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Alexandra Palace Television Society

Television Scenic Design at Alexandra Palace

Stuart Marshall

Audio Wav file - 30/07/1997

Stuart: This tape is being recorded by old, retired members of the Design Department working at Alexandra Palace in the old days before BBC Television moved down to Lime Grove in White City.

My name is Stuart Marshall and I came in at the tail end of the period we are covering, from about 1930 to 1952. I joined in 1952 from the theatre as you will hear from my colleagues and my first post was as a 'Sick and Holiday Relief Draftsman'. So from a sick and holiday relief draftsman to an old retiree recording things is quite a step and, as I remember, my salary was about 10 quid a week!

Before we go round the table, I'd like to go through a brief history of television design that I have put together – no reference to the official BBC written archives was made as to the dates, but I am sure they are within a year. However, since I have written them I found out something else. The first Head of Television Design in the world not only at the BBC was a chap called Peter Bax. But he first came to the BBC on invitation to paint captions I found since I did these printed notes to which I am referring now.

In 1930, Pirandello's "*The Man with the Flower in His Mouth*", the famous drama on early television, had four camera's background painted by C R Nevinson who was a war artist (the First World War) and quite a well-known artist. Close-ups were black and white discs and one of the people who operated the discs as lots of old photographs show was George Innes, later the producer of "*The Black and White Minstrels*" and well known to us all. The engineers will talk more about that, presumably.

In 1936 Peter Bax came in as a studio manager. Now he came, like a lot of us, from the theatre – he was a theatre designer - but he'd stage managed, I think, for six years at Drury Lane in London. So, he came from the theatre and started designing presumably, whatever the design required in those days.

From 1936-1939, when television stopped because of the War, there were two designers working with Peter Bax, one was a chap called Malcolm Baker-Smith who was a designer/producer from all the reading that I have done. We can't find anything else about him – maybe somebody else can find some information, however, he designed his own productions and produced them and Barry Learoyd who is still with us, I am pleased to say, but not today around this table as he is in the south of France at the moment. He was an architect and he came from films. I don't know where Malcolm Baker-Smith came from for his design skills. Anyway, Barry came from films and was reputed to have worked with Zoltang Calder whether it was on "*Things to Come*" at Denham, or whatever – I always thought he came from Pinewood.

In 1946, when the BBC television service re-opened, there were those three – Peter Bax, Malcolm Baker-Smith Barry Learoyd – and two more joined (both from the theatre) James Bold and Stephen Bundy, unfortunately, no longer with us – they came from the theatre.

In 1947, Peter Bax (it was all departmentalised by that time, presumably) became Head of the Design & Supply Department. Now I have been saying "design" and when we talk about design, we really mean design and the ancillary infrastructure – the carpenters, the painters, the property department and, in lots of cases, the costume (or wardrobe, as it used to be called in those days) and make-up departments. The Design & Supply

Department included designers and wardrobe and makeup, which was all one department. Unfortunately, we have not been able to track down the ladies and get them to take part in our discussion today. Then, as I have mentioned, carpenters, painters, caption artists, papier- mâché makers (before the date of plastic) and during that time an art file - a reference library of detail – was built up. Of course scenery was made and stocked – there became stock fireplaces, stock columns, that sort of thing, and as it was made for each show it was kept and, gradually, a reference library of photographs and references – newspapers, magazines, photographs that the design department people took themselves – was built up. That was the beginning of the designers’ great interest in our BBC reference libraries wherever we had been based.

At that time, great unit sets were made which were stock pieces of scenery known as the “Louis XIV” and “Louis XV”, the “Oak Panel” and the “Georgian” and so on and so forth – we’ll talk more about those later. All these, we found, had to be used in the studio about 70 per 30 with a fixed figure site which was about 14’ high and the scenery we worked with, even I remember, some of it was ex-theatre canvas not the film type flats that we had when we did shows later on. The scenery itself was about 10’ or 12’ because we had to fit it around that blasted scaffolding skin that went into the studio to hold the lamps up which restricted our setting space and according to a note (not in my time) somebody mentioned that the designer was taken up planning with the producer and the drawings were done in the evening and at night because there were no draftsmen – Richard, you were probably the best draftsman there?

(Mumbling)

Richard, with whom I have just spoken, joined in 1948 from the theatre and was assistant to Stephen Bundy, were you, or all three of them?

Richard: No, dogsbody.

Stuart: No? Just a dogsbody.

In 1947, Steven Taylor was the first draftsman employed by that title in the BBC, apparently. He came from films too and he was shared amongst the designers Barry Learoyd, James Bolden and Stephen Bundy, as later I was, funnily enough.

Control of Design was put into A, B and C categories or design productions and non-design productions to make it easier to allocate the work, presumably by Peter Bax to the right designer for the right size production and then, of course, there were beginning to be stock set backings and break backings to talk programmes and the old “Oak Panel”, I remember, in my day was used a hell of a lot for documentary-type things.

In 1950, Roy Oxley (also an architect like Barry Learoyd) came from films and he eventually became Assistant Head to Peter Bax and he brought in quite a number of people from the film industry - Fred Knapman (who is still with us today) Richard Henry, Richard Wilmott, John Cooper, John Clements. Unfortunately, Richard Henry, Richard Wilmott are no longer with us and then later, Laurence Broadhouse from films (he’s no longer with us), Gordon Rowland from architecture (not sure what happened to him – can’t trace him) and Michael Yates who is with us today who came from the theatre.

In 1952, the year I joined, the last lot of the AP crowd as far as Design is concerned, you might say, was myself, Charles Carroll, Charles Laurence and Don Horn. Two of us came from the theatre and two of us came from films and I mention this in this brief history because coming from films, television was more akin to working in films even in the early days of old AP, because the sets were separate, there were different set-ups, which was quite different, with us coming from the theatre who worked with Persenia Martis or if we were lucky an open stage, we had to work out site lines in the theatre and

there were just multi-view points on however many seats there were in the theatre we were working in. So, it was quite an adventure for me, certainly, and I am sure Michael found it so. Working from the theatre into television was a whole new world of design opening up – the selected viewpoint of the cameras, that sort of thing and the cutting, and remember it was all live in those days.

So, soon after I joined the Alexandra Palace lot, including us, moved down to Lime Grove and the Design Department with all the ancillary services grew and grew from there.

So, what I would like to do is just go round the table and see what anyone has to say and start with Richard on my left who was the first to join.

Richard: Right! Impressions of AP. I joined in February 1948 as a sick and holiday relief. It didn't say what I was relieving or who was sick. I was the sort of general dogsbody to begin with, and then I certainly remember assisting Stephen Bundy, but as they were all so desperately busy in those days I was very soon given the sort of stock - "*Muffin the Mule*" set, "*Picture Page*", fashion shows - and things that Peter Bax thought that we had a lot of stock scenery for and that I could sort of put it together and make it happen. So, at the old theatre at Alexandra Palace was the scenery store which was stacked with scenery. Much of it had been made before the War. Tom Edwards, who I think was the master carpenter, was he not, who came from Broadcasting House, if I remember, and sort of made scenery as if he was sort of building Broadcasting House! It was made to last, and balustrades and things that we made in sort of 1936 were still just as good as new – certainly in '48 and '58 and I think probably '68!

Uhm, this sort of went on all through the Summer and, as I say, we were all frantically busy and towards the end of the Summer, there was a series with Ian Atkins called "*Magistrates' Court*" – it was in three episodes and I don't know whether they were in half-hours or hours and Peter said "Oh well, we've got lots of courts stuff and so you can do "*Magistrates' Court*". Well it didn't turn out to be that at all, because Ian Atkins was the director/producer, and I think (who was it who wrote it?) Robert Barr, I believe, wrote the script. Anyway, it needed in the second episode the whole of the magistrates' court at Marlborough Street and certainly none of our stock stuff fitted that at all and so I trundled down to Marlborough Street and took copious notes and the court took up, I suppose, three quarters of the middle of Studio A and had to be made absolutely to the nearest half-inch because there was absolutely no room for cameras and things to get between flats if you got them half an inch wrong.

Stuart: There were no spare half inches in those studios, ever.

Richard: There weren't, indeed, and in the three episodes there were a total of thirty-six sets of which the second episode had the "*Magistrates' Court*" and two or three other sets around and so a set consisted of an 8' flat or a 6' flat, very often. The "*Magistrates' Court*" was sort of interesting in that, of course, we couldn't get a camera in to look directly at the magistrate or, indeed, the boy who was up in the dock. Both the magistrate's desk and the dock were repeated to the side so that the magistrate hopped over to the side so that they could get a camera looking straight at him. Ah, anyway. So, I learned at extremely high speed from Ian Atkins how to design for television and I always believed in being thrown in at the deep end and Ian was marvellous because he taught me what would probably have taken years to learn now.

Stuart: Well, anyone who had been to his lecture on use of camera lenses would have it indelibly imprinted on their memory forever. It was absolutely wonderful.

Richard: He was absolutely marvellous!

In your note, I think you said something about Mr Pelham.

Stuart: Yes, yes.

Richard: Well, I think I did that and the principal actor played twins, if I remember rightly, and Ian worked out that by cutting (having a camera on each side of him) with the first camera looking at the set behind him and the second camera, the set looking that way, was mirrored and by

Stuart: Judicious camerawork!

Richard: Well, yes, and by reversing the picture, so that the set looked the right way round for both of them and so that, by cutting, the same actor was playing twins and this was most ingenious and Ian worked all this out.

In those days, we didn't have a scenery lift, when I arrived. The two Studios A and B were up twenty-five feet above ground level. All the scenery and props and everything had to be hauled up on the end of a rope – which was fun.

Stuart: Well, we might get Buddy and Frank, the earliest members of television, (compared with us designers, apart from Richard who has just spoken). What about that scenery lift?

Buddy: Well, I remember the heaviest pieces of scenery because we had to pull them up and one was enormous as they came in two pieces which had us both stuck underneath and the top section was totally separate. Another one which they called "The Door from the Dark Lady of the Sonnets" which was an enormous Tudor door which had been built pre-War and these are the things we remember, because of their weight, I suppose, and bulk. The "Dark Staircase" came in much later when James Bolden designed that from an old staircase, but that was a pretty hefty piece as well, I must say, and then we had to do "*Pygmalion*" they had to cut the coach in half down the middle, to get it up into the taxi cab.

Frank: But, also, before we got into the lift I did a night show for Richard Acton, which shall remain nameless, and I went up to Halifax (or I think it was Huddersfield) to sort of look at it, and the actual rink was about eighteen feet in diameter. It came in three pieces and this was going round the music halls and they dismantled it at one theatre, rushed it to the next one and plugged it in by which time the ice hadn't melted and so off they went next week to whatever. So this was all worked out and all rushed in on a Saturday night, after we finished transmission and it was lugged up by rope with the ice in it. Unfortunately, the refrigerating machine then promptly broke down and so all the ice melted and this was overnight and I regret to say that I was never very keen on doing overnight things. I was not there, but, in fact, in a great panic they got a load of crushed ice in, put it in and got the thing going and we ultimately did the show.

Stuart: This was handed over to Props to get the emergency ice, was it?

Frank: Well, I don't know who, but Richard Acton somehow got it.

Stuart: Buddy, were you there when this ice was required?

Buddy: Yes, yes. It was just before the production started.

Stuart: I remember the compressor guy working all weekend.

Buddy: Everybody was worried! Everyone!

Stuart: I'm sure they were.

Buddy: Fortunately, it did go off we done the show! But, it was a very, very near thing.

Stuart: Well, that was one wet experience. Another one was when Jimmy Bolt designed a show called *"The Gentle People"* where we had a harbour and water tank and our department managed to supply a water tank which leaked or the boat leaked or something.

Frank: As far as I can recall, Abraham Safar was playing the lead at the time in *"Harbour"* in New York and it was the first time ever, I think, we had built a tank of that sort of size and it did, apparently, leak through and put the transmitter off the air for a while! (Laughter).

Buddy: Yes, well, the story goes that dear old Dr Campbell, from memory, or one of the engineers, stood for the whole production so that when it leaked with an enormous great valve that looked like a mega-size version of these static electricity things that you wipe your hand on now with a great big purple light coming from the thing that used to light up the valve room and when that leak came out the story goes that an engineer was there holding the thing the whole time protecting the valve to prevent it exploding or something.

Stuart: Going back to what Richard was saying a moment ago about hauling stuff up on the hoist, I think Buddy could tell you one or two very interesting stories when we used to bring acts from Wood Green Empire, we used to take acts out of the first half of the programme and the last act of the programme and take them up to Alexandra Palace to appear.

Buddy: Yes. We done Buddy the Seal at Wood Green Empire (I don't know who the producer was) well, we thought, we'll put it in - it's the last act in the show - so providing we had sufficient time to run up to the Palace, upstairs, you must realise the dock at Alexandra Palace, right in the middle there was this great big opening and we used to put everything up on the dock. It was very, very slow and we had to close it down during the day while we were walking round there and when the show finished in the studios we would run down the corridor, open it up and down it used to go - 40 ft, was it?

I remember once I having a lovely pipe - a Dunhill pipe - the first Dunhill I could afford I those days, and as I smoked the pipe fell down and I shouted "Pipe down the bottom".

But this seal - we had our van waiting at Wood Green Empire and when the act finished, we returned in our van straight down to Alexandra Palace into the dock, up the chain, close it down, run it up to studio - I think we were in the end one, I think it was 'A' - and we got the seal in okay (it was in a crate), we done the act, rushed it down to the dock, but my chappy, instead of putting the chain round Buddy's crate once, he put it round twice for safety. Of course, the van was waiting as we had to run back to do the last act at Wood Green Empire, and we rolled it down and we ran out of chain and, of course, we were feet away from the lorry! So, the only thing to do was to pull it up again and it was so slow, there was nobody in the second house at the Wood Green Empire, there was no seal.

Frank: The other Fishy story was *"Here Come the Boys"*, I think, which I didn't do, but I think Stephen Bundy did in Studio 'B' and it was a fish stall scene and we had real fish and this fish, of course, went off!

Buddy: I remember it, I remember it very well!

Frank: As I remember, didn't Princess Elizabeth come to see the show and was in one corner - was that the occasion? But, anyway, I remember the fish went off and I seem to remember she was there.

(Loud laughter)

Frank: And Jack Hulbert.

Buddy: Oh, I remember. Oh God, it did smell! It did smell!

Stuart: Our basic stock scenery was piled up in the theatre, wasn't it? A scenic artist working with the lines of the old Alexandra Palace Theatre and the paint frame as it was then.

Frank: When we joined, immediately after the War, things were rationed very much and we were existing on stock sets that had been left from pre-War days and even existed as the "Green wallpaper Set" and the "Rose wallpaper Set". You couldn't get wallpaper at all then. All the sets were rag-rolled or stencilled because of lack of wallpaper and the grey set (which you called the "Unico Grey") stock set was used for fashions and all sorts of productions and they held this set of grey scenery which had arches, niches and the various rostra that went with it and columns which were assembled and re-assembled all the time. They were kept at the scene dock quite near to the grey set. The other sets were the "Louis sets" ie the "Louis IV" and "XV", the "Charles II set" and the "half-timber set" which was produced immediately after the War. These sets existed right up until, well, the late '60s before they started demolishing them.

Stuart: They were certainly multi-purpose because they were in every drama even though you were building stuff for drama they still used stock sets – the stock Georgian, or something.

Frank: Well, the stock Georgian was designed by Barry for "*Morning becomes a Day*".

