inspired opportunism, he really did but, on the other hand, it was inspired – he always got the answer, it was always right (or usually right). On occasion it was disastrously wrong but the Dimmock's of this world tried to get the alter moved from the West End to the East End and the Royal Chapel at Chelsea but, on the other hand, he was a man of great initiative of great innovatory initiative, actually.

Mike: Yes, when suddenly, all the umpires had to come out at Lord's five minutes earlier so suit him.

Aubrey: That's right. No, no, I mean I think Dimmock was a great leader. I think the BBC, again, let him down in a way, though he let himself down, and I think that Enterprises was probably not the job for him. But that's neither here nor there. That's not for me to pass an opinion on really, but I think he was a great leader, a great leader, and I am proud to have worked for him.

John: Yes, me too. He was great fun to work with. And I had the privilege of working with him on the Coronation, of course. I was his Vision Mixer and that must have been one of the major OB's of the period we are considering and I found him very inspiring.

Ronnie: Where were you on the Coronation?

John: In the truck outside. I was Vision Mixer for the Coronation.

Aubrey: No, I think he was really one of the great leaders and we were very lucky to have him. I shall never forget Dimmock coming out to New York when I went there and he came into the office and said "What's your title here then, Aubrey?" and I said, "Television Officer". "Where's the television set then?" He was quite right. The bloody office hadn't installed one and so I used that as leverage to get one. But, that is just a minor example of the way he worked. He actually saw things quite clearly.

Ronnie: Talking of seeing things really clearly, I remember we did a point-to-point and Peter Dimmock was the commentator on this horse racing on point-to-point and it was a misty day, very much like it has been earlier on this morning, and the horses were out of shot. So I said to him, "How do you manage to commentate when they're out of shot?" He said, "Well, I just keep running and by the time they come into shot again, I just say they've come into position". He said, "When you're a commentator, you do what you like".

Aubrey: You did what you liked when there were no pictures.

John: That's right. You had to get it right when there were pictures. But I think we were very fortunate in Dimmock. Don't let's forget Philip Doherty.

Mike: I was going to say, can we go back?

John: ….. because in his way he was inspiring too I saw a little of him from both sides, because as well as being a Provisionary Technical Assistant on OB's, I did a bit of moonlighting with the film unit in those days and enormously enjoyed learning a bit about being a Sound Recordist and driving the camera truck and that kind of thing. When you think back to the double act that Doherty was doing, remember, there was no recording so that if we did, say, the Lord Mayor's Show at Trafalgar Square, there would be an OB truck and there would be a film camera and the film camera would roughly do the same things that the OB cameras did. And, only the commentary would be recorded, so that it went out live as far as the OB were concerned, but there was a chunk that made sense for television newsreel that evening, because the film was processed in time to go out and that was an ingenuous wedding of two media to achieve the required effect. This was the kind of thought that Doherty was always very good at.

Mike: Well, I could tell you one that I was always involved with and that was I think '48, it might have been '47, August Bank Holiday weekend, and Doherty – this is typical of what you were saying – decided we would do a complete sort of composite newsreel thing of Bank Holiday and wanted me to do the commentary and it was to be done as a sort of OB. We moved from one place to another and I had to remember what I had said in the previous place so that the whole thing could be just rushed to the lab, spliced together and go out that night. In fact, it still goes out on the air in black and white, this particular film, it's been kept – one of the few things of those days that has been kept and the only reason I know is that someone said "Was that your voice?", but we learnt as we went along because I began to realise that it was getting a bit bald to have a cut so, remembering the voice, I would say "and from so-and-so in Whitehall, we move to …" in the next place "in Trafalgar Square where they are doing so-and-so …" so that one would have a cut in mid-sentence and this worked. And this was an example of Doherty sort of marrying film and OB techniques, but it did need everybody involved, including the commentators of having an idea of, technically, knowing what it was all about.

Aubrey: I'm post-Doherty, so I can't comment on him. I heard a lot about him, but I have nothing I want to add.

Mike: You didn't come across him on the film side at all?

John: No. Only in New York when he was doing his *"Around the World in Seven Days"* and killed himself.