My first work on the scenery when I joined in March 1946, was the demonstration film to which we devoted four months of work and we were building sets for the De Bois Summer Orchestra - there's still film of that that you occasionally see on television.

Stuart: With Eric Robinson playing the guitar and that teapot set with an orchestra around it, I've seen pictures of!

Dubby: Can I ask what Jimmy Paper and Percy Cornish used to do. They were in the scene dock where there were great big holes in the floor.

Frank: Percy Cornish was the scene master and George Beech shared an office with him as the Property & Construction Manager at the time. That was when I joined, anyway. Jimmy Paper then became Percy Cornish's clerk and the two studios were operated by xxx and the other was Ted Hutchins on one shift and I believe it was George Wardell on the second shift and Charlie Petero. And, there used to be a character called Robinson who used to make captions who used to do giraffes all the time!

(Loud laughter)

Stuart: And there was another who made ties.

Frank: Yes, yes and flowers.

Stuart: Was he Wardrobe?

Frank: Yes. I was just saying that although I started in 1938 as a page boy at Broadcasting House, I arrived at Alexandra Palace I think at the beginning of October 1939 when it was all closed down. I stayed up there for about three weeks relieving the page boy on the front desk there. There was nothing to do at all, but to wander around this ghost place, you know. There were a couple of people left behind like Charlie Hall, keeping an eye on the scenery and I think there were sort of Fire Wardens and people as such, but the place was absolutely deserted and derelict, you know.

Stuart: Were the cameras and mics there?

Frank: All the technical equipment was away, I didn't see any of that. Most of the offices were open, you could wander around. There was nobody really there at all, there was the watchman and people as such. I think there were a couple of cleaners up there.

I didn't go back again until late 1942 when I left Evesham and what happened in 1939 when the television service was closed down, the majority of the staff all went down to Evesham with the exception of the engineers, and I think with the engineers, most of whom went to Daventry, other than that they went into the forces scattered throughout the country. The crowd that went down to Evesham – such as Seaman and Protman - performed other sorts of duties like defence guards.

Duffy: Don't forget about riding the bikes.

Frank: Everyone was issued with a bicycle so that we could cycle around, but people from Costume Dept, Wardrobe Dept, Mrs Hernshaw, Beryl – they became clerks down there in monitoring section. Heather in Wardrobe Department, she was working in monitoring section. Some of the carpenters came down, Ben Stephens came down. I've got a feeling that the master painter came down (Bill Thicket) and everyone was doing different jobs.

I came back again in 1942 just prior to my conscription, and I was then in Accommodation Dept and I was the furniture auditor and one of the jobs was to go round and audit and check all the furniture and all the London buildings of the Corporation and I think, at that time, we had about something like 50 buildings, including places right out Seer Green. One of the places, of course, was Alexandra Palace and I went up there to list all the furniture and all the BBC's property.

There was only one place I couldn't get into, and that was the Control Room of the Transmitting Room which was occupied by the RAF and they used it for what reason I don't know, and the place was padlocked and chained. So, for me to get the information, I used to write down on a piece of paper what I was doing and what I wanted, passed it through the crack of the door, the RAF chap would go round and list all the furniture and equipment in there and pass it back out again to me.

I then came back to the television service in 1947 and I became a clerk in the Television Design Dept, working for Stuart Mortimer who was the Supply Manager and at the same assisted the designers - the three designers we had when I first started was Barry Learoyd, James Bould and Stephen Bundy, followed fairly quickly by Richard Greenough, and one of my functions on the design side was to photostat (or get photostated) the drawings that they did. Now, we had no facilities at all ourselves to photograph stuff or reproduce drawings and they used to be sent to a place called "*Planned Reproductions*" on Kingsway in Holborn. Another job I had to do was to catalogue and file all these drawings for references, because designers were constantly calling on past sets that they had designed wanting to use pieces from them in the next production.

Another thing I used to do quite often was assist Stephen Bundy when he was doing some of his shows like "*Café Continental*" when we used to make the little models and I would help him by painting the little table or chairs, or even when he was doing the ballet programmes, I used to put on ballet costumes and tights and stand there on the table in full view of the public walking past Alexandra Palace in poses whilst Stephen Bundy painted me!

(Laughter)

And, he didn't cease there. Whilst I was posing, my other colleague in the office, Charles Denman, would hid my trousers, because you couldn't be painted with your clothes on – you had to take all your clothes off. He would should out “I'm going to lunch now, Frank” and I was running around in this ballet things looking for my trousers!

(Laughter)

Stuart: Yes, Stephen did a lot of costume and set designs, didn't he?

Frank: I remember when we did “*Pygmalion*”, which we mentioned earlier on, Barry Learoyd designed the costumes, I believe, for “*Pygmalion*” if my memory serves me correct.

Another job I had was to start cataloguing all the scenery. It had, in actual fact, I believe, been started before the War – it was what they called a “kardex system” - and Stuart Mortimer called me in one day and said, “Frank, what we're going to do is catalogue and list and record and measure and, where possible, cut bits of drawing out as references and put in the file of all our stocks” – a mammoth job when I went into the television theatre to see it. Anyway, this I started to do going round numbering the scenery/measuring the scenery.

Well, in those days when designers did drawings, before they went out to the carpenters' shop, they went by a gentleman by the name of Charles Denman and his job was to list all the new pieces that we were going to have made new and he would type a requisition which would go to the carpenters' shop, the painters' shop, the workshop stores and other people who were interested in it. The requisition listed, as I said, all the things we were going to make. Now, from that list, I would go out and start looking for a new four-panel door, a new fireplace, number it, write down its description and put it in the catalogue. However, if the chippies were running out of time, instead of making sure we put a new four-panel door or new six-panel door or new window, they were going to the scene stores, picking out something as damn it to it, bring it out and alter it to suit the programme that they were making for. That created problems for me because;

- (a) we didn't have a new one that I had listed in the catalogue; and
- (b) the old one was nothing like what the catalogue said.

So that produced all sorts of problems for us.

The other sort of thing we started to do in those days, because we were running a tight space and just before I joined, to make more space, they took a terrific amount of scenery out and took it down the slopes of Alexandra Palace and, literally, burned it.

Stuart: Yes, we had an enormous break-up period when there was a particularly cold winter (I think it was 1947) and everyone took pieces wood home to keep the fires going.

?: But we also had that bar for storing scenery, didn't we?

Frank: The first things we had under the Tower we put all the cut-outs in the “King George V Suite”, I think they call it, we started storing in there.

Then we set up a new section to help out, that was called “The Reclaim Section” in charge of this was a gentleman by the name of Frank Bird. Now his job was to reclaim the scenery when it came back from programmes, but before he could start doing this, I had to run into all the designers with the drawings and say, “Look, this show's coming up tomorrow, do you need any of these pieces?” and they would look and say “Yes, no, no, no” and with my rubber stamp I would say “reclaim”, “reclaim”, “reclaim” and rush it out to Frank Bird so he knew in fact what he needed to reclaim.

That went reasonably well, until I slipped up one or two times with the rubber stamp and one or two pieces that were ear marked for another programme went missing.

Duffy: That, of course, was in the days of several productions in a studio a day. There would be one show at one end, possibly a small talks programme, and another small thing at the other end they might be altered for evening shows. More than one show in Studio 'A' and more than one show in Studio 'B' at a time and so you would have several lots of paperwork going around just for one day, presumably.

Frank: That's true. You mentioned earlier on about the papier mâché. This was, unbelievably, controlled by a gentleman by the name of Alf Hilburn and his assistant was a chap called Charlie Wing. Now Charlie was transferred from the scenery side. He used to work in the upper dock, if you remember Buddy, hauling up. Poor Charlie had an accident and lost one eye. He was a bit of a danger, old Charlie.

Duffy: He was too elastic.

Frank: Charlie was transferred down with Alf Hilburn and they set up the papier mâché thing. Now, the original papier mâché walls we had they were taken, in fact, from Alexandra Palace building. Alf used to go out with that sugar paper and stuff and look at a patch that he thought was good and take a mould from it. That's how we started our papier mâché brickwork. Taken from the building itself.

Duffy: We used to get sugar glass for crashing through windows from Barratts, the street people down at the bottom of the hill.

Frank: We were talking earlier on about design productions and that. They were called DPs and I think in the early days we were doing something like 16 DPs a month. These productions were allocated designers and allocated sums of money. Ah, but we had lots of programmes that weren't listed as DPs, weren't allocated any money, weren't allocated designers and they fell on the desk of Stuart Mortimer and Stu would do some and then he would call me in and say "Do you think you could cope with this little variety show?". I remember the first one I ever did was one called "*Wit and Wisdom*" and there was an up-and-coming start called Norman Wisdom. Stu came in and he plonked this on my desk and said "Frank, I wonder if you would be able to cope with this one". And what we used to do was this. We used to chat with the producer and the producer working on this particular show was Richard Afton and we would wander him around the scenery stores, picking out bits and pieces from other designers' productions, but then we would then probably take Bill Pickett the Painter and Brian would say "Paint that out" because that is something we don't want to be seen in this particular act and then we would select back-cloths, three-fold backings as such and do programmes that way. In a lot of the talk programmes, as you said earlier on, we would use the "Tudor Panel" sets or the "Charles II" set, get a chair, a table, a vase of flowers and that was a non-design production.

Stuart: Well, even in the later days, in my days, at the tail end days at Alexandra Palace I was doing Christopher Mayhew doing international commentary with probably somebody like Ernie Alfer a "caption artist" (as they were known in those days, not graphic designers) would have to supply a map or something of that sort and that was just the odd oak panel or a drape in the news for politicians sitting around, chatting away, those were non-design productions.

Frank: We borrowed the table from "Sound Radio".

Stuart: Yes, yes. But, even the design production in those days and allowing for inflation and time passing and all the rest of it, you can read in the records that the budgets given for dramas were only between £500 and £800.

Frank: I remember we used to get a DDBA (a Design Department Budget Allowance), apparently for captions only.

Fred: I'm sure it wasn't as much as £800, surely!

Stuart: It was between £500 and £800, maybe it was Henry Caldwell doing Café Continental which originated at Alexandra Palace who took the £800.

Frank: I remember we were given £10 for "Staff Training", and that was a lot of money. You remember, Fred?

Fred: Well, I know this is years afterwards, but I did "*Sunday Night at the Palladium*" for £45.

(Loud laughter)

Don't say "It looked it" because it probably did!

Stuart: I was wondering where Ted came in.

Ted: Well, I joined in December 1946 and I spent my time at AP right up until we opened up at Lime Grove – "*Children's Hour*" – and I was one of the first chippy's to get in there on "*Children's Hour*", "*Muffin the Mule*", "*Cracker Jack*", so really my time was interpreting the horrible drawings of the designers up at AP.

(Laughter)

Stuart: Yes, yes, because we didn't have offices down at Lime Grove until early 1952. BBC took over Lime Grove in what, '51, and we were still designing shows from AP for Lime Grove at the Alexandra Palace studios.

Ted: The thing I enjoyed doing at AP was making a little taxi for Barry Learoyd. Lochwood was in the show and we got an old Austin frame and built this little taxi and you could only just get into the back seat and the driver could just get into the front seat.

Duffy: In later years we used to hire them from Pinewood.

Ted: That's right. I can't remember the show though.

Stuart: "*Pygmalion*". The taxi was around for a long time afterwards and we used to use it for all sorts of things.

Fred: Barry Learoyd also did the "*Victoria Regina*" series which was the first series where they used built perspectives in it.

Ted: Oh, yes.

Fred: I used to draw those for him.

When I first came to Alexandra Palace, which I think was in '49, they were drawing on cardboard, not tracing paper and I said "Why is this?" and they said so that we can do the artist's reference on the original drawing to pass to the workshops, while the other drawings were reproduced by you in miniature form. That was before tracing paper.

Duffy: You're absolutely right, because the original drawings, before the designer took (because of his own personal reference) they were taken either to the senior artist or to Bill Pickett, the master painter, for him to match the colours up with and you could watch him matching them up and putting them up to dry and then matching them up again and then

those drawings, splattered with paint and that would, eventually, be returned to the designer for his personal file.

Stuart: The use of colour in the old black and white days – we all know what happened to reds and blues and you had Jimmy Bolt doing his light entertainment shows and he used to use silver and gold watercolour paint on his references for the artists and canary yellow, but we had to watch our tone designs in the old days otherwise some things could read in a very peculiar way through those old Emitron cameras.

The cameras and the equipment in the studios getting around the scenery in the dhow we've been talking about – they were a bit of a hazard sometimes too. I nearly got my finger chopped off with those old bicycle chain connectors several times and I remember Ted Langley, on one show, doing a back track shot while he was half-way up one wall of one studio to get the shot the director wanted because they were fixed lenses.

We've talked about most things in general, but how about Ernie Ogg talking about early captions? Yellow on green, as I remember.

Ernie: Oh, well, we'll start off with the grey card, that pale grey because white was too bright. It was all done black on grey, but you could use your reverse phase and things came up just right, the right captions on the background.

I was just thinking, I've been listening to all these names being mentioned backwards and forwards and things come flooding back in my mind. It's really marvellous just to hear it, but I feel I'm the odd one out here because you're all in the Design Department, although I was, I wasn't actively concerned with Design, just the captions.

The captions definitely took a long time, especially the rollers – they used to spend two or three days on those.

Frank: The one I remember, in particular, was the early boat race.

Ted: Remind us, who was doing captions at that time.

Ernie: Alf Carey was charge, but when I went there, there was another man there Reginald Nordrich, I joined them so there was just the three of us.

Frank: Gordon Decock was working with the Scene Department. He was the paint mixer. Another chap working with captions, but on the film side was a chap called Baldy Harris. He worked by himself, but was doing captions for the films.

Duffy: He was a bit like DOL Cam who was working on the engineering/electronic side. Baldy Harris I always thought of with bits of plasticine and wood and elastic trying to animate film characters because I remember he did mostly film work, Baldy Harris, didn't he?

Stuart: He did film captions which were few and far between.

Ted: I remember, though, that he used to come to us for our help – how do you do this, how do you do such and such – and we used to say “Go on, off you go”!

Frank: Am I right in saying that he did most of his work on plain pieces of glass?

Stuart: I don't know what he did.

Ted: He was Professor Frankenstein up on his own in the tower and the work came home, that's all I know.

Stuart: He was in a little cubby hole, I think, where Jimmy Bould used to work round where Transport used to be and when I was there I am certain he was doing it on glass.

Frank: I don't think Jimmy was there. I had an office round there.

Stuart: No, Jimmy did have an office there, originally.

When we first started off, our office was in the main tower on the fourth floor. There was Peter in one office, Barry Learoyd, Stephen Bundy and myself and Stuart Mortimer in another, and Jimmy Bould, then, was round the corner. Then we all moved down to the new South East wing that they had just renovated and done up, and then Jimmy joined us there and I am certain that when he moved across from round near the chippy shop, Baldy Harris went in there because I used to pop in and I'm positive he was doing it, I'm positive, on pieces of glass.

Stuart: Speaking of offices, when I first joined I shared an office with Fred Knapman. Fred what were our impressions of the place?

Fred: Little window and windy stairs.

Stuart: Floor half way up an arch so that we could look down through the floor and see who was going home early from the car park.

Fred: Barry and James used to share that office and there was a partition that was Barry's half and James and there was cutting a fireplace in half which you could walk by and there was a notice board and on that notice board was a vine which Barry Learoyd had drawn and James Bould daren't put a notice of his across that line otherwise they wouldn't talk to each other for weeks!

(Laughter)

Stuart: The story goes that when the mailman came round, and the post came round, if one of Jimmy's letters got on to Barry's side of the partition or vice-versa it was thrown over the partition or returned to the mailman for the correct delivery.

Frank: When Barry wanted talk to you, he rang you up from the other side of the room!

Stuart: We had these partitions and we had three designs and it was unbelievable – so amateur!

Frank: So Barry would shout over the top "What do you need Bould, or Stephen Bundy?" and would shout "Frank, can I have such and such a drawing" and Barry would often call me in there "Frank, would you come in here, please" and I would walk in and he would say "Do get rid of that, would you?" and I would look around and think "What is he talking about? Barry, get rid of what?" and he would say, "That fly on the window", and so I would take my handkerchief or a piece of paper and clout it and he would say, "God, man, you've killed it!" and I would say "Yes" and he was always calling someone in.

One day James had a visitor (she was a young actress) playing a part upstairs in the studio the previous day and she was doing something the next day and she would say, "James, darling, you were absolutely marvellous!" and this would go on for about three or four minutes and suddenly I thought "I know what's going to happen" and I would hear the voice "Frank" and I would say, "Yes, Barry" and he would say, "Come in, would you please" and I would go in there and he would scribble a little note and say, "Give this to James next door, please." On my way out from one cubicle to the next I would quickly look at it and it said "James, for God's sake, how much longer is this damn row going to go on?"

(Laughter)

and I would knock on the door and James would be in there “Come in, darling” and James would say, “A note for me, oh good!”, he would read it and say “And, who the bloody hell does he think he is?” and this used to go on regularly, you know, little things like that.

Stuart: Well, what else do you remember, Fred?

Fred: After *you* shared the office, I think John Clement shared it with me and we were both from the Film and we were absolutely speechless with this sort of behaviour, it was extraordinary to us because, what can you say, you’ve got to talk to each other over some things haven’t you?

I think my sort of memories were really of the engineers. You had people like Otis Eddie, Sammy Sampson, Nick Holmes who were in radio engineering which was a very, very strong institution and their word was law and when Design staff started to increase, and go into the studio on productions they didn’t really know who we were, what we were and they thought they would tell us what we were able to use in colours, whether we had cigarettes that were too white for the cameras to take, and they would peel off and, generally, engineering was a very strong thing which, I believe, we had to somehow equate with eventually and let them know that we were a major part of any production, the same as engineering was. They had come from Sound, you see, and that really for me was a big battle that went on in the studio.

Frank: That was very much the case with the lighting directors, who were all part of Engineering.

Fred: Well, that was reasonable enough up to that point until the designers got to know something about the job and they could argue with the engineers and get their way as long as they knew that they were right. But you see, in the end, where we wanted artistic effect we had to really battle hard to get that. There was no such things as seeing an outline of somebody, knowing who that intruder to a room might be, they had to see a portrait of this person (lighting-wise) for it to be able to be their standard. We wanted an artistic effect which was, maybe, a sub-standard picture to them.

Frank: Well, it would be to them but, in the end, there had to be a meeting point.

Michael: I had that once, but this was much later down at Lime Grove when this marvellous lighting director who had been put into a junior position (he was far too good to be lighting director in my view) and I got together with him, you see, for a certain thing and it was a ballet which John Cranko did (this is just to underline your point) and the whole thing was painted on a large gauze, which I didn’t realise, in pure white and that was an anathema so you don’t pay any attention to all that rubbish that you can’t use white when the way you used it was right. And, this lighting director got together with Racks as they were then called, and the beginning of the ballet started in blackness, you see, which was astonishing to all the people sitting in the Control Room and so forth, and he got the Racks people to turn up the contrast and brightness and very, very gently as the dancers came in in white costumes against this black background or dark green with white roses all over it and as it came down sort of flames came out and the whole thing came to life and this was absolutely against all the rules. This was the lighting director’s idea, not mine.

Stuart: Michael Yates, this was at Lime Grove? Did you do ballet at Alexandra Palace?

Michael: When you come to me you’ll find that I have about two things to say which is nothing.

Stuart: I can’t believe that is true.

Michael: Well, I never actually worked at Alexandra Palace, you know.

Stuart: Did you now have an office?

Michael: Oh no! No, no, no. I'll tell you what I did if you want to know.

Well, I came from the theatre, as you know, because I was in the Production Department of the Royal Opera at Covent Garden for three years from 1945, before it re-opened, and Rees Spencer was Production Manager there who later went into design and ITV and that, of course, was marvellous as I was lent out at once to Oliver Masor for two to three months which was very good experience in many ways and, of course, one worked with all these marvellous international designers like Béraille and so forth and then I went to the Carl Rosa on a contract as Resident Designer and Stage Director which was good experience.

Then I got an interview with Peter Bax who I think was in charge of children's programmes at that time and so I went off down to Devon after that to visit somebody and suddenly got a telephone call the moment I arrived in Chagford, not all that far from you Fred, and they wanted me at Alexandra Palace the next day. I didn't see any reasonable way of getting there, but I did catch the next train and went up and Peter Bax said to me, "Well, we can offer you a job as a draftsman, as long as you don't mind being taken on as casual labour". I said, "I don't mind what you call me, you can call me "labourer" if you want" for £8 per week and I was given to Richard as his slave – full-time and permanent!

(Laughter)

Contrary to Duffy, we were at the office down at Lime Grove and that is where I was right from the beginning and all I did was visit Alexandra Palace and stir things up sometimes, really on his behalf including journalists from Pinewood to Alexandra Palace and back to Lime Grove in one day collect about five BP slides.

Duffy: Of course, scenery was still stored at Alexandra Palace!

Michael: Yes, but all my personal design work later was down there after '52 but this is important, all the assistant designers or whatever you called them – draftsmen – went on training course didn't they and I went in '52, probably towards the end of '52. It was important this training course because it just showed that it was not specifically for designers, it was a general training course for designers to get to know everything which happened in television which was very sensible and hadn't happened I don't think much before '51.

This was an important development at the BBC in that everyone who worked in television on the production side needed to know what happened everywhere, technically.

Duffy: I must confess, this is news to me. Did you go on it?

? Yes. Richard Wilmott and I went on the very first course ever.

Duffy: Well, I must be the first one who didn't go on it. It must have stopped for people joining the Design Department then.

Michael: But this course was important, not because I went on it I have to say, because on that course were Michael Peacock, Richard Attenborough, John Thurnall (who was a very distinguished theatre producer and director), Rees Pemberton was on it, Eileen Diss was on it, Peter Reiss was on it, Peter Grant-Scott was on it and one or two others, but it was those top people that's where they started in 1952 and dear Grace Wyndham Goldie - she got her clutches on Michael Peacock at once and I think David Attenborough too! But I think it is important to know that these courses happened at the BBC.

- Stuart: Yes, well I joined at the same time – I was the next one after you because Eileen Diss and Peter Reiss came after me, chronologically speaking. But I didn't go on a course, I was just working for three designers as a draftsman.
- Michael: I used to learn the trade, coming from the theatre like you, I used to learn about television even though I was working for Barry Learoyd and Steven Bundy at the same time at Alexandra Palace. I used to say "Well, the drawings are done, the prop lifts are out, there's nothing to do I'm going down to the studio" and I used to go down to the studio which is what most of us wise people did when we had a bit of spare time and see what the lighting did and the cameras did.
- Stuart: You're quite right, I think this is important as far as designers are concerned – the only way they could learn and a lot disbelieve this even when independent television started they didn't believe that the only way you could learn was by becoming a draftsman first, you see, and watching what happened and working with one designer, preferably, so that you kind of got into a rhythm and so forth and this taught you everything about not just your own job, but also about everyone else's such as actors because a number of designers were not interested in actors you know.
- Fred: When you mentioned Grace Wyndham Goldie, I worked for her quite a lot at the Palace and when I first went and became Barry Learoyd's draftsman, he said to me, "Well, Fred, in ten years' time, you could well be an Assistant Designer" and I suppose it must have been nine months and Grace Wyndham Goldie wanted me every time she did a programme with Norman Swallow, and then Peacock came into it and I became a designer after that.
- Michael: All that sort of background training which is sort of – well, I don't know what is going to happen now, they'll probably sink the whole bloody lot.
- Duffy: Well, they come straight from art school into an organisation as designers.
- Michael: It doesn't exist any longer.
- Stuart: I remember one designer being told by a producer, "We don't want you creative types around here. All you create is trouble".
- Michael: Well, before I got into television the first job I ever had in the theatre was as a scene shifter and that I found extremely useful – to know how to handle scenery and then I thought I would be an actor and that, of course, became extremely useful because you would act the things out and you could make things fit. I found that enormously helpful.
- Stuart: I don't know whether previous experience of people like Freddie here who worked in films was like, did you work in the theatre before films, because I came to the conclusion very quickly that we who came from the theatre (and there is three-to-one of us who came from films here) were able to latch on to the communal creative side of designers working with lighting man/working with props and scenery and that sort of thing, a little bit an artist which you mentioned, Michael, and who had probably acted themselves as Richard said he had, and I in the theatre I was always playing parts at various reps and things, you know, and then the film designers who were a department in the film industry.
- Richard: I joined in 1938, working for my father at Gaumont-British Pictures at Lime Grove and then went right the way round to Pinewood Studios, then went to an architect's office and then from the architect's office I came to television.
- Stuart: How did you find the transition from working in films with that sort of technique?

- Richard: Well, you knew all about camera angles, they were second nature to you, not so much the co-operation with lighting as we did in television and as you did in theatre.
- Stuart: Now, you see, we in the theatre were devoid of camera angles – we just had sight lines when we did designs.
- Richard: As with the design in the theatre you also did a certain amount of lighting, I believe, with the lighting designer.
- Stuart: I used to light my own sets at various reps, yes. So the transition from one industry to the other, as it were, was easier in some respects but completely new in others.
- Richard: They are all allied, you just adapt yourself.
- Michael: I think so, because the draftsman from films were infinitely superior to us who came from theatre. You gave a model to the scenic artists and various other scene builders in the theatre and they said “Up yours” (well, not really) and they just said “Thank-you, leave it behind”. They changed it you see, if you said 6” and they thought 4” would do, you got 4”, you know, and the only thing you got was the colour which was usually right, but one’s own drawings were no good and people didn’t do drawings for the theatre in those days as they do today.
- Duffy: In my time it was all in your head and you worked it out as you went along.
- Michael: In the West End when we used to do shows and at Covent Garden with all these people we got these great designers’ sketches and so forth and did a very cursory job scaling them up and then they went off to the builders and so forth.
- Richard: Well, it was always my opinion that the attitude of theatre people was right in those days, in the early days of television because it was the first night and everything was live and scenery had to go in, be put up and worked on and then out and I have never worked in the film industry, but my opinion of what went on there was that the things were built and plaster was used and it was all more permanent, and I always felt that the attitude of theatre people – where it was a first night, every night and the scenery had to go up and in and be handled like the theatre scenery, and it was that attitude that I personally felt was good for television. I know things have changed since then.
- Fred: There was quite a turmoil in the Scenic Department when Roy Oxley came in, of course, when the scenery basic sizes were 6 x 5 rostra with triangles which were left-hand and right-hand and then we became 6 x 4 after that, and the door flats became very narrow opening units which had flattage right up to each side of it taped over it which was completely different to the 5’ door flat that covered the initial shots.
- Richard: The other thing, Fred, was that in the theatre they would use canvas and hessian and, of course, in the film industry they would use plywood and hardwood and whereas you could lift the theatre scenery and move it along, the only one was when you closed the door on the set. When Roy Oxley came in, he started switching the design sort of thing from the film world, we could hardly lift the stuff and it took a while before we took a bit from the theatre and a bit from the film world and said, “Right, that’s the street we’re going to go down”.
- Fred: They eventually made a rule that no scenery should be heavier than two men could handle.
- Duffy: Oh, yes, I remember that. That came much later on. There were a great crop of hernias after that!

(Laughter)

Richard: It didn't really matter quite so much in those days but now, of course, with the depth of focus and so forth even when we got down to Lime Grove with those Pye cameras and a few strange things in the background never showed up, did they?

Fred: The transmission you were just saying there, they used to have solid skirtings when Roy came in the picture and then, eventually, they said this isn't necessary. You would state "solid" when required and "painted" when required on the same set.

Richard: This was just sensible economy at the time and manhours of practical detail became part of design function, I think.

Duffy: And then you had painted mouldings, didn't you which would be papered on.

Those cameras at AP when they were focused on someone's nose, their ears were out of focus, but certainly when you focused on the artist the set was nearly always out of focus. In fact, one show I worked on with Barry Leroy we had some scenery painted very dry brush out of focus already – we didn't bother to paint in detail - and we got away with that as background.

The other thing is moving in on scenery seemed to give a different scale to whatever details you see behind the artist when you moved into a medium shot or close-up and something that was a hovel with a couple of tramps or something and you moved in and it looked like a Salvation Army old clothes store or something.

Richard: It was very complex, anyway, and got more so as cameras improved and if the designer, let alone anyone else, lost sight of the fact that what the artist was doing in front was the most important thing – I mean the artist didn't matter at all to a lot of designers - he didn't last long. All the fuss in the background is part of the design function, not just a technical necessity.

The designers' draftsmen (assistants as they became), they didn't learn this unless they actually worked on the floor with a good designer.

Duffy: It's the old apprenticeship.

Richard: Well, it is.

Stuart: Going back to what Freddie was saying. Freddie, am I right in saying that in the film industry 90% of the scenery was constructed actually on the set?

Fred: In situ, yes.

Stuart: Whereas us in television, everything had to be pre-fabricated. Now the carpenters' shop was right round the other side of Alexandra Palace and as I said everything had to be pre-fabricated and of a size that could go through the trap door and hauled up onto the studio floor. But, apart from that, it had to be hauled or pushed on trucks and trailers somewhere in the region of about a quarter of a mile from its point of manufacture, in the open air. In the pouring rain where all the paints would run!

Duffy: I was going to say, to book scenery from my office I had to put a raincoat on and go to the scenery store and so we had that problem. It was pre-fabricated, hopefully it was lightweight and you would move it about often in hailing gales that went on up at Alexandra Palace and the trucks would literally turn over!

There was a joke that Charlie Hall was down at Wood Green where the cameras were – he'd taken off!

Stuart: The other point that Freddie was making was making about sorting out the problems with lighting engineers we also had problems in props, no doubt, coming back via the designer. I mean, I remember, in the early days every newspaper had to be blown down, all the table cloths had to be in grey casing, the cutlery had to be in grey, the shirts were either yellow or a grey colour.

I always remember the day where there was a scene where this person was eating an apple, half eaten, and it came back to us "Could we blow it down?". We dusted it with cocoa and sent it back to the studio. The things that we used to have to have blown down!

Richard: I can't speak about AP because I only worked up there once. The first thing I ever did there was something with Richard Hearne and I had no idea that he was going to do the lancet and I put up some columns with silver paper on them as I thought that would be rather fetching and so there was silver down the ladder and having the thing dulled down. I know that you got to have a thing about blowing everything down and the shirts and so forth which was quite sensible, but the plain fact is that you could use lighter things if everyone was working together, which they often weren't, you see.

One example, was that we did the ballet up in Dee and all the costumes were white and that was it. They're not going to make a whole lot more costumes, and I was deciding things so I made all the scenery white too, you see, and the whole thing was balanced up properly. You didn't have black coming in suddenly, you could control it if you tried and the lighting and so forth. I know that there was a problem with light - lighting matches and getting flare and so forth - with those cameras, but if it hadn't been pushed to the limit because everyone was stuck in the past weren't they? These rules became so permanent you just had to push your way through it and it was pure black and white next to each other, not yellow on green and so forth.