Mike: Ian was in charge, of course, when you joined.

John: Ian?

Mike: Ian Orr-Ewing.

John: No, no, Peter.

Mike: Oh!

John: No Lobby was in charge.

Aubrey: Did Ian leave when he became an MP?

Mike: Yeah! Can you remember Ian, as I can, at Alexandra Palace – you were talking about where the vehicles were maintained out at in the car park there – well, if you were foolish enough to be in your office after lunch at AP in OB's, Ian Orr-Ewing after having been to the dive would march up and down there spouting at the top of his voice his political speech for the evening.

Aubrey: Oh, really!

Mike: This was in advance of him becoming an MP but then, of course, he did become an MP and, that was why he left.

Aubrey: I was just trying to remember, did he leave to go into Parliament or did he do one rather large commercial job before he went into Parliament?

Mike: No, I don't think so. He did, he worked for EMI pre-War before he came into television. He was an engineer and had a University training.

How are we getting on with the tape?

Ronnie: We have about two minutes left on this side so if anyone has anything else very quickly …

Mike: I'm just trying to think. There was something in my mind about Ian. Oh, I know, sitting in that office, if you were foolish enough to be there during your lunch hour, Ian would (having started his speech) would stick his head round the door and say, "What are you doing in here? You're not paid to sit on your bottom in an office, get out and get amongst it!" because he quite rightly saw that our job was to get out there and find programmes because, in those days, people didn't queue at your door and say, "Please put me on television, like nowadays". Would you like to expand on that? It was very much like going out and begging, wasn't it?

Aubrey: Yes, on the feature side you had ideas like Kodak and Keith Rogers' idea of doing the programme from EMI or what have you.

Mike: But, they would need a bit of persuading, sometimes.

(Beginning of Tape 1 - Side 2)

John: Good, good, we're on.

Ronnie: The date is 4 February 1993.

John: Yes, yes. Shall we chug on?

Mike: Yes, where did we get to? Oh, yes, I think we more or less dealt with Philip Doherty.

John: We were looking at the great figures weren't we?

Mike: Does anyone remember Norman Collins?

John: I only met him twice.

Ronnie: He was a sound man as far as I was concerned.

Mike: It was really extraordinary at Alexandra Palace, because he used to get up in the small hours of the morning and write "*London Belongs to Me"* for two hours before coming in to do his job. So, he was a sort of dynamo then whether he was in sound or not.

I've got a story which I must tell. In those days, there were enough, this was in '47 perhaps, there were only enough producers in the whole of television to all get into one small room in the tower every Tuesday, which gives you an idea of how small we were and the meeting had started and they were useful because there was a cross-fertilisation because everybody watched anything in those days when they weren't actually working, and you could get a light entertainment producer's view, an OB's view … and we were hardly into the meeting and it was in Norman Collins's office and his secretary was hovering beside him and said "Excuse me, Mr Collins, Mr Priestly is on the phone" and so Norman with his normal voice with us got to the phone in the corner and said "*Hullo, my dear Jack! How are you?"* – this was J B Priestly, the playwright, who was writing for us in those days - and after a few moments Douglas Berkinshaw, who was then Head Engineer, put his hand up in Norman's direction and said "Normal Collins will be resumed shortly" which means something to us.

John: Perhaps, I can explain the context of that comment? Quite simply, the caption that one always had really, because in those days there were more technical interruptions than, I'm glad to say, there are nowadays and whenever anything went wrong one had to provide, rather quickly, a caption that said "Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible" and, always, there was one within reach because it was frequently needed.

Ronnie: Talking about "Service will be resumed", I remember when we went to Wimbledon and, in those days, for the coverage at Wimbledon there were two cameras on the Centre Court and one on No 1 Court and it was usual in those days that the vehicles got rather warm and we were all in the vehicle and the doors were all open and we couldn't get cool enough because we didn't have refrigerators and the two cameras on the Centre Court packed up, one by one, so the producer had no alternative but to go over to No 1 Court. Unfortunately, the match that was on the Centre Court was a very, very exciting one and the other one that we had to cut to was very dull and we had a terrific number of complaints afterwards – "Why did you cut away from a very exciting match to a very dull one?" – But, I think this was some of the trouble. We had three cameras, which was our total amount, and if they both packed up because it got too hot or something like that, well, that was it! .

John: It happened quite often too and, sometimes, I remember I used to be the commentator sitting beside the one camera on and trying to make something of a nonsense match on

one camera which was, after you'd had Freddie Grisewood or then Dan Maskell on Centre Court was a bit hard.

Aubrey: Because you really had to get away for most of the afternoon not doing very much.

John: Yes, yes on that, and sort of sucking ice creams.

Aubrey: Just to finish the Norman Collins story, it's interesting isn't it, because I think the next thing he did after he left us was high definition films down at Highbury, do you remember?

John: He was moved straight to Production.

Aubrey: Well, where did that Highbury venture which is now very much what the Japanese are up to …..

John: No, that was a little later I think it was ..... they actually headhunted him and he decided to go to – I forget which outfit it was.

Aubrey: ATV.

John: Yes, and I remember amongst the BBC set-up in those days, this was considered highly reprehensible.

Aubrey: Yes, yes.

Ronnie: But, wasn't high definition formed sometime after 625's, with the cameras, and they edited out as they went along and produced it and they finished up with temporary xxxxxx in those days.

Aubrey: Yes, I agree. It certainly wasn't a thousand.

John: We are just talking about Norman Collins and how he ended up doing high-definition television.

Aubrey: Yes, which we have only just got back to now and he was actually working at 1200 lines wasn't he?

John: It wasn't as much as that was it?

Ronnie: I think it was actually 625 because were on 405.

Aubrey: No, it was 1200.

Ronnie: Was he?

John: He actually left, headhunted by ATV, that was later, I think.

Aubrey: Yes, I think he was. No I never knew him. I think I met him once, I didn't know him at all.

John: He was, compared with Cecil McGivern who we were talking about, at a Producer level, liked to be quite distant, Norman. He was probably a very good combination with Cecil McGivern, probably, because he was much more of an organised type. He was somebody who could write a book for two hours before coming in to do a very good job. It was extraordinary, really.

Aubrey: And, in truth, it was a very gentlemanly organisation which we were fortunate enough to enjoy, wasn't it and, with the best – we actually had the choice, in retrospect, of the best in the country. Look at me for instance! But, we did. There were five hundred applicants for my job and so one was actually picking from the best.

Mike: Somebody said, on one of the earlier tapes, that in the early days whether you were an engineer or on the production side everybody seemed to be, I'm going to use the phrase 'Renaissance men' in that they had a whole lot of strings to their bows, that they were capable of doing a surprising number of things and they could bring this experience into the extending of the new service.

Aubrey: That's right. Well, I think 'Renaissance man' is putting it a bit high. It's a lovely thought though. It flatters one to be considered a Renaissance man, but I'm sure I'm not and I wasn't.

Mike: No, I wasn't either but there were certain people who were. I mean, we were talking about Douglas Berkinshaw as Chief Engineer, who was also a very fine organist. I mean, he used to play the organ at Alexandra Palace and I could hear it peeling out sometimes when he wanted to let off steam.

Ronnie: xxxxx in St Gabriel's Church in Cricklewood.

Mike: David Wortmeyer. Does anyone remember him? He used to do the most beautiful bird pictures – sort of pen and ink and wash.

John: Kaf was a cartoonist.

Mike: Still is, isn't he?

John: Still is, can't keep him down. He still sends me cartoons.

Mike: There were some characters around. Talking of Wortmeyer reminds me of Evelyn xxxxxx.

Aubrey: Oh, yes! What period was he? He was after this time wasn't he?

John: Ah, no. Very much not. He came from films.

Aubrey: Did he? He was a publicist, was he? He worked with Calder didn't he? He was a lovely character, wasn't he? He really was. Best arranger of a party that I've ever come across.

Mike: The thing I really remember him arranging – he was in his element – was the London/Paris week, where he was out there in advance and we had a fleet of cars that were arranged at no expense that somehow he had managed to organise.