Duffy: But don't forget the design vis-à-vis engineering problems gradually sorted themselves out because the technology and the technicians gradually got better and we soon knew which lighting men we would prefer to work with than others, because some were more advanced and learned more about our side. The perfect lighting man and the perfect designer is the designer who knows about lighting, and the lighting man who knows about design.

Richard: Yes, and that can happen when the designers needed to play their part and they weren't the kings.

This wasn't Alexandra Palace, this was when you got to Lime Grove.

Duffy: This continued for a long time didn't it, this problem with lighting?

Richard: Oh, yes. The cameras at Alexandra Palace, they were pretty limited technically.

Stuart: I think I am right. We did have the Lime Grove cameras at the latter part of Alexandra Palace.

Duffy: Yes, yes, in the latter days.

Stuart: Can I just record that we have talked a lot about the jolly trap door and everything going up on a rope, which we all remember, but we did get a scenery lift was installed ...

Duffy: Yes, eighteen months before we closed Alexandra Palace.

Richard: Anyone, one did go in and, ultimately, we did have a lift put in.

Duffy: It was the wrong way around. We had to turn all the scenery around.

Stuart: It did break down when it was over-weighted quite often.

Duffy: The last resort was the old trap door until they sealed it up!

Richard: You can't escape all that. We had an outdoor hoist for our scenery.

Michael: I think it was somebody like Alfie Massey and Rolly Underwood who did all the water and gas and all the plumbing.

Richard: But, we also did the bigger light entertainment ones which ran weekly like "*Café Continental*" and "*Rooftop Rendezvous*" where we had the toppers.

Duffy: Fawcett did some musicals at the Palace, did he not?

Stuart: I think something else we need to stress at Alexandra Palace is that because we couldn't record, "repeat" literally meant we repeated the whole show.

Duffy: Oh, yes.

Stuart: I mean, the Sunday night drama was repeated again every Thursday afternoon. Every prop, every stick of furniture had to be pulled back in again.

Frank: All the floors had to be painted again, captions had to be found from the first show or reproduced very quickly for repeats.

Duffy: This was particularly difficult when you had a show with fights in or distressed sets or anything of the sort and the stock set you would use to save money on building the rest of the sets being booked for some other show if you were unlucky if it hadn't been recognised that it was due for a repeat, when someone had forgotten to say "Keep for".

Stuart: At least this was one way we increased our stock of scenery because we had about four Adam's windows which somebody else had drawn into another show at the same time and so we immediately had eight the next week! Then, we did "*Café Continental*", of course, the big sweeps that surrounded the orchestra were extracted from "*Noah*".

Duffy: You couldn't book a piece of soft scenery for a few days if there was another programme using it, to give the construction people the time to repaint it and fit it into the new set.

Stuart: I think it was more or less related to the retention note – if you retained something out of someone else's show because of the quickness of a production (because of no recordings) that you wouldn't show the same item within two weeks, I think it was.

Duffy: Yes. Designers didn't like that, did they?

There were all those initials over the place in chalk – "keep the series", "designer water-let", "hbs (has been selected)" and your story which has been recorded in Denis Norden's book – the story of NTGB or "Not to Go Back". In actual fact, it was North Thames Gas Board!

Stuart: When I became Property Master at Alexandra Palace (I took over from Ray King), one of the first things I did there was to number all the stock right from the word go. The reason being that as we were expanding and taking on new staff, furniture and property was generally known by the last show they were used in or the show that they were regularly used in – you would have "Around the Galleries Table" or "The Jungle Book Chairs, "The Picture Page Chairs" and things like that and you were just hoping that on

the day that your crew came in (or Buddy had) that they were on that particular day because you were going to need that particular furniture.

Apart from that, not all the staff we employed in props immediately after the War were terribly familiar with the difference between a Louis XIV chair and a Chippendale, a Sheraton or whatever the case might be, and we thought that by numbering all the stock we had a good chance of getting all the right pieces of furniture that the designer had selected in the studio. So, that was a mammoth job that was undertaken by Jack Richards and he went through the whole of our stock describing it, numbering it and back in the office we were typing it and listing it all.

Now, apart from supplying all the straightforward props - tables, chairs, saucers, plates - the props department, in the early days, were also responsible for supplying the effects and I always remember, and no doubt Buddy will recall, the very first fart machine we had! It was a monstrous thing and in the early days (I think we copied the idea from Hollywood), we used to use diesel oil and it used to come out "splurt"!!

(Laughter)

Duffy: It used to spray everyone in the room, and anyone who smoked had the greatest flame thrower going!

Frank: I always remember one year (I think it was in the Alexander Palace days) and we were doing the radio show at Olympia or Earls Court and Richard Afton was doing a dream sequence with the Littlewood Songsters and he said he would like to use the smoke machine. By then we had moved on from diesel and had now moved on to Neujob, I think it was called, and this was liquid paraffin, and it would come out as a white sort of vapour. If you wanted it to lay you fired it over dry ice – solidified CO₂ – and we thought "Ooh, this is good we're going to use it for Richard Atton's show. We went down to do the show, well, the show was at Olympia, we had done two or three days beforehand for rehearsals, which was more than we had done at Alexandra Palace, so that the public could see how rehearsals went and we used to get under the stage then and fire the old gun and after the first time, Richard Atton came to see us and he said "What kind of stuff are you using?" I said "Why?". He said, "I've got trouble with all the singers and the dancers" he said, "They're all going to the toilet". I said, "Are they? Oh, dear! I'll find out about it". So when I spoke to the guy he said, "Well, what you are using is actually liquid paraffin. Do you know what liquid paraffin does?". I said "No".

(Laughter)

He said, "I don't know what to suggest now." I said, "We're going out live tonight, what do we do?" He said, "I don't know". He said, "I tell you the best thing to do, go round to the chemist and buy a little bottle of "Evening in Paris" – one of the cheap perfumes – mix it in and shake it up and it'll come out and nobody will know".

So we pumped it all up and had a little go and thought, "That smells better, we'll use that tonight". So when we came to do the live show we were pumping away and out it all went all these lovely clouds, and all the girls singing in the clouds. So when the show finished, Richard came down and said "That was much, much better. It smelled good. Why didn't you use that the first bloody day? I think about three days later and the PA came up or the Studio Manager as he was called then and he said "You rotten lot of swines! The girls have still got the !!!!!'s!"

(Loud laughter)

The other thing we used to use was the cobweb machine. I mean, nowadays, you just buy the stuff and pull it out. You remember the old spray gun the painters would use?

Well, we had one and fitted to the back of it a fan and we put the old cap back on again and put ring between the spring and the wing nub and then we used to fill it up with Dunlop solution, and then the petrol from the old lighters, mix it all up and thin it down again and according to how you wanted it to come out, you would just adjust the nut. But, of course, there was no variable speed thing, it went whrrrrrrrrrrrr and you held this sort of spray gun and you'd put your lines out, thin cotton lines, hoping it would grab on to something and away you would go, chucking this solution all over the place and dusting it down with fullers earth and with those early guns, if you weren't careful, it spun you round!

Stuart: And then, of course, there was Visual Aids. They used to come into the props for all sorts of things.

Jack Card eventually went from the scenic studio into Special Effects. He and Bernie Wilkey and Bernard came from Engineering somewhere in Surrey.

Duffy: Was he at Kingswood?

Stuart: Yes. I remember the things we used to attempt to do at the last minute! Jack was a beautiful model-maker and absolute first-class man had gone over to Special Effects.

Richard: Tell me. When did Bill Hillman come into everything?

Stuart: Bill Hillman came into the BBC Television Services in 1938 as the first television prop buyer in the world. He worked previously at Warner Brothers and he worked with Lyons and he came to us around about the latter part of '38, I believe. God rest his soul, he passed away two years ago on his 80th birthday and he stayed with the Corporation and the Television service until it closed and when it closed down he went down the Evesham, like we all did, where he was doing buying and then he was sent across to Northern Ireland and he was the general buyer for the BBC in Ireland, most dealing with catering over there. He returned to the Television Service when it opened up again in 1946 and, after about two years on his own, he was then joined by a gentleman by the name of Victor Stokes who previously worked in the Buying Department and previous to that worked in the BBC Valves section, which used to be in Nightingale Square in 1936.

Then, we gradually expanded the buying side which was still, in those days, part and parcel of the Buying Department at Broadcasting House. They just rendered the service to us. It wasn't until Peter Bax came along when he took the construction side – the carpenter's shop which came under Civil Engineers – under his wing. He also took under his wing the Props Dept and then, what else did he take over? Oh yes, he took over the Buyers then, they became part of us – they came under me in actual fact and then we expanded Prop Buying at Lime Grove and Betty Hodgson came in as the first female buyer. The staff I had working for me as property assistants, they were amalgamated with the buyers' duties. So, you had the one guy to deal with previously if you were a designer, you came along to a Property Assistant, you spoke to him about your props and he selected with you your stock stuff, then he passed you over to the prop buyer - who was Bill Hillman – and you went out and did your buying then. It all became one eventually. That was after we moved out of AP though.

Duffy: Yes, yes. It expanded quite a bit and some departments became separate departments (like Costume and Make-up).

Stuart: Yes, Costume & Make-up.

Duffy: And then, again, the wheel turned – Peter Bax died in 1952 and Richard Levin came over and it finished up as it is now, presumably, "Design Group", with all the various departments underneath it – costumes, make-up.

Richard: Anyone heard about Stanley Lawson?

Stuart: Stanley Lawson joined us at Alexandra Palace. He came to the BBC as an Assistant Stage Manager, mostly working on the shows of Shaun Sutton. He previously worked in the theatre, if I remember rightly, Richard will tell you more about his stint in television. Stanley joined as assistant to Stuart Mortimer. Stuart Mortimer was the sort of manager of the supplier side of Design & Supply, and Stanley became his assistant.

Stanley stayed with us right the way through until we got down to Lime Grove, then we moved into the Television Centre and it was whilst we were in the Television Centre that Stanley went up to Bush House to become something for the German service there, but Stanley worked with us for some time.

Duffy: A very nice man, very nice man.

Stuart: The first Property Master we had at Alexandra Palace would be George Beech. He was succeeded by Ray King and then Frank and I took over from Ray King. By that time, I was in the overlap with Lime Grove opening up and so we went down to Lime Grove. Also on our side, Stuart Mortimer I would consider one of the great pioneers of television only he wasn't an engineer or a designer, but he put in a lot of hard work.

Duffy: He was a Studio Manager when I knew him.

Stuart: He was a great guy! I had a lot of respect for Stuart Mortimer.

Richard: Well, I was in the RAF with Stuart and I remember I got onto him and it was he who put me in touch with Peter Bax. That's how I got in!

Stuart: Oh! I believe he was known in the theatre as Stuart Clifford or Clifford Stuart, I don't know. He didn't trade under the name. He was great friends with Edward Stephenson and they were both of the theatre world.

Duffy: I know he was up to Olympic standard in fencing because Stephen Bundy and I used to go for fencing classes with him in later years.

Stuart: Talking of "*Quatermass*", which I worked on with Richard and the effects we were talking about earlier and the working of lighting engineers with designers, I've got a note here about Barry Learoyd's penumbra scope. He made umbric and penumbric shadows on early back projection material instead of scenery, which consisted of a turntable (usually hand-turned), tilted with three large lamps on. Then, that involved the engineering because, I believe, you kept it in props, did you not, Frank?

Frank: I think we did.

Duffy: Are you going to bring up the business of practical props, electrical props etc in the early days how there was engineering or house services versus design was there not? In later years it developed into the business of designers not being allowed to use electrically operated turntables or something.

Frank: I think that was much later on. They were all hand-operated like the roller caps at AP.

Duffy: In the old days, everyone did everything – there wasn't this departmental thing. Everyone mucked in.

Richard: I was told that the penumbra scope came from an adaptation of the film industry.

Stuart: Oh, I'm sure it did.

Richard: We used to project clouds through a turning drum onto a painting of clouds to project moving clouds.

Stuart: We even used it in later years for a “*Miss World*” at the Albert Hall which Dick Levin designed and Barry Learoyd came in with the penumbra scope! We added to it by putting foil around the edge.

Richard: Do you remember Peter Thompson and a doodlebox?

Stuart: Oh, yes – the children’s producer.

Richard: You could write normally and it had a mirror down like this and the camera used to be underneath taking a picture of what he was actually drawing.

Stuart: Yes. It was like a camera actually under the table looking up.

Duffy: Did we not use that for one of the early panel games like “*What’s My Line*” or something?

Stuart: Possibly.

Duffy: But, there were all sorts of things developed in the pioneering days up there especially children’s things where you used to get the pound for the captions. I’m sure that’s where “*Billy Bean and his Silly Machine*” originated. I added bits to that. I don’t know who originally designed it but this was a thing which was, in its day, equivalent to what they have on commercial television now “*Fun House*” with wheels going in slides and all the rest of it. It wasn’t just “*Muffin the Mule*” or Anne Hogarth’s puppet or Jan Bussell’s, because they were very early television performers, were they not?

The “*Muffin the Mule*” set was rather an interesting one too because it was only just flap with striped wallpaper and the scene outside the little window in it was a line photo blarb in a box. So, all you had to do was put this one flat up, put Anne’s piano in front of it, the platform for the puppet operator to operate “*Muffin*” behind and you just clamped this wall box on (it had its own strip lighting on the side) and that started at the Palace.

Stuart: What about the early lighting on the cameras?

Duffy: Those awful strip lights. They weren’t even

Stuart: I think one of the things you designers would have mentioned about the problems you had at AP (which was passed on to us at Props) was the fact that the camera could only get down to 3 ft from the ground to centre of lengths and everything was linked up – we were always calling for blocks – and we used to put blocks under the tables, blocks under the chairs, screwing bits of additional pieces to furniture – we were always adding things on.

Buddy: Any of you people remember Nancy Price?

Stuart: Oh yes, in “*Whiteoaks*”.

Buddy: We did a show with Nancy Price in Studio ‘A’ at the end of the corridor and Eric Robinson was the producer and she was a terrible woman – very precise. She did her rehearsal outside and then came into the studio. As you know, there weren’t any props outside the studio and with the props if you needed a chair you used a chair, but when you get back into the studio you have a different show altogether – probably hired. Most of the stuff was hired in those days and this show required a suite of furniture and she did all her talking from an armchair. She would sit in one of these beautiful armchairs we hired from Maples – a suite of furniture. It was a Sunday and she was there as well and everyone was in there with Nancy Price and a call came through from Studio A that they

wanted the property man. So, I roll up. Eric Robinson is there and he says, “Buddy, Miss Price thinks this chair is a little too high.” I said, “Well, it’s a set”. He says, “Well, it’s a bit too high and she is not comfortable. Is it possible to make it lower?” I said, “Not really”. So he said, “Can you saw the legs off?” I said, “No! It’s a hired armchair”.

It was a Sunday, so he went to Broadcasting House and somebody gave him permission to have a bit sawn off this chair that Nancy Price sat in. So, he came to me and said “I’ve had permission” and so, of course, I couldn’t say no because it was Eric and so I got the carpenter who was on duty (because it had to be done properly) and he cut it and that was that. They cut an inch off the chair so that the armchair and the other chair were even smaller.