John: Oh, the expenses came in later!

Mike: That was at no expense. He somehow sort of persuaded some French firm that there would be all this publicity attached to this and so on.

I'll never forget Dimmock driving me around – I'm sorry I'm going off at a tangent – he'd been out there a bit penniless and Keith Rogers and I came out for the preparations for London/Paris week and Dimmock drove us around Paris personally sort of talking to us in the back seat in the middle of Paris "circulation". It was absolutely frightening and Elvira Bambarran, remember her?

Aubrey: Oh, yes. She was lovely – my secretary.

Mike: She was part Swiss background and she was French speaking. Dimmock had been out there for a while and insisted that he had a French-speaking secretary in order to cope with the work that was going on and when we got out there we were having a drink and I said "Did you find you have a lot to do?" and she said "Well, the first job I had to actually type a letter to a French countess in conjunction with a bunch of flowers and a box of chocolates" that Peter had met at the races.

(Loud laughter)

Aubrey: Well, quite right! First things first.

Mike: But, this was Dimmock's style.

Aubrey: One thing about Peter was that he had energy for about three lives and that's fine if you can get away with it.

Ronnie: Coming here today, we're very near Chiswick Bridge and I haven't been here for a long while in this area and it always reminds me of the Boat Race and I think that all of us, at some time or other, were involved in the Boat Race.

John: Oh, yes. I had one camera and I was always behind the boat.

Ronnie: Well, originally it was all done from the shore, wasn't it?

John: Oh, certainly. And there came this strange vehicle called "Central Mobile Control Room".

Ronnie: That was a long while afterwards, I think.

Mike: My first Boat Race was '48 where I was having to interview the crews and, of course, this meant only the women crew as the male crew were so depressed they couldn't, at the end, but then, very quickly, when we got a camera onto the boat for the first time it was found that what was needed was a commentator who could actually use cue words so that they could switch simultaneously the receiving point on shore and the area on board and so I was recruited as commentator. I didn't know one end of the rowing boat from the other. I had to learn very fast from the chap from the "Times", Sir Richard Burnell.

Ronnie: Oh then that must have been 1950.

Mike: I think it was 1949, it might have been 1950. That was an example of how one had to commentate and learn very rapidly. I also had to learn tennis very rapidly actually, as a commentator, because while I taught Dan about television commentary he taught me about tennis and we learned, he was a marvellous teacher and we learned how to appreciate tennis. I hope I was some help to him in television commentary. So was Bill McLaren on rugby.

Aubrey: It wasn't until Lobby arrived that people started to take to the art of commentary. It was Lobby who started to write bibles for commentators. It was Lobby, for instance, who first said "Don't talk about "the picture". If you must, say things like "on the left", "on the right" but, "on the left of your screen" instantly reminded your customers that they weren't there, they were watching television. He put his finger straight onto that problem and did the art of commentary a great deal of good. He did.

If I had to rate my colleagues, one name that is going to come at the top so far is Alan Chivers. I think he was one of the greatest "Events" directors of all time simply because, as an ex-RAF pilot, his reaction time was far quicker than anyone else I knew. I mean his reaction time was incredible, just incredible. When you think of the number of years he was king of soccer, wasn't he? I mean, the first time he went near a soccer match which

must have been in this period (in the late 40's), until he, well he went on I think being a consultant on the big soccer occasions up until a few years ago. Alan Weeks then took over when he retired.

Ronnie: I think Alan started the BBC 2*"Match of the Day"* which was at 7:30 in the evening and that was a very, very quick turn round.

Aubrey: He was a great man. What happened to his wife, Michael?

Ronnie: Well, his wife's died and his son's died and poor, old Alan is in a bad way. He lives down in the West Country – Cornwall.

Aubrey: Alan is in a bad way because of his War-time experiences, isn't he and he has to consume an awful lot of paracetamol. He's in some pain, I believe.

Ronnie: Yes, yes. He would never admit to that

Mike: You'd never have ….. but his wife was Lesley.

Aubrey: Yes, a lovely lady.

Mike: And, I'm afraid, she took to the bottle, I gather.

Ronnie: Yes, I think she took to the bottle when her son died.

Aubrey: What did he die of?

Ronnie: I don't know?

Aubrey: Alan used to rely on her completely if you remember in the days when we were thinking of back at Alexandra Palace and Wembley. She had big problems.

Mike: Well, I was just saying, if I might, that in the days that we knew Alan, that Alan did rely on Lesley (by his own admission) in that she looked after the money and everything because he said he was no good at it. The other thing, before I forget, sorry to interrupt Aubrey, but my first meeting with Alan was at Bush House when he was a Recorded Programmes Assistant, I think it was called in those days and the first time I met him, there were little cubicles with about three turntables where you could go in and practice (a very serious thing in those days) your overlap changeovers from acetate to acetate, which was a very tricky business (to get them going in sync) – you only got a small band to do it – and who should be in there but Alan and I wanted to use the studio. He was having a sandwich, having a lunch-break, and there was the most incredible noise going on. There was a big band going absolutely flat out on one, there was an effects noise of the Blitz with bombs dropping in all directions on another one and machine gun fire going off on another one. It was all absolutely a deafening sound! And that was my first introduction to Alan. I was then told, afterwards, that because of his RAF experiences that this was one way he could get comfort from the noises in his head which, to some degree, could explain his present feeling. I'm glad to say that there are certain people who are in touch with him and we'll see.

Aubrey: Now, there's another person who I could not stand and I will be quite frank about it and that was Craxton. He wasn't there at that time, was he?

John: He arrived after you.

Aubrey: Wasn't it interesting, just to interrupt for a moment, because I know there is no point going on to Craxton, you just mentioned Bush House. Now Bush House was you,

Berkley, Chivers, Haverstock – there were quite a lot of people and, in a way, it says quite a lot for the World Service …

John: And Ian Jacobs

Aubrey: Yes, yes.

John: I must tell you a Jacob story because it's getting near lunchtime. I hadn't become a newsreader then and so it was in my first few months and I was battling with the Hungarian service at 8am or something, and a little figure I was aware of on my right shoulder behind me and I had just finished one of the acetate discs Tony had brought up to me and I turned to him and said "Would you mind taking that off?". This was my first introduction to Ian Jacob who hadn't actually started there. He was typically doing (mumbling) coming from the Admiralty bunker working for Churchill and was about to take over as boss at Bush House. Typically, he took it off without demure and I turned round and said "Thanks very much" and he said, "I better introduce myself".

(Loud laughter)

Ronnie: John said most people started at Bush House on the Overseas Service. I think at the Corporation that was the biggest department before television started, wasn't it, and even at the beginning of television, Bush House Department or the Overseas Service was bigger, in London, than the domestic service.

John: Well, it was the "European Service" in those days.

Ronnie: You see, I always knew it as the Overseas Service.

Mike: It was bigger than Oxford Street. It was twenty-six different sections – languages.

Ronnie: Yes, but you see

(Mumbling)

John: Aubrey has had the whole bottle.

Ronnie: The whole bottle.

Mike: Going on are we? Press "Pause" for a moment, would you?

John: You asked where Keith came from. Keith Rogers, pre-War, was in the radio business as an engineer. He went into the RAF and worked under Doherty and Ian Orr-Ewing and was part of that whole outfit and so when he came out it seemed a natural progression. And, of course, the marvellous thing was he was very useful to the likes of myself and others. He could really educate us on the engineering side because it very quickly became apparent to me that if we were wanting to get the engineers to do things for us in advance we had to know how they'd to go about it, so we could show we understood their problems.

Aubrey: Is Keith still alive?

John: No, no, sadly. But, I would like to pay tribute to him because I think he did an enormous amount because of his being a producer who knew his engineering he could press the limits in understandable ways. He also had some very good programme ideas.

Aubrey: He was a lovely man to work for.

John: Very nice. I enjoyed vision mixing for him as much as anybody because once he said what he wanted- you know the effect he was hoping to achieve - he let you get on with it and that was obviously rewarding.