Anyway, she sat in it and we went on with rehearsals and I’m back down in the studio end near Studio B. A call came through from Studio A. Up I go again. She is still not happy with this chair. So I said, “Well what can I do?” So, she said, “Can I have the chair out of the rehearsal rooms?” (the old chair she had had when we used any old furniture) and we had to get the chair and get in a taxi, go all the way to the rehearsal room, get the chair, bring it back for Nancy to sit in. It was a shabby old thing next to the one she was using, but it was comfortable. However, she sat in it and a little while after she said, “I don’t think I like this chair. I think I’ll have that one”. So, she finished up with a higher chair, but we had to buy the suite of furniture.

Stuart: I bet you did. I think it was that production, that was “*Whiteoaks*” where she “dried”.

Duffy: I do believe it was.

Stuart: In those days, if anybody “dried” ie forgot their words, the floor manager (or whatever he was called) had a cut key and they would cut the sound prompt and shout the line and everything would go on, and the fact that at home you saw people looking slightly surprised, but you didn’t hear anything, and then they picked up the line. I always understood that it was in this production that Nancy Price dried early on and she was no lady then. She never, ever got it!

Duffy: She was a star in those days.

Stuart: Yes, and she never picked it up and she was playing “Grandma” who was supposed to be 100, so it didn’t really matter and through the entire play, everybody else was saying “You do want to do this, don’t you Grandma?” and she said “Yes” and “Don’t you want to do this?” and she said “Yes” and then went through the entire play without

Duffy: Were you there with the chair?

Stuart: No, no I wasn’t actually connected with it, but that was the story.

Buddy: She was a terrible girl. She put everybody on edge.

(Everyone talking over everyone else)

Stuart: Well, I did “*Whiteoaks*” with her in the theatre and I’m saying nothing about that. It was the same bloody parrot!

Richard: But, this is some years later at Lime Grove with Charlie Chester and we had a diving suit which was the helmet and the complete suit and I forget now why, but in the end we cut the helmet off the rest of the suit and ruined the whole thing and what that entailed I don’t know, but that was Lime Grove.

Duffy: I mean in the Lime Grove days, the damage we had done to some of the equipment was unbelievable.

Stuart: You see, what people have to realise is that in the early days of television, we didn't have around (as we have today) specialised hiring firms. I mean there were some about which the film industry used. However, in the main, we would go to Maples' second-hand department and say to Mr Franks there, "Good Morning, Mr Franks, this is so-and-so from BBC Television, can we hire this and this and that?" and he would say, "Yes, but be very careful with that lot. It's being sold and the customer is picking it up on Wednesday week."

(Loud laughter)

Stuart: I mean companies would actually loan us furniture. Coshers were probably going then. They were in Cleveland St around the corner. Whether they were purely hiring out or selling, I really don't know. But there were no such super hire firms like David Jordan's and all the other firms like that. We would go along to showrooms and say, "Would you mind, if we pay for it on the promise that we return it in good condition".

Duffy: These day, of course, it's all insured.

Stuart: Nowadays, we deal with specialised hiring firms who are in the business for it and they know it.

Duffy: We damaged so much furniture. You'd send it back and there would be a little scratch underneath. Well, you wouldn't see it, but Maples would see it and it was uninsured and it would have been a terrible price to have it repaired.

Same thing happened to Sparks of Twickenham, just on the corner where I lived. They had so much damage by film and television companies that they went out of business.

Stuart: You know where we finished up a lot? There was an old pawnbrokers on the corner here of Warren Street called "*Robinson's Brothers*", I believe, and we did a lot of our hiring from them.

Duffy: Jewellery from *Robinson's*, I remember.

Stuart: Yes. Stage jewellery from *Robinson's*.

Buddy: I remember, talking about awkward people, when I was doing a show with Campbell Logan and there was a mirror and an actress in front of the fireplace and we had to hit a certain shot and he didn't like the mirror. During the break I went up to the Centre got another mirror and put that up. He didn't like it and he kept on like this and so, during the lunch break I got every mirror in stock from the Property Dept and I put it all round the set, on the chairs, everywhere and he came back and I said, "Choose one." because he'd altered it about ten times. After that I didn't care whether it fitted the set or not in style. I said, "Choose one, Campbell".

Stuart: Mind you, in those days, although there was such a thing as a prop list at Alexandra Palace as Buddy will probably tell you, that was a sort of a token thing sent to you. The designer would come along on the day of the show and say, "By the way, Buddy, you've got the prop list, can I have a few extras?" What he actually meant was 75% of the show.

Fred: I was guilty of much of that.

Buddy: It was during an old show

Stuart: Hal Burton?

Buddy: We went downstairs. We had the cellar, you know before we put the lift in we went downstairs at Alexandra Palace

Stuart: The old furniture store in the basement.

Buddy: Yes, for year and years in the basement and when we wanted some greenery I would go around the corridor - at Alexandra Palace there were palms – I would take one and put it in the set and when the show was over I would run back and put the palm back!

Stuart: We used to borrow it from the Trustees.

Frank: The other thing about props – I think we had about two tea services which appeared in everything and people used to write in and say why did everyone have the same tea service!

Another thing was there was no advertising at all and so the gin bottle had to have the name removed and this was done very crudely and everyone knew it was a *Gordon's* gin bottle and then people wrote in, or the companies wrote in and said “Why do you always show a *Gordon's* gin bottle instead of a *Blue's* or whatever?”

Stuart: There was one particular brand of whisky we used because it was a better bottle for the artist to grip or hold and for some reason I can't remember the name of the bottle.

Duffy: There was a pub scene and we had the whisky on the shelf and I had given him this particular whisky to drink, but he would have this whisky that was on the shelf and it was down in this cellar and had been there for years and years and years and he nearly put in a claim for the doctor.

Stuart: Yes. We did have another claim from an artist once. What was it we had done? It could have been Lime Grove, I think it was to do with fire proofing all the sheets and he got into bed and it gave him dermatitis.

Fred: Talking about fire proofing. I remember fire drills at Alexandra Palace. I remember being called out at least twice and standing in the car park on a freezing autumn day until somebody let us back in.

Duffy: If you were live in the studio that day that time used to be useful.

Stuart: Oh yes, we did xxx around the lake didn't we?

Duffy: Peter Bax used to like that lake.

(Everyone talking over each other).

(UNFINISHED TAPE 1 SIDE 2 – 47:43)

.....

Stuart: Well, hullo again, this is the second session of the Design Department's contribution APTS tape.

During lunch, we have collected another member, not from the Design Department, but one of our old friends from the cameras who has got some camera vis-à-vis design stories to tell us and, no doubt, he will take part in other parts of the conversation too. This morning we talked about facilities and that sort of thing, studios and Alexandra Palace itself and the difficulties and this, that and the other. This afternoon will be shortish session we hope, so we can all get on to our bread and milk will be mostly about personalities and productions we may have worked on and odd quirks of fate that have

happened. Well, let's start off with Laurie's story of snow – one of the special effects of Alexandra Palace.

Laurie: I worked on a production called "*Quality Street*" which, in fact, was one of the major dramas on Sunday night and this started off in quite a normal way except at one time with "*Quality Street*" we had a love scene on a settee and behind it there was a lattice window and behind that there was, of course, snow coming down because it was in the middle of winter. This was alright until it started snowing because everything was going extremely well and I was, in fact, on a close-up of the hero and the heroine on the settee and, of course, it was snowing. Unfortunately, what they hadn't calculated for was the ventilation system in Alexandra Palace which brought air in the top and it sucked it out at the bottom and blew it in or, rather, the other way around. The air at the top was taken out and the air at the bottom was coming in so the scene gentleman started emptying the down feathers which, at the time, was snow. We had no alternative to that and the down feathers were being emptied out into the gallery and down past the window.

Unfortunately, the down feathers when they got half way down hit the ventilation coming in so the down feathers coming down started going up. So, we not only got snow coming down, but we had snow coming up! Now the two ventilation systems joined half-way, so in the middle of this love scene there were not only feather going up, but feathers going down and sideways!

(Laughter)

And, the producer said, "What the hell is going on?". We said there was nothing we could do except stop the chaps at the top dropping feathers down, but they had no headphones on so they couldn't hear what was happening. This is how we did the entire love scene in the middle of *Quality Street*.

Now, this was basically one of the hazards of doing something like drama because there was another occasion where there was a love scene going on (exactly as before, as the BBC always used the same settees, they couldn't afford anything else) and this production, unfortunately, I was involved in this because I was on the scene that just finished and my enthusiastic crew started to wind me off upwards and backwards at the same time. What we didn't know was we had hooked up the coffee table with twenty or so glasses on and as we tracked back, the glasses emptied off the front of my camera and landed on the floor. In those days, this was live and there was this crash that went on as the lover who was saying to this girl on the settee "What can I do for you? Will you ask me to marry you?" and then the girl said "Well, the first thing you can do is get rid of that butler, because that is the third load of crockery he's cracked this week!"

(Laughter)

..... and I thought this was marvellous and the producer was saying, "What the hell is she talking about?"

(Loud laughter)

"I didn't see that in the script!", but she was covering this crash that we had just eliminated onto the floor! That was Sunday night drama, everytime!

As I was saying to my colleagues earlier, we did another one - "*King Lear*". Now, *King Lear* was the most miserable of Shakespeare's plays and on the last scene, Henry Oscar, one of our major artists had to appear on the balcony of Studio 'A' and, unfortunately, he was actually acting in Studio 'B', and so we had to run along the corridor, open the door, come in and go up onto this balustrade at the top and do his lines. Well, were already on the air, they had cut over to us from 'B' because the scene in 'B' had finished and so they cut over to us on 'A' and Lenny Chase, who was the Floor Manager, was getting very

upset because he hadn't got his artist to do the next scene. So he was on the phone, which was one of these old-fashioned, automatic phones that you phoned by dialling, picked up the phone and said "Hullo, is this Studio 'B'?" and there was no answer from Studio 'B' because it had to go through the engineering switchboard, which Gladys was in charge of and she had to replug it and put it through to the switchboard in 'B' and so they could answer the phone and say "Yes, he's on his way", but it never actually got there because Len kept taking off his headphones and running across the floor, looking down the corridor to see if anyone was coming. Well, they weren't coming! Lenny Oscar had to pass the toilet on the way through and he had obviously gone in there! Well, they couldn't get hold of Henry because we were already on the air!

So, poor Len was coming backwards and forwards with his headphones on and he was getting more and more tied up and, finally, Henry appeared at the studio door, and Len said in a silent voice without making any noise, "Quick, you're on!" and, of course, Henry Oscar thinks to himself, "Ah, there must be a problem here." and so he dashes through the door, then falls flat on his face (being tied up with his talkback cables all round his feet because he had been backwards and forwards) and, Henry realised there must be something wrong and so he came running in, went up the first lot of stairs he found but, unfortunately, the first lot of stairs he came to were perfected stairs, made of plastic, and he went all the way up the stairs and by the time they got to the top, it couldn't stand his weight anymore and so he went straight through it and the only thing that was showing was his face. Two of the scene boys realised what had happened and dashed up the stairs, pulled poor Henry out and put him on the right stairs up to the final scene. Unfortunately, again, we couldn't show any more than head and shoulders because his tights were all ripped to pieces by going through the plastic stairs!

So we finished up doing the whole scene by going backwards and forwards and two head and shoulder shots and that's all they ever saw. The producer who, at the time, was Dougie Allen, was a very serious man especially with plays and he came down to the floor and, of course, by this time we were all in hysterics including the two chaps who were operating the electric switchboard with Charlie Carp on one end and the other Charlie was on the other end and as the lights went down (being pulled down by Charlie Carp who was in tears) he pulled it down like this, Charlie who was at the other end was pushing the thing up again. So we finished up *King Lear* with the lights going off and on, these two chaps walking along the balustrade which were all in head and shoulders and we couldn't show any more of them as Charlie's tights were ripped to pieces!

(Loud laughter)

In the end, by the time we'd closed down and put the end title screen on we were all flat out on the floor absolutely crying our eyes out and Dougie Allen, to stop all this, came down and frowned at all of us in fits of laughter and said, "But, this is the most serious of Shakespeare's plays! What's funny about it?"

(Loud laughter)

Well, we said "You should have been down here when this lot was going on!", but that's how we finished up Sunday night's play.

Stuart: Thanks, Laurie. Those two stories have added to previous ones we have mentioned where water has gone through the floor to the valve room and the ice show melted and they had to get extra ice in! There was another one you mentioned about fruit?

Laurie: Oh, yes! When they were trying out different people out to do these cookery programmes and xxx was up in the gallery and we were doing this in Studio 'B' and this lady came along who had this beautiful fruity hat on she was going to show us how to make meatballs. So we went on the air and everything was quite alright and, of course, within ten seconds she dropped the word "meat". From then on, it was the other word.

I won't say what the word was, but you can gather what the word was. This was alright until she said, "Well, you get hold of them and you rub them between your hands and you stick them in hot fat. Oh, what a lovely feeling when they go into hot fat!"

(Loud laughter)

Well, at that point we were all on the floor and xxx who was up in the gallery said, "Bloody hell, turn her off please. Stop it, otherwise, we'll all get the sack!" because, in those days, if you'd mentioned the word "balls" without the "meat", you'd all have been sacked and we sat there for half an hour after the programme waiting to see the telephones rang from BH.

Stuart: And, the one about the snake?

Laurie: Oh, yes. We were doing *Picture Page* one day and a cameraman by the name of Haradine – he was on the No. 1 and I was No. 2 and I was on Joan Gilbert who was editing *Picture Page* and this chap they were interviewing was a pukka or something from India, but what they didn't tell us was that they parked his snake on the back of Camera 2 and all of a sudden, the picture started to wobble and we wondered why, but this time the cobra had got out and it was waving its head about on Camera 2. He couldn't understand why the trucker wasn't going backwards. With that, he turned round and came face-to-face with this cobra. That was the end of that interview. He put off the camera and went.

The other one was the one with the blunderbuss and that was concerning Leslie Mitchell and we had this blunderbuss on and they were going to do a firing and, of course, the sound supervisor's ears went up and said, "How loud a bang does this make?" and he said, "Oh well, a shotgun bang". He said, "Well, half the amount of power you would put in that and you should be alright". So, Leslie came on and got this blunderbuss used on a highway robbery and he pulled the trigger and nothing happened. He said, "Something has gone wrong here, I don't think this is right". So, he pulled the trigger again and nothing happened. So he said to the audience, "I'm dreadfully sorry, I don't think this is going to work tonight" and he pulled the trigger. Of course, the thing blasted off at the rate of knots and every ventilator in the studio emptied after about, what, twenty odd years. The dirt came down at the rate of knots, I was in a white coat at the time and was smothered from head to foot and I was on Joan Gilbert and all I saw of Joan Gilbert when everything came back together again was cobwebs hanging from her eyelashes because she always had eyelashes about two inches long and there were cobwebs everywhere. I was as black as ink and looked like a red Indian and this was alright except when Camera 2 came back on air (because it had blasted everything off air) there was a chap there we were interviewing who had just been out to Hiroshima to see what the results were like. Do you know that they never got a word out of him because he was crying his eyes out on a settee and he was saying "You wanna see this lot when that lot went off!" That's all we ever got out of him.

(Loud laughter)

Stuart: You mentioned white coats because both the camera crews in both Studios 'A' and 'B' at Alexandra Palace wore white coats.

Laurie: That's right. This was between us and the engineers who looked after the equipment who had blue overalls on. The scene boys had brown overalls on.