Mike: Yeah. Yeah. I mean I've got a lot to thank him for partly because I was staff-no-fee (which was useful in those days), I was one who he wanted to persevere with as a commentator.

Aubrey: Yes. Staff (no fee) got to do all sorts of things when money was the object.

Ronnie: I think we ought to explain that.

Mike: Because of you had a programme budget, as I said earlier, of only £25 for an hour, if you could hire a commentator who was already on the staff, and you didn't have to pay him, then, obviously, you didn't have to pay a commentator as well. So staff-no-fee were put on the programme as broadcasters.

John: That did me a great deal of good a little later on in as much I went up, in the very early '50s, to be the Travelling Stage Manager between Manchester and Birmingham and in Birmingham particularly, Barrie Edgar was very keen to do as much commentary as he could and he was SNF and, therefore, young Vernon (muggins) was often left to produce the programme so that Barrie could be in front of the camera because he was SNF and it made the budget much more reasonable.

Mike: So that was the sort of role you moved into producing?

John: It was, indeed.

Mike: Which was interesting because, without going into detail, Yvonne Littlewood did the same thing as secretary to Michael Mills.

John: Yes, yes, great lady.

Ronnie: In those days, we all had a bit more fun together. I mean, today, engineers are engineers, producers are producers, they don't mix about so much but in the times that we're talking about – the late '40s early '50s – we all mucked about, didn't we? I mean the engineers would make suggestions (which they dare not do today) and things were done …

John: Well, you were part of your regiment, basically, and it's the price of a bigger firm too.

Mike: And also from what I can see nowadays of an outside broadcast unit the producer and director, of which there are two usually, sit in entirely separate vans and in the old days you all mucked in together, which had its advantages, if you could stand around so you could at least begin to realise that the camera was likely to be going down and the rack operator was likely to have trouble.

John: You could even lean over the front and say "Do you think it's going to be back in one minute or two?" and that was very useful.

Ronnie: And we used to turn around and say "I am not a genius. What do you expect"?

Mike: And, in those days, I can remember, at least a couple of times, when once at White City athletics and once at Lords, you'd suddenly find that you had the Duke of Edinburgh behind you.

John: Historically, I would love to know (in OBs particularly) when the first notion of a producer and a director on one programme appeared. It certainly was a very long way

off in the early '50s, thank heavens and it was really the first evidence of over-staffing that has been the vein of the system ever since.

Aubrey: Well, yes and no. Things have grown in complexity since then and vision mixing is no longer mixing slowly from one to three (mumbling). I don't know. I think the whole idea of directors as OB's grew in complexity, didn't it? You know, there was a guy who would plan the thing out and then there was a producer who would sit at the back and take a lordly overview of the thing. But that changed pretty rapidly too.

Mike: The thing that interests me, because I left in 1960 and when I've met various people since, some of whom are now dead but others are still in the business at the top, and they say "Mike, when did you leave?" and I say "1960" , they'd think for a moment and say. "Did you know that was a watershed?" and said before that time it was enormous fun and afterwards it became increasingly a vast factory. Now would you agree with that, Aubrey, because you've been in it …...?

Aubrey: Well, I was very lucky because I escaped that, I mean, I went to America. I went up to Scotland and that was a terrible baptism of fire, actually. The Scots didn't like Samson!

John: I was born a Scotsman, so be careful!

Aubrey: Oh, that's alright and we had to maintain an enormous output with one OB unit. I didn't mind that except that it was complicated by the fact that we couldn't find a place to live and my wife had a miscarriage and various things like that that tend to mix up one's private life, dammit, you know. My private life was actually a nuisance, although I wouldn't tell Cynthia that. Well, there was no truth in it actually. We devoted ourselves to the job.

So then, after that, I was lucky enough to be sent to America for three years and that, actually, was the most important formative period of my life.

John: It was that that actually moved you away from programme production into the executive world.

Aubrey: That's right. I understood then what I think television is about which is, taking the right decisions, putting the right amount at in the right place at the right time with the right people, and it gave me an overview which I never would have acquired otherwise.

John: And programming it in the right place.

Aubrey: That's right.