Stuart: If you were a charge end you had a blue collar, but you were saying earlier on that you had to lose your white coats because of?

Laurie: Oh, that's when we went to Lime Grove where they went over to CPS covering because every time the camera went across, whether it was on vision or not, if it hit a white coat, it just peeled off.

Stuart: Oh, even if it wasn't on vision?

Laurie: Oh, yes. If it was white anything. My story on this was when we were doing a *Children's Hour* programme and we had the marine band turn up. Of course, the marine band turned up with all their white pith helmets on and every time we looked at them the whole lot peeled off. The engineer came down to me and said, "Look here. You can't have this. You'll have to have all those hats sprayed down" and I said, "Are you telling me that I have to tell the sergeant in charge of all those marines they're going to have their white hats sprayed down?" "Yes" he says, "Otherwise we can't have the programme". I said, "You tell him. I'm not telling him" because he's standing by the side of you and he's twice as big as me!"

(Laughter)

Stuart: Of course, that was the problem with orchestras too.

Laurie: Yes, with the suit and fish with the white shirts, the cuffs close-ups and pianists' cuffs. I remember coming up doing ten/twenty-minute music items with pianists, violinists, soloist at AP on a Sunday night and we didn't have as many problems then as we do with the CPS cameras down at Lime Grove, eventually, but the white problem was always the things until we got, what, Pye?

Duffy: The only problem with Pye was that, unfortunately, our viewfinders used to fade during the course of rehearsals so by the time you got to transmission, you couldn't see anything.

Laurie: But that was better than the inverted viewfinder which we had at the Palace where to pan left you had to pan right.

Duffy: Well, I didn't find any difficulty with that. The difficulty was going the right way round because one of the problems was with the pictures upside down, you didn't compose because the picture looked right, but because the lighting looked right, in other words, the highlights were in the right place and, therefore, it never bothered you that the picture was upside down at all. It was when I got to the other end of the scale that we found that looking at the pictures the right way round there was a problem.

Stuart: Wasn't there a period before transmission for the line-up?

Laurie: Well, the line-up (that was at AP), that was because the picture we actually saw was inside the mosaic because there were a lot of problems with the outside mosaic and so you lined up a picture slightly inside. Now, unfortunately, on the optical viewfinder that we had, we saw everything, regardless of what the electronic side of it saw. So we used to be able to see at least 1% all the way round more than the viewers could see. So what we used to do, we used to mark the limits, if you like, of the optical picture inside the glass screen.

Stuart: Didn't you also mark the limits on the floor as well?

Laurie: Oh, yes, everything.

Duffy: And what wasn't realised in the early days, there was about an inch-and-a-half all the way around the studio transmission monitors which wasn't seen by the average home viewer, because the home receivers had been badly set up and so we had a phrase we used to use at one time - "domestic cut-off"- we used to say to the director "Allow for a domestic cut-off". Then they put a transparent with a black line over the transmission monitors.

- Laurie: But, when colour came in we still had the same problem, you know and, eventually, they were whipped off and when we asked why, the director said “We can’t stay with that black line around there”.
- Duffy: Because we did have a parallax problem because our lenses were six inches apart so the viewing lenses were six inches apart from the cameraman’s lens and so we had to line those up so they were both the same. What we used to do was to slide over the viewing (that’s our viewing picture) so that it matched the viewing picture that the viewer was seeing and we had to mark on the frosted screen, exactly what the viewers were seeing. Actually, it was an advantage because in a lot of cases we could see the boom coming, long before the viewers, long before it got to the picture.
- Stuart: That brings us back to design again because with those problems on the camera, we were always being asked by the producer, “Can we have another flat on the edge of the set” because the camera was shooting off on the shot that the director or producer wanted in those days. So then, first of all it was drapes and then grey flats and that sort of thing, and the mention of the mic booms brings in the design problem of designing and lighting with no shadows of the mic all over the back of the set however big it was because the average size of the sets, eventually, when we got down to Lime Grove were all about 24ft wide and about 12ft deep, or something, but at Alexandra Palace they were two 6ft flats put together at right angles for cross-shooting. Three folds, do you remember those? There were dozens of three fold flats.
- Fred: The beauty of them was that they were free-standing.
- Laurie: Yes, but one of the difficulties that we found going down from Alexandra Palace down to Lime Grove was our depth of field. At one time we could get away with cracks down the set because half the viewers couldn’t see them because the depth of field was nil – we were working wide open - but as soon as we got down to the more sensitive camera, we started stopping down and immediately that extended the depth of field so you could see any cracks.
- Stuart: That’s when we started masking all the cracks with tape.
- Laurie: It made the design problem slightly more difficult when we got better cameras in that our work used to enhance the period, the time, the place of the artist in front (which is still the important thing), but they set the scene a lot of the time and at Alexandra Palace our lovely sets weren’t seen because the stuff had to be shot in close-up because the studio was packed with cables and sets and things because it was out of focus and you couldn’t get very far out. I remember I did Laurence Houseman’s “*Happy and Glorious*” as a series with Stephen Bundy when at AP and we things like the interior of Buckingham Palace set to do (the “Stag Room”, I think they call it at Windsor Castle) where all the furniture is made out of stags’ horns. That was a property problem. We got them from somewhere, eventually, God knows where, but, you know, things which are illustrated in magazines and books, things that people know, you never saw them with those old cameras. It wasn’t until we got to Lime Grove with our subsequent cameras that everything came out, in fact, it’s too good now – the foreground and background are almost one.
- Fred: When we went to Lime Grove from Alexandra Palace it was decreed by Cecil McGiven and many others that we were not to use any more scenery in the larger studios than we were in Alexandra Palace, that the space was to be used for getting backings further back. Well, I can assure you that that lasted about five minutes because I did the two first ones out of Studio ‘G’ and we filled it with end-to-end scenery!

(Laughter)

- Duffy: “*Café Continental*”, which started at the Palace, that went down to Studio ‘G’.

Stuart: Do you remember Dennis Fancy's "*Stand by the Shoe*"?

Laurie: Yeah, not only that, but his idea of having BP screens all over the place.

Fred: Well, I did a thing called "*Halcyon Days*" in Studio 'D' and it was all done on BP. We went round Essex photographing clapboard houses to look like the Deep South. I'd never been to America then, but that's what I imagined it all looked like!

(Laughter)

Duffy: Once you did a passing show and one of the scenes was in Sherwood Forest and the whole forest was on a BP screen and I was on camera 2 and camera 3 was looking the other way ie towards the forest, and that employed the best of the archers (somebody that was high up in archery in this country) to do the firing. He stood alongside me and he fired an arrow and, of course, it went into a tree just past Robin Hood's head. I cut over to the BP screen which was the forest and he said "Oi, we've got the opposition here" or whatever it was there and the scene went on. This was alright until we got to transmission. When we got to transmission, the artist (the archery artist) pulled his bow and, for some unknown reason, the arrow did a right hand turn that way, and it went straight through the BP screen and so when we cut across to the BP screen all we saw was a great white light!

(Laughter)

Fred: It was my understanding that it was Bill Ward – this wasn't at Alexandra Palace, it was at Lime Grove. It was Bill Ward, because at that time and it started at Alexandra Palace, he suddenly developed a great passion about archery and became a great archery expert in all sorts of things and I always remember it had been Bill who shot the arrow. Now, whether it was or not, I don't know.

Duffy: Mentioning Bill, he headed up a number of these recording sessions he was the doyen of old television members because he was an engineer, he'd done stage management, studio management. He'd done everything that I could read.

Fred: He was a drummer, once, in a band.

Stuart: Another person we talked about then we talked about S E Reynolds, how about George More O'Farrell who used to do quite a lot of stuff up there.

Duffy: Yes, yes, and Fred O'Donovan said he only needed one camera.

Michael: I still think of Fred to today when I see all this cutting, five hundred times in a second which drives me absolutely potty.

Duffy: Death of a thousand cuts!

Michael: Fred did the whole thing on one camera or, at least, in one scene and when Hitchcock tried to do it with "*Rope*", it was a mess because he did whip pans from a door to get someone from the other side. Fred never did that. He'd follow, from somebody coming in through a door, follow him across the set to pick up somebody else and then carry him through and he was marvellous.

Duffy: This motivated the actors big time.

Stuart: Was this sort of thing a technique he brought in from the theatre?

Michael: Well, his argument was if you go to the theatre you sit in the best seat you can afford and he wanted to give the same effect on television ie you sat in the best seat, but you were in the theatre in a way, you weren't cutting from one thing to another.

Duffy: The worst perpetrators of the bad side of that in Michael Yates' area of ballet. You watch ballet programmes these days and unless it's being done especially, I remember (nothing to do with AP) a New York ballet programme where they shot it as if from the front row of the dress circle of the theatre. You could see the choreography, the patterns – the lot. With most ballet programmes these days, you get close ups of people toes splitting on the floor, close-ups of hands ...

Michael: Yes, it's nothing to do with the ballet, it's to do with the director. Same with music, same with plays – click.

Duffy: Margaret Dale used to design for cameras, didn't she?

Michael: Yes, but she was a dancer.

Laurie: Margaret Dale and I had a very close liaison with this and when she said she was going to do one of the big ballets, I sat through about four films at the National Theatre watching how the Russian ballets produced their productions on screen and I came to the decision then that if I was going to do Camera One, I'm going to sit on the floor all the time and I think I never rose above three feet during the whole time I was doing the ballet. Now, most ballet dancers have very thick, heavy legs and the only way you can show them on television is by giving them very thin night legs and, therefore, if you shot them from below (upwards), they all looked like they had svelte-like figures. They hadn't really, but it was because I was down on the floor and that's why Margaret and I got on extremely well - she carted me everywhere she wanted to do a ballet, she used to book our crew to come and do the ballet for her because I had seen how they did it in Russian films. If you watch a Russian film, they never come above more than two foot above the ground.

Stuart: But, back to design of planning meetings, that instance you've just stated then gave a problem of design because you were shooting off the backing

Duffie: That's right.

Stuart: then if the designer heightens that, you give a problem to the lighting man if you do it like chapters in the book – bit by bit – and if you have the right planning meetings with everybody attending as they should as Michael was saying earlier. This team work seems to have been lost with transmissions that we see these days on all channels.

Duffie: Yes, yes. It doesn't seem planned.

Stuart: Because the camera was never included in the planning meetings, quite often the designer used to come round to me and say, "What are we going to do?", and we used to have a little, private talk outside and I used to say to him "Well, what I would like is a nice slice of backing because I can shoot up as high as I can", you see. But that's how we used to work – we worked as a team.

Duffy: I remember the fourteen foot cys – the wooden cys in the studio - they used to give problems with shooting off because there wasn't much of a way you could add to it except to mask the whole thing with a fire cloth.

Michael: Well, in Studio 'B' the cys was sixteen feet! I don't know why.

Duffie: Oh, it was more shallow one, wasn't it. The one in 'A' was virtually semi-circular.

Michael: It was an absolute curse when you were trying to put drama sets up because of the doors at the back, you couldn't get out!

Duffie: Quite often, we used to shoot off the top of the sets and nobody would notice. If you shot off the side, you got a line

Stuart: As soon as you went off side, everyone would notice and, in those days, I can tell you, we had an audience that noticed everything because within fifteen seconds of you doing something there was a phone call and you could hear it in the background – “That was a Chippendale chair, Chippendale wasn't born in those days.”

Michael: We had many calls like that in Props.

Duffie: Yes, I remember somebody was supposed to be playing Chopin or something like that but the sheet music that they had on the piano was somebody else!

Michael: There was always an expert looking in!

Duffie: Oh, there were more experts out there than there were in the business.

Michael: We were talking about the “*Quatermass Experiment*” and the interior of the rocket and I went to Trading Post and got all this ex-RAF stuff and put it all in. Then I got a letter from someone in the RAF saying, “I recognised all the bits!”

(Loud laughter)

So, I wrote back some facetious letter saying “Oh, well”.

Duffie: I once had a show where I had a trap door over the bed of an invalid as a camera trap for the camera to get behind the scenery and shoot through, and I painted a phoney van Gogh in about ten minutes in the lunch hour because I said to the workshop when they built this special flap with the hole in on which they were going to hinge two panels – it was just sort of a book-opening flap, not a sliding one as we used later because the slides used to get stuck sometimes and you couldn't get the shot through it and this was the days before recording, I'm talking about. So I knocked off with some designer's colour squeezed out of tubes a family van Gogh in a lunch hour, waved it about to dry the colour off, took it down to the workshops got a coat of button polish or something over it and got the chippies to fix it up for afternoon rehearsal.

I got a letter sent to me, eventually, saying he was a van Gogh expert and didn't recognise the picture.

(Loud laughter)

In the same way, the lady didn't know whether a vase that I had once on the end of the mantel piece in a maid's room was one of a pair she'd had stolen from her house in the year previously.

Well, I'm sure we've all had letters about design.

Richard: Generally, it was very difficult to answer. Once in a play which was way-back, we showed flowers. Well, if you wanted flowers, it was a case of what can you get today? Flowers that exist and we had to show these and the Society wrote in to us and offered us a lecture and so we invited them in to lecture all the designers on period flowers.

Duffie: Yes, this happened a lot, actually.

Richard: It happened more often after we had left AP.

Duffie: And when we went into colour.

Stuart: We got a lot of begging letters in the Props Dept – people writing in saying, “I wonder if it’s possible when you finish with the curtains that you used in the cottage set, if I could have them for my dear aunt who accidentally tore hers last week”.

We got a lot of letters like that. I always remember once, I think it must have been in “*Dixon of Dock Green*” if you wanted to dress the mantel piece and you wanted photographs on there and you didn’t have photographs, we used to take the magazines and cut the pictures out and stick them in there. One day we had a phone call from a very irate person saying, “How dare you portray my sister as a prostitute!”

(Laughter)

I said, “I beg your pardon”. “Well I watched “*Dixon*” the other night” he said “and in it there was a reference to my sister as a prostitute”. Of course, it was a cutting that we had taken out of one of the newspapers or magazines.

Duffie: Copyright was quite a thing then.

Stuart: Well, then, we had to be very careful. We had to go copyright with every photograph we used, every frame, every picture, whatever the case.

But, betting letters were more prevalent when we got to the Lime Grove days – “Have you finished with that?”, “Have you finished with that?”, “May we have this, please?”, “We’re opening up a new school, can we have that?”.

Laurie: The thing we haven’t spoken about, Stu, is the set photo references that we used to have at AP.

Duffie: Yes, I mentioned those earlier. Peter Bax started off, or during Peter Bax’s time started off a reference section in the library for designers, so if you wanted to know anything about period, or furniture.

Laurie: Oh, I’m talking about our own references.

Ah, yes. Well, when I inherited this in 1947 there were newspaper cutting books and I think there were about five of these, and they were set stills taken pre-war ...

Duffie: By Hugh Tosh, our staff photographer.

by Hugh Tosh, then Joan Williams, but in those days there were photographers such as Ryan Rakes, Tommy Walls – there was another one. Anyway, any show that we did photographs were taken for references and these were put into a book. Some of the photo references pre-war included ghoulish settings, drape settings and things as such and I carried on putting them all into these books what have you, right up until 1950. I think they then went on to Design Dept and I know that the designers had their own copies. Every set we had, one copy went to the designer, one came to me for reference purposes.

I think it was carried on by either Friedamunt or yourself, Stu.

Laurie: Fifty-three newspaper cutting books of these photographs and I carried it on, because by then we were in colour, with transparencies of set photographs. The ones that you’re talking about also included photographs for re-setting on the Thursday. These re-setting photographs were sent to the designer and a set went into the archives.