Now I want to put a little story on record so that it doesn't get lost because I think I'm right in saying that the first stage management job I applied for was to be …

John: You were the first producer in Scotland weren't you, Aubrey?

Aubrey: Yes, yes.

John: You move up with the unit. You were lucky. You got a unit to yourself. The other unit was shared.

Aubrey: No, no. We shared our unit with Terry Moldose.

John: Oh, yes. Your unit was shared half Scotland and half North. The other unit was shared half Birmingham and half Manchester, so it was Manchester who won because they had two halves of a unit which made them particularly rich. Now I wanted very much to be a stage manager because I was a vision mixer at the time, and the first stage management

job I put in for was to be the first stage manager in the Scottish region and the principal competition on that Board was a splendid New Zealander called Alan Morris and

Aubrey: He used to be Director-General in New Zealand.

John: Indeed – a very, very, able fellow indeed. No doubt at all. He spent a lot of his time in the office writing scripts for commercials on radio. And, amongst other people, the two of us were shortlisted and Alan was in just before me and he came out and I said "How'd it go?", "Oh," he said, "I think fairly well. I told them I came from Bellhoum and therefore there were considerable Scottish connections" and I said "Did you?" and he got the job.

Aubrey: Of course! A New Zealander!

(Much laughter)

Aubrey: Skye was an awful place to work in actually. I shall never forget it, ever! It was parochial in the extreme, it was tight, mean!

John: Against that, you were the boss and nobody up there had a clue about tele when you arrived.

Aubrey: No.

John: That's nice.

Ronnie: That bloody foreigner!

Aubrey: But that doesn't help you. No virtue for me, but I just happened to be around in producing the first programmes. Keith did the first one in Birmingham. In Manchester, Cardiff, Bristol, Glasgow and Edinburgh, I was the first person to produce. I tried to think afterwards, "Why?" and I think that out of all the brash lot I was considered most tactful because you had to be extremely tactful. I mean, I went to Cardiff (and you will appreciate this one) and their idea there was that they were really rather suspicious of this man from London and one's accent, and then when they told me that their idea of the first programme ought to be a Welsh choir in Welsh national dress, which is ladies with black hats and black costumes and so on in a semi-row singing for three quarters of an hour in black and white. And you remember the certain whitewash pictures? Ronnie, can you explain certain whitewash pictures?

Ronnie: Well, yes. Well, before I get on to that, …

Aubrey: No, no certain whitewash pictures – I'll do it if you won't.

Ronnie: Well, you do it then.

Aubrey Well, from what I understand it from a programme point of view was that with black and white pictures you didn't want to produce very extreme blacks or very extreme whites, which is why the newsreaders had to wear yellow shirts and that sort of thing and if you could get a sort of intermediate colour you got a sort of better picture and so a certain whitewash picture was something that would have extreme black and extreme whites. Well, the Welsh national costume is made up of extreme blacks and extreme whites so one had to tactfully explain that television was about things that moved rather than standing in a line singing. It was difficult.

Mike: And did you find the same in Scotland?

Aubrey: Well, the opening. I can't remember what we did with the opening. Well, we had to do the Church service, which I did and after that it was quite interesting, OB's. One which I was most proud of was this OB from a coal mine. It was fascinating. I was there I remember it. It was hell! It put the OB unit out of action from three weeks, which infuriated Derek. The only way to do it was on the old Hollywood rail making the frame work for you. You had the coal cutter coming in left frame and going out right frame. You couldn't pan the camera and so we did that. But the Edinburgh Festival were done and I did OB's from the theatre in Glasgow, the Black Eye with Jimmy McTaggart.

Mike: Golf? Was James Buchan around in those days?

Aubrey: Oh Jim was the OB producer who was appointed alongside me for me to try him. We are great friends, still. He was a wonderful man. Great man.

John: He was the local.

Aubrey: He was the local, that's right. I didn't know what the hell to do in the end and I was so fortunate when this job came up in New York and, God, did I need that job! I don't know what I would have done otherwise.

Mike: Did Nobel Wilson then take over from you?

Aubrey: Noble joined, at that time as a stage manager. He's in great form. I had lunch with him, actually, yesterday. We see each other regularly.

John: Well, I must tell you a story about Noble very quickly. Noble and I found ourselves in Vienna at Christmas in the early days of Eurovision and I thought oh, nice assignment if I was going to work at Christmas in Vienna. It turned out that Christmas in Vienna was a complete shutdown. On the Christmas Eve we did the Vienna Boys Choir and then I've never seen a unit pack up as quickly as the Austrian one did on Christmas Eve, all saying "I'll see you on Boxing Day and hope you don't mind, but Christmas is very much a family affair and we are all off to our families" and driving through the night, some of them. We were asked by our hotel whether we were going to be here over Christmas and we said "Yes" and that we actually had a day off on Christmas Day and it turned out that our Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve was to help ourselves to sandwiches out of the kitchen fridge with a bottle of wine! So Noble and I sat there and he, poor chap, was expecting their first and was on tenterhooks wondering how his wife was getting on. It was the most dismal Christmas I've ever spent.

Aubrey: I think the people who suffer most from this are the wives. I really think they have a hell of a time.

Talking of sandwiches ….. (mumbling)

Ronnie: Let's take a shot of the wives first, shall we?

Mike: Tony Ridgwell told me he met his wife in the bad days, you see, which was interesting and I actually put this one to him that the wives did have to be very long-suffering. I can now see why my first wife was a journalist left me after three years because I was looking at my work schedule of about 80 hours a week non-stop in those days.

Ronnie: I met my wife whilst I was in broadcasting. I met her whilst I was working in Germany. She working in Germany then and had come from Bristol and when we eventually got married, I joined television but she knew that as far as I was concerned, the work would come first and, in those days in OB, we used to work every week-end and have week days off and she was at work and so we rarely used to see each other except in the evenings. But I think the children suffered to a certain extent, because on OBs we always worked week-ends – there was always a sport event on a Saturday and something on Sunday, and

I thought they only met us when we were off during a weekday. I mean, Monday was our easiest day, wasn't it, after we'd got rid of all the paperwork, and I think it is today.

Mike: I hadn't been going very long, come to think of it, (sorry to butt in) in 1948 when on Saturday I commentated on Rugby at Twickenham and on the Sunday was producing xxxxx at the Albert Hall. I mean, that is how it was in those days whereas, nowadays, it seems with a producer and directors and researchers and all the people on the credits, it might take a year to make a programme whereas, in those days, you were doing four programmes a month.

John: I mean, I'm not saying they were anything like the quality ….

Aubrey: Well, the programme standards have risen haven't they?

John: Of course.

Ronnie: For the better?

Aubrey: Yes, I think so, actually – technically.

Ronnie: But, artistically?

Aubrey: Yes.

John: Oh, yes.

Aubrey: Oh, yes. I mean operas written by Mr Vernon ten years ago were one thing but, today …. Did you do Stiffelio, or whatever it is, this weekend?

John: I've only just heard about this. It's going to be live apparently. It was going to be recorded.

Aubrey: Live!?

John: Apparently. I read this buried in the gossip column of the Financial Times. Yentob, apparently, went to the first night and said this is so wonderful, that instead of it being recorded it's going to go out on Saturday night. I am livid! I'm going down to Devon, where I haven't got any tele, and I shall have to devote a whole tape to recording it on Saturday instead of other things I wanted.

But, anyway, that was just an aside.

Mike: I just wanted to quote one of the tapes that we've had in I mentioned earlier. This is somebody who started off as a spear carrier sort of in the 1930's and ended up as a producer before the Wars under people like Dallas Myer and George More O'Ferrall, people like that, and he did forty-two drama productions between '36 and '39 in one way or another, and he ended up his letter to me - of course, there have been enormous technical advances since then, but I wonder sometimes artistically - because they couldn't get ballet over here and so they were bringing ballet companies over from Paris in the '30s which was quite a triumph considering the hole in corner, one-man Cinderella band it was.

Aubrey: Well, now let's stop recording. I will get some sandwiches.

Ronnie: Well, we're going to change tapes. Let's go onto tape 4. Tape 3, sorry!