Stuart: I think a copy went to Make-up & Costume as well.

Laurie: Yes, yes.

Stuart: The clothes would be invaluable today.

Laurie: I think they should still be in the Design Department at Television Centre. If not, they should have gone to Archives as they really are history.

Richard: Very often, if it were a Sunday thing, they didn't photograph it until the Thursday and, I tell you what, the one that didn't happen on the Thursday was the "*No, No, Nanette*". Steven Bundy designed it in 1947 and we did it on Sunday and then it was discovered that they hadn't cleared copyright and we never did it on the Thursday at all, and the photographs that were taken were of a little cardboard model that I made for Steven and that was the only record!

(Laughter)

I've got that somewhere.

Laurie: We had instances of copyright not being available even in my time.

All the drawings that we filed at AP in our office – there were boxes and boxes and boxes. Where have they all gone to?

Stuart: Well they all got chucked. I remember when at Lime Grove, wasn't it in your area, there were a whole lot, but when I left ITV in 1983, we chucked everything. What could you do with it? There was no-one to look after it and it takes an awful lot of time, space and effort and sooner or later someone says, "Chuck it".

Most of the stuff at Alexandra Palace has gone except for the stuff that people like Richard here have salvaged and then they went onto microfilm.

Duffie: Fred Leicester has copies of all original dye line scenery photographs.

Richard: All the prop furniture we had, I've got a book about as thick as that – probably more than the archives.

Stuart: Any more calamities that we had happen with design at Alexandra Palace? I can't remember anymore.

Laurie: This is a story I've got to tell you and it's about the operational side. Well, when we were doing a play one Sunday night about the First World War which had something to do with the troops coming out of the trenches. We had a scene where all the troops were in the front line and they were all dirty and had been in there for weeks on end and, of course, there was a scene that followed this which was a court martial scene. Because we were limited as to how many extras we had, the same troops had to appear behind the set in Studio 'A' all dressed immaculately. However, they had been on duty in the trenches for the previous 48 hours or so and the producer, on rehearsal, couldn't understand why these actors didn't appear to be looking as if they'd been in the trenches for 14 or 15 days. He said, "They don't look tired enough. There's something wrong with them, they're not distraught enough!" The idea was that they came off the set where they were fighting (and don't forget this was a live transmission), they went through the alcove and put on their new uniforms very quickly whilst there was another scene on, their hats, their full packs and their rifles and they had to appear at the back of Studio 'A', all standing to attention, immaculately dressed despite having been in the trenches for a month or more. The producers kept saying, "These boys do not look like they've been in the trenches for hours!"

So, the scene boys decided they'd take things in hand and when they went through the alcove, they all had to put on their full packs on and strap their rifles and go around the other side and I was on Camera 2 sitting there waiting for them to come round. So, of course, they cut over to us and the scene started and, on transmission, we suddenly realised that all these chaps were perspiring like anything and their knees were beginning to sag and they were going down lower and lower. The producer said, "Oh, that's the effect that I wanted all the time. It's marvellous what you've done. They're marvellous actors!" What they didn't tell the producer was that the scene boys, on the way through the alcove on the way back, had filled their packs full of stage weights and no-one could stand up because of the weights on their backs.

(Loud laughter)

They didn't realise it until they got on the set and when they got on the set, that was it – they couldn't do anything about it. They couldn't take their backpacks off and being in the hot weather at AP they couldn't stand any longer and their legs were beginning to sag and the producer said "Oh, that's the effect I wanted" but nobody ever told him that it was the scene boys who actually produced that effect.

Stuart: The word "rehearsals" might spark off a few more memories too, because rehearsal time at the Palace in those two studios were used for all sorts of programmes, even though transmission finished at ten o'clock, or something. They were used for a women's programme in the afternoon and a bit of children's programmes at the end and something in the evening. The multi-use of the two small studios meant that there was hardly any time for rehearsal. In fact, as you said, some shows weren't rehearsed.

Laurie: I did one that was designed for Tino Rossini, the Italian tenor, who came up and it was the first time the BBC had ever had this great name from Italy and, of course, we did the afternoon programme and before we went on air, we rehearsed the first bit of the evening programme. The first bit of the evening programme was a programme on barrel organs and so when we had finished the rehearsal, your chaps came in and put grey drapes all around it at the end of Studio 'A', because Tino Rossini was down at the other end of it. So we came in and did the rehearsals for it he did a marvellous performance and, of course, we all packed up and we went for supper. When we came back from supper at seven o'clock, all we could hear was the barrel organ going and somebody said if Tino Rossini hears the organ going he'll walk straight out the studio doors. We went round there after we came out of supper and behind this screen that had been put round with grey drapes there was the man who invented the barrel organ and Tino Rossini – they were both Italians talking away in Italian and Tino Rossini was winding the barrel organ, jabbering away in Italian!

(Laughter)

Somebody said, "He's not going to go on, you know, if he finds this out", but in actual fact they were both Italians and they were friends. We said if they had put out a programme with Tino Rossini winding the barrel organ, that would have been better than all the programmes put together!

Stuart: When you spoke about "rehearsal time" at AP, you were talking about the rehearsal time for things like cameras and things like that.

Laurie: Well, the actual time we had was, in fact, the actual timescale of the whole production. When we got to Lime Grove we had to be scheduled, like, corporation-wise. When we were a small group up there, there were two small studios and a limited amount of equipment and technology, we had problems of planning time with the producer, doing our drawings but, certainly, the setting times given – I never remember a night set at Alexandra Palace.

- Richard: There were the occasional ones.
- Laurie: Because of the multi-purpose use of the studios, one studio could have three shows at different times of the day and during some productions (mostly dramas), scenery was being shifted and changed during transmission!
- Michael: Most of the AP shows, the actual outside rehearsals were done at Marylebone High Street, where they had the wooden replica cameras.
- Richard: I did "*Under the Counter*" which was directed (well directed for the theatre) by Jack Hulbert and it had Cicely Courtneidge in it and, in the theatre (the Phoenix Theatre) it was basically one set, but there were two intervals and the sort of gag that he had was that in the first scene the windows were at the back and then, during the interval, they re-set it so that the windows were on the left and you got another wall at the back and another wall and then in the third act they moved it round again. So, Jack Hulbert said, "What we'll do, we'll build the first set at one end of the studio and the second set at the other end and whilst we're on the second act, we'll build the third act at the first end of the studio", and we said, "Just a minute, there's only one set. In the theatre, people are sitting there and you get this effect because they can't move, but we've got moveable cameras". So, after a bit of a discussion we managed to persuade him that it was the camera that moved and so we ended up with one set, instead of all this moving – he completely got the wrong end of this!
- Laurie: As a point of interest, I always remember when they were talking about expanding, we needed more studios at Alexandra Palace and this was before Lime Grove came about and this was before White City and Television Centre. When I had to send out drawings of the old-style cinema on Hornsey Road – I don't know if any of the designers remember this – these were the BBC's plans converting the old-style cinema in Hornsey Road into a TV studio ie an additional studio to the two we had at AP. That fell through.
- In the next set of drawings I was sending out for our expansion was the possibility of using the old Athenaeum at Muswell Hill and drawings were sent down to Plan Reproduction for the new proposed studio there. Now I don't know if any of you designers recall talking to Peter Bax about expansion, but the drawing certainly went through me.
- Richard: It was Peter who produced this circular design for White City on the back of an envelope.
- Laurie: Is that true? Well, that was our first possible expansion into the cinema.
- Richard: Well, it was his bright idea to have all the services on the outside and all the people on the inside. It started almost as a question mark.
- Stuart: Were you ever involved in the shows that we used to do at the Intimate Theatre at Palmers Green?
- Richard: No, never.
- Richard: Another thing that Peter was very keen on doing that never really happened was the Edward Craig, large, sort of three-dimensional pieces of scenery which would move round and I don't think it ever happened.
- Michael: He had a box full of drawings and he called it the turrux set all in different forms which moved round so you had different angles.

Laurie: But even though cameras were mobile, as I quoted earlier at lunch, one of the things that solved a problem where a couple had to dance in a ballroom, was we kept the cameras still and the cameras just elevated and depressed and panned left and right according to what happened at rehearsal and we put a revolving ballroom in and had black gauze wall and detailed paintings on with cameras covered in black velvet.

Stuart: Were any of our designers involved in any of the OB's that we did from Alexandra Palace? I don't necessarily mean the gardening programmes that we did at Alexandra Palace, but when we went out and did OB's.

Duffie: There were based round the back, OB's, weren't they?

Stuart: Yes, but I mean were any of our designers sent from Alexandra Palace? Say, didn't we do one or two Richard Atlee shows at the Bedford in Camden Town, St Pancras Town Hall?

Michael: But was that Alexandra Palace based?

Duffie: I don't think so. That was later. The only things that the OB's would have done would have been from the London theatres when they actually shot excerpts from Palmers.

Richard: Well *I* certainly did shows from the Bedford in Camden Town.

Stuart: And the Palace?

Richard: The Bedford. It's now gone.

Stuart: But were you based at AP because we did shows some of the St Pancras Town Hall.

Michael: Yes, I did those. I did them from the Bedford.

Stuart: I have a feeling we did shows from the Intimate Theatre at Palmers Green. It was the first theatre, as far as I know, that was equipped to project television onto the stage there.

Duffie: Well, they certainly went out from AP.

Stuart: I know the camera crews did. I wonder if any of the designers ...

Richard: They certainly did the Bedford and St Pancras Town Hall – I did both of those.

Stuart: Were we doing "*Dancing Club*" in those days, or "*Come Dance With Me*". Was it done in 'B'?

Laurie: Without any doubt.

(All talking over each other)

We did a lot of band shows – you remember "*Jack Payne*"?

Duffie: I'll tell you someone we did do at Alexandra Palace and no-one will believe me is Tommy Steele. We did Tommy Steele in Studio 'B'. I can remember his manager coming in to Studio 'B' and he came in with a big cigar and said "Where's this place you're gonna show my boy!?" and his boy was Tommy Steele and Tommy Steele walked along afterwards – a young chap with a guitar and made a hell of a noise as far as we were concerned at the time. However, it was the man who preceded him more than anything else.

Richard: Larry Parnes.

Duffie: That's right and he came into Studio 'B' to see if everything was alright for his boy.

Richard: We also did "*Cabaret Cruise*" in Studio 'B' with Harry Secombe doing his sailing sketch.

Duffie: That's right. We also did Mary Malcolm for the first time in Studio 'B' because I did the initial interview with her there.

Richard: Michael Bentine was another. He did this act with the back of a chair – he came to me with the back of a chair and wanted the chair to fit and only recently I thought why the hell didn't we get hold of a chair and just

Duffie: There were a lot of additional programmes that we just accept now.

Stuart: Michael Mills did light entertainment from Studio 'A'. "*The Serenade*"?

Michael Mills sat on a scene basket watching an Eric Fawcett variety going on because he said to me, "I'm going to do some light entertainment shows in here", and he was asking us about what we did. I said, Eric was the light entertainment man at the time and I don't know whether you know about Eric, but he had this stutter when he was on the air and we did a programme with him one day which was a band show and Eric Robinson was up behind us in AP, and he wanted us to come out fast and so we came out fast on Camera One and we knocked down half the band because, as you know, with the bands when they were in Studio 'A', they used to have a marked area but, of course, they used to creep out during the course of production and they finished up at least two foot across our tracking line. When we whistled back at the rate of knots we knocked them all over – we knocked all the music stands over, there was the clarinet player sitting there with his music stand on the floor and all the rest of it. I always remember when we did one of these and we were doing the rehearsals and Eric was up in the galleries saying, "Ha, ha, ha, that's marvellous chaps. Okay, let's go back and do it again, shall we?"

(Laughter)

And, there was all this littered orchestra all over the floor and I said, "I don't think we should start right now, they're not very happy with us!"

Richard: Well, I did with Michael Mills "*Family Affairs*". That was the first Saturday night series that went on at six with Heather Thatcher. Do you remember that?

Duffie: We tend to think of I "*The Grow Family*" as the first family series.

Stuart: But, do you remember when we started bring in the shows from Paris? There was "*The Lido*" when we had to put bras on all the girls – well, we didn't, but they did!

Duffie: That was bringing the artists in, not bringing them in by satellite.

Stuart: We had the first Bolshoi Ballet in there as well!

Duffie: They flew the crowd over, didn't they?

Richard: Well, they brought all the props because they had some sort of electric little truck things and they all came from Paris! It was incredible. I didn't get to Paris to look at the set, which was a great pity.

Duffie: Yes, there was quite a bit of that going on. I've got a note here about Stephen Bundy realising the décor by Koptova which was a ballet that went on. In later years, dear old Richard Willmott was the realisator of all the ballet scenery that came in. Michael, here, used to do lots of rigible designs.

Richard: Do you remember one of the very big dramas at AP was *"Live in in Peace"* with Victor Rietti, Robert Rietti's son, and they repeated it quite frequently after that.

Michael: There was a ballet called *"L'Homme est Mort"* or somebody was dead, and this was in Studio 'B' and the man hung himself in the end, it was one of these French companies and this was up in 'B' and the cast came in and took one look and went "Oooooh!!"

(Loud laughter)

Stuart: Do you remember, any of you, *"Inventors' Club"* with Leslie Hardem and Geoffrey Boumphrey and Andrew Miller Jones?

Duffie: Andrew Miller Jones used to do a lot. He introduced *"Muffin the Mule"* and he was always regarded as a talks and documentary producer.

Richard: I remember in *"Inventors' Club"* some weird things on there.

Duffie: Yes, that gave a few designer problems.

Stuart: The *"Inventors' Club"* went down to Lime Grove and then went down to Riverside after that.

Duffie: It started off as *"Pilgrim Street"* did *"Dixon of Dock Green"*, it was a sort of pilot for *"Dixon of Dock Green"*, Stephen Bundy did it, I think, but one tends to get near that area and one's memory thinks it was AP, but it wasn't, it was Lime Grove.

Stuart: Do you remember, I can't remember the name of the show.....

(END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1)

Stuart: Do you remember the very first light entertainment show Barry Learoyd did? It was very unusual for Barry to do an LE show and one of the things he had as a big background piece was a huge gauze and onto the gauze they had fixed a cut-out hand opening a champagne bottle and I was so proud - it was me who I had to pose for that! I dashed home to see that cut-out of *my* hand!

(Loud laughter)

It was very similar, you remember, when we first opened up transmissions as far as Birmingham? I had to go up to the studio, to actually be in the studio when the first pictures were going to go – a hundred miles away!

Duffie: I don't know why, but I always stay on for those live transmissions for most of my shows. Fred Knapman did too.

Richard: I never did. I used to go home and watch it at home.

Stuart: Not being gifted with a television like our rich designers, Peter Bax afforded us the opportunity to use his office in the evening – you remember the old set? It's now gone up to the TV Museum.

Duffie: Yes, it was a 9" Bush television.

Stuart: That's it, it was a 9" Bush. Peter used to allow us to collect the key to his office from main reception and sit in there in the evenings and watch the television so that we could keep abreast of what was going on, and I did that for a long time until we could afford a television.

Richard: Well, they opened this viewing room at the bottom of the stairs near the control room and we used to rush round and have a look in there.

Duffie: But, I didn't know why we stayed on because there was very little we could do with live transmissions.

Stuart: Didn't we have IFM's at AP? I know we had ASM's.

Duffie: We had Studio Managers, Pool Boys.

Richard: They used to rush around with the running orders.

Stuart: At Lime Grove and TV Centre they had AFM's and floor managers. They no longer have PA's – what we called the old production secretaries.

Duffie: The credits, these days, are longer than the programmes.

Stuart: Oh, absolutely. But, at Alexandra Palace, you had a producer who was also the director and he had a secretary, and that secretary did everything! She typed the property plot, the scenery requirements, the artists' bookings, camera requirements the captions

Duffie: And, if they had two series interlinked they would get an assistant secretary in to work on the second programme.

Stuart: On top of that, she was in the gallery calling cameras. She did everything! Everything! Now, for every job I've mentioned, you've got a separate person.

Duffie: Yeah.

Stuart: It makes you wonder how we ever got through shows in those days.

Stuart: They had offices behind the stage at the old theatre at Alexandra Palace.

Duffie: It's a pity we don't have anybody from the old Wardrobe Dept which is called "Costume & Make-up" because we've been talking about our calamities and experiences and things, but they had their own personal accommodation up there in one of the corridors in AP.

Stuart: Well, eventually, they went into one of the towers didn't they, Fred?

Fred: Yes.

Stuart: Down by the carpenters' shop, above the old boiler.

Duffie: When they had a collection of dancing girls and a light entertainment shows they did it in the corridor.

Fred: There were a lot of dressing rooms, weren't there, all down the side?

Stuart: Yes, they weren't very big. There were also the quick-change booths which we took down to Lime Grove.

Duffie: ..which also had to be planned on the designers drawings on the line-up area which Laurie talked about later. Everything had to be put down on the plan – quick change booths, space to store the door backings if you were going to take the door backings away to the other camera crew.

Stuart: Fortunately for us, I don't think the fire regulations were as tough.

All talking: No, no.

Duffie: I think the greatest fire hazard at AP were the control switches in the engineering area - those big bronze switches on a big ebonite board, I remember.

Stuart: Cables all over the floor and Jeeez!

Richard: The one that we were always being got at for were the fire exits because a particular one was in that little alcove because there was a fire exit there and we were always cluttering that little one. I mean you had to leave the ones on the corridor open because people had to get in and out of the studio.

Stuart: And the one you are talking about, I think they stacked the scenery around there.

The scenes that I remember were at the end of transmission every night everyone dashing down the corridors trying to catch either the last bus or the BH coach. Eleven o'clock at night, on the dot – everyone was dashing around the corridors, packing up and trying to get away!

Duffie: Yes, it was a pretty hazardous place as I mentioned earlier with snow about and ice about and fog.

Stuart: Yes, the buses would not go up the hill, would they?

Duffie: The buses would not go up the hill, it was hazardous to walk up the hill but, somehow, we managed to get there, the staff, I don't know if any artists were held up or late or transmissions were cancelled because of weather conditions (not because of transmissions, but because artists couldn't get to the studio), because it was, as everyone keeps saying, every night the first night and live!

Richard: And, if there was a breakdown, they had to delay things and they had to delay the whole production and there was a knock-on effect. Certainly there was a period where programmes were running and over-running and so the timing was going all over the place and then they had a great blitz and this was Alexandra Palace trying to get the programmes to run reasonably to time.

Stuart: To correspond to the Radio Times!

Duffie: When you mention breakdowns, I always remember a breakdown and up would come what, the goldfish?

(All talking over each other)

And when you were in the kitchen making a cup of tea and you saw the windmill or the potter's wheel or whatever, you listened to the barrel which brought you back to your seat.

Richard: That's right, but that was often an organised interval.

Fred: Yes, and in some shows, we did have an organised interval like they had in the theatre.

Duffie: No doubt you painted some of the interval captions didn't you, Ernie? No?

Ernie: No, just that one kept in stock.

Duffie: The breakdown one – "Normal Service Resumes as Soon as Possible".

Funny enough, everything worked in Studios 'A' and 'B', but everything in the studio worked on A and B system. You got the camera working in area A and then it went to camera B and then, probably, back to the area A and it was sort of alternating as the studios were made.

Stuart: I think one of the best things we took down to Lime Grove from AP still being worked by some departments today and that's the old AP shift pattern. Do any of you remember the old AP shift? It was a marvellous shift pattern and there are one or two departments that still use it today and it's still referred to as "the old AP shift".

Duffie: What's that?

Stuart: Well, it would be one day on, one day off – Monday on, Tuesday off, Wednesday on, Thursday and Friday off, Saturday and Sunday on – and then it reverses itself automatically for the following week. So, you got one complete weekend on, and one complete week-end off and that's how it went – on, off, on, off – and the shift pattern in those days was eight in the morning until eleven o'clock at night and there was no such thing as overtime, was there Fred? It was until end of transmission. Each week, you did uhhh, no every other week you did a thirty hour shift over two days.

Richard: Gosh, so you worked four days one week and three days the next.

Fred: Yes, and that was the shift I worked right up until the day O'Reilly died.

Stuart: Did you?

Fred: Yes, in News.

Duffie: We designers worked to that pattern because it suited the pattern of the shows.

Stuart: Until we got to Lime Grove when we were having a three or four day stand, it was impossible to do it.

Richard: Well I wrote a memo to Peter Bax, proving that I worked thirty-five days in the month before because I worked out how many shows I did and how long it took me on all of them etc. Unfortunately, he didn't take it very seriously and threw me out.

(Loud laughter)

But, really, I did at least three shows a week and then there were meetings and all the rest of it.

Stuart: I mean, by the time you got home And then you were back up again the next morning, trudging through the snow or whatever the case may be.

Duffie: It's interesting the number of shows a week you just mentioned, because I've got my record and I have regarded the production as being responsible to a producer or director, as they are now called, however long the programme, whether it's ten minutes or whether it's a ninety-minute drama in the old days and my records show of my work when I first started to do designing was something like nine shows a week. Well some of them were caretaker shows like "*What's My Line*" making sure that the glasses were on the table and there was enough water to fill up and that sort of thing, but in terms of numbers of shows per week, it's totally different from what it became at Lime Grove. Today, they do three shows a year and call it hard work!

Stuart: When I was at the Centre at the peak of our output we were doing about fifty shows per week fifty shows would come by my desk plus about ten to fifteen film-ins. I mean to

today at the Centre, I doubt they get through a dozen shows in a week. We were doing it in a day, almost. – with a fraction of the crews that they’ve got!

Fred: In the peak, we were doing sixteen thousand craft hours a week, weren’t we Tim?

Tim: That’s right.

Stuart: Yeah, we were really churning them out and, let’s face it, we were the biggest manufacturer of television programmes in the world! The biggest company in the world! We can’t say that today.

Richard: Later on, not only were we holding our own stock, but we had each of the package contractors holding a quantity of package scenery which matched ours and we were doing bookings for all those people.

Duffie: When did we first start to using outside contractors to construct our scenery? At the Palace?

Richard: Yes, at the Palace. Ackman Snows did some work for us and, also, City Displays were next door in the Great Hall. They did an enormous amount of backing at AP.

Stuart: That was what Freddie was saying – City Display was in the main hall at AP. They were next door to us. The other people you mentioned – Ackman Snows – they were where they are now?

Richard: Stanmore, no Stanwell.

Duffie: Of course, when the scenery was still stored up here and we designed shows to be put into the Lime Grove Studio the trucking became a problem too. When we started off with some nicely painted scenery, by the time it got through All Souls Avenue and Kilburn and all the rest of it you needed a bit of extra effort in the studio to put the cracks back together again.

Richard: I went down to Lime Grove and opened Lime Grove Studios in 1950 and, in those days, we were doing both scenery and props and, obviously, we had to unload all the scenery to Studio F (which was our store) ready to move into whatever studio it was going to be transmitted from and the times we took it off the trucks and the state it was in! I was constantly on the phone ringing George saying, “George, I think we need some painters down here tomorrow – there’s some wallpaper to be done, there’s this and that and could you please do it before the designer gets in!”

Stuart: But was else could we do? We did not have trucks at the BBC in those days designed for the transportation of scenery. It was as simple as that!

I mean, backcloths, we were asking the transport if they make a hole the size of a driver’s cab that we could put our 20’ cloths through! Everything was Heath Robbins, you know – could you please put ropes/ties on the vans so that we could tie the scenery on so that it’s not doing this sort of business. We used to have the same sort of problem transporting props and furniture.

Richard: Until, eventually, we moved all the props from Alexandra Palace, not to Lime Grove, we took them all into the Centre and you sent all your scenery back to AP! Yes, because I took over your scene store in the scenery block and we used it as our furniture store.

Duffie: It seemed that the AP situation, gradually grew as we have discussed it had sufficient suppliers for props and manufacturing scenery when it became necessary even at AP more shows were being done just before we got to Lime Grove.

Richard: We had a fair selection of furniture in the basement. We kept most of our furniture at Lime Grove and most of our furniture we got because we damaged it and the firms wouldn't take it back, it was as simple as that.

Buddy: We damaged so much hired furniture that a lot of people just wiped us off and so we had to buy it. Maples would have nothing to do with us at all because every chair that was sent back was not damaged.

Duffie: And at Ally Pally how could you avoid swinging and knocking.

Buddy: And with Maples, it was not only the value of the chairs, it was also the value of the hire. You might hire that chair six or seven times a month. So that was about £200 for them. It was worth about nine pence to us, but £200 to them!

Duffie: When we talk of hiring, I always think of these velvet drapes that I made a note of. I hired those from, was it Louis Coche or Old Times in Putney. I hired them from 'Old Times' before I came to television and they look good from the early days until ... I don't know they are still around.

Richard: I thought you were going to say they were in your front room.

(Loud laughter)

Stuart: We didn't have a bad selection of props at AP, but as Buddy said, we did inherit a lot through damages and things.

Buddy: I don't know how much the insurance would be for the BBC. It must have been enormous! There wasn't a show that I handled that didn't have something wrong with it or something missing – hand props. Percy Cornish - I suggested it and he told me to mind my own business. Why couldn't we have a prop man, like me, or an assistant in the studio with the scene men. You see there were about twenty actors in a show and each had a hand prop and for a tiny show all they were concerned about was getting home. So, half the hand props were missing!

Stuart: That's one thing we didn't inherit from the film industry. Fred, wasn't there a property man in the studios as well as the stage prop.

Fred: When we went into ATV that's when we started, because the BBC didn't. We never did it during the entire 45 years I was with the BBC! Buddy rightly said we had no representative in the studio, but our worst loss and damage was out on location. They just didn't want to know.

Buddy: All they knew was the scenery. They wanted the designer's set as Percy says.

Stuart: They were only interested in the scenery, and rightly so.

Buddy: The prop man was in charge of six men, was it? In that studio, we had one property man. It took me a fortnight to get a show ready, but there was only one prop man and when the show was over, everybody went home. Then there was "Where's this, where's that? and nobody knew. Not one show did we get back as we sent in.

Stuart: But Buddy that man was in the scene crew, he wasn't from the property department and he would be nominated by the charge man in charge of the stage crew and you used to get chaps handed the captions and told, "You're on captions" and the bloke who had been given the job for the last three shows, would say, "I'm bloody fed-up with captions, can't I do props?" There was no enthusiasm and that was when the rot set in.

As a point of interest, by the time I retired our “Loss & Damage” account, what we paid annually, would have run the whole of the television service at Alexandra Palace in the early days.

Buddy: I think the interesting thing was when you had a designer’s meeting and they all had a moan about certain things and very little was done, like the prop man being allocated, you’d have minutes of the meetings and about two years later it would still have the same idea on.

Stuart: I fought for a long time to get a prop man for my department in the studio. I said, “Look, please, can I just have one out on location, please?” because on location was our worst area. The stuff that was left behind was like nobody’s business.

Buddy: And then the audio seating. You remember the audio seating? It was left to the scenery men to put it up and by the time they had set their sets it was about four o’clock in the morning and they were dead tired and then we had Teddies. Do you remember the Teddies? Everything was twisted. All the seating was twisted. It took hours to put it together. And then they got the second set and that was ruined.

Stuart: That was Lime Grove. We didn’t have any audience at AP.

Buddy: When we went to Television Centre, it came out of the wall.

Stuart: But, we didn’t have any audiences at all at any of the shows we did at Alexandra Palace.

(All talking over each other – inaudible)

Well, I certainly don’t recall any participating audiences all the time I was at AP, other than “*Roof Top Rendezvous*, *Café Continental*”, probably “*Cabaret Cruise*”, I don’t know Fred.

Fred: How about “*Ronnie Wardman’s Show*” that might have had an audience?

Buddy: With “*Kalaidoscope*” we had to provide a bottle of champagne at the end of the show. Also, I used to have ginger ale, but it was in champagne bottles. So the bottle of champagne came in, we’d put it in the cupboard. So I said to the chap “Send a bottle of champagne up” and he sent one up and it wasn’t champagne it was ginger ale. Then, it was too late to do anything, it was there. So I was watching them. They were saying “I’ve never tasted champagne before”.

(Laughter)

Stuart: We continued to do that. Buddy, after you moved away from the Property Dept, we always sent the Prop bottle of champagne up and not the real one because, in actual fact, it was never used in the show, it was taken up into the gallery. We used ginger ale made by a company called “Perets”, still doing it today – it’s a Madame Veuve Clicquot label on the front and they were the only firm that would get pop-up champagne for us with ginger ale in it.

Duffie: Mostly, it was seen as one of the perks of the stage crews.

Stuart: Yes, well I don’t think we ought to go into that.

(Loud laughter)

If we ever did a big banqueting thing, you could forget it.

Duffie: Mind you, the producers weren’t above presenting things from the sets to the artists! The less said about that, the better!

Stuart: I mean, everyone who worked on the production probably had a finger in the food, you know what I mean.

Richard: Do you remember the show called "*Villa Rosa*" where they panned through a little pair of gates up on a pedestal to go into this villa.

Stuart: You mean, rather like the "*Café Continental*"?

Richard: Yes, very much so.

Stuart: The taxi door with blind coming down. The End.

Buddy: Do you remember "*The Glass Floor*". What was that show? This was at AP, yes.

Laurie: I remember this. It was hexagonal.

Buddy: It cost a fortune, but at the time, it wasn't worth the trouble it caused.

Stuart: Right, gentlemen, it's quarter to four. The memory is slowing down a bit. Shall we vote to call it a day.

Do you wish to mention any references that may be available to like Richard's got these 'Authentic Original, Ground Studio Plans of AP'.

Richard: I've got some on tracing paper.

Stuart: You've got some on tracing paper? He's got a lot of photographic references of the sets that we did at AP, there are photographs by Ted Duck that we have here of staff that worked there, we have photographs here by Ernie Owl (Captions Dept). I don't know if Freddie's got any.

Fred: Yes, I've got copies of the drawings of scenery.

Stuart: In case they want to make – we've got lots of bits and pieces that we can make available.

Duffie: We've many visual and graphics that we can make available of all sorts up to the days at AP. Most of us have got them and so if they do want any pictorial information or illustrations, all I know of the ... But if you want further information, contact one of the names you've heard on this tape.

I, myself, virtually used three television annuals from 1952 which I picked up from a bookstall on a visit to town one day. "Adventure in Vision" by John Swift which Frank has also got and a couple of other things.

Richard: Do you want to sign off by giving our names?

Stuart: Well, I'll conclude the tape by going around the table as unofficial convener.

I'll say thank-you Richard Green, Michael Yates, Fred Lister, Buddy Allson. Ted Duckett and Fred Knapman.