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HORIZON AT 50

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW ALEC NISBETT

Q: It's Friday 11th 2014, and I have the pleasure of talking to Alec Nisbett who worked in the BBC from 1953 originally. Who joined BBC television in 1962 and made no less than 42 *Horizon*s. Can we start at your beginning in science, in your childhood?

00:01:05 **A:** I think I started out with an interest in science programmes; practically as soon as I could read I went off to the local library, joined, there were things in the children's library which I found a little bit boring, so I headed off into the grown-up's library. And there I found books on astronomy by people like Eddington and Jeans and I loved reading those books, I read everything I could lay my hands on. And so that was about the age of seven or eight or nine, I don't know, I went back home and looked at the television in the corner of the room which, curiously, was never switched on, so I didn't know what my future would hold at that point. The television turned out to be by somebody called Baird, the wrong sort of television, the wrong sort of science and although television is associated with Baird it was actually invented by

00:02:14 somebody completely different than the way we have it now. So from when I was a schoolchild I'd gone to, passed some examinations…

Q: Did you do science at school, all the way through?

00:02:30 **A:** Physics, chemistry, maths, besides languages and English literature, English language, that sort of thing. And I was obviously far better at the science side and maths and physics, particularly.

Q: You had a story about talking to your teacher about atomic physics.

00:02:57 **A:** I was going back to the library just as much as I was getting stuff from school, and one of the books I picked up was about nuclear physics, it was about atomic particles, in fact. It was about protons and neutrons and how they were joined together to make the atoms and if you added up the weights of these things, I saw in the book, the results were a little odd, they didn't work out quite right. You had an awful lot of energy left over if you broke down a uranium atom at one end or you joined together a couple of hydrogens at the other end. And I kind of worked out, during the way, if anybody found out how to do this they'd have an awfully powerful bomb. And I spent most of the time in the war

worrying about who would get this first, would it be us, would it be the Germans would it be, possibly, even the Japanese. As we now know, of course, everybody was looking into it, including the Japanese.

Q: But you came back to tell your teacher about it.

00:04:09 **A:** Eventually, however, the news came on one morning, they'd dropped an atom bomb in Japan, the German war was over, they'd dropped one on Japan. I marched into school, I said to my teacher, 'The war's over', and they were furious with me, I was really quite surprised about that. They stopped being furious in about two or three days later when the war was over because it was obvious to me, it wasn't to them, that that much power was going to stop a war instantly, pretty much. So I was heading in the direction of doing that, my university professor had in fact worked on The Manhattan Project.

Q: Which college were you at?

00:04:53 **A:** I was at Birmingham, it was a very small department, the year before there'd only been three students, but they opened the floodgates and admitted twelve people in my year. So that's how I got in, I wasn't the brightest of those students, I don't think, and

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I spent most of the time at university actually working on directing plays and running the theatre group and things like that. Organising the finances of the theatre group. I found that if you got the finances right they'd let you do what you like; this was a very important thing for the future, as I discovered later. So I was going in the right direction all the time.

Q: Is the interest in drama what led you to television? Did you know what you wanted to do at university?

00:05:52 **A:** I would have been quite happy to go into the theatre; I realised that I probably wasn't where I… I had terrible dreams, the dreams were that the city I lived in was destroyed by an atomic bomb, I had this dream twice, atomic bombs, the most terrifying dreams I ever had in my life, they were. I had the same dream twice,' and I spent the whole following day simmering down after it. And I didn't feel that I would like to go into any kind of business that was looking into anything that could possibly have anything to do with that. Which slightly put me off being a mathematical physicist because some of the jobs you could get in that kind of thing were at Aldermaston and Rutherford or… I didn't want to go there, so I decided instead I would go

somewhere else and the BBC was recruiting for radio, for some things called studio managers which… Lots of people were being taken on round about that time and the idea was they would probably go on to do something more interesting later. What's her name,

00:07:07 Joan Bakewell was one, all sorts of people, names you would now still recognise, they were getting those kinds of jobs. And I did that for quite a few years. But my professor always thought it was a good idea for me to go into the BBC because he thought that I would finish up in the interpretation of science in some way, and he said we need people doing that.

Q: When did you first become aware of *Horizon*?

00:07:41 **A:** When I worked in radio I didn't even watch television, when I looked for a job in television I had to keep it very quiet that I actually hadn't seen much, and *Horizon* hadn't been invented at that stage. They were recruiting people, they had tens of thousands of applications and rooms full of paper which they couldn't shut the door on, for people who wanted jobs. Because BBC Two was coming along, and I got over from radio which was what didn't happen at that time, but somehow I managed to get across. *Horizon* was only a

gleam in somebody's eye at that time.

Q: What did you start in?

00:08:30 **A:** I started off in a programme called *Tonight*, it had Cliff Michelmore in the studio, so everybody knew it as Cliff Michelmore's programme. But I made short films and went out with Fyffe Robertson and various other people and made little films that went in the evening's programme.

Q: How did you get into *Tonight?*

00:08:56 **A:** Well the interviews for this were conducted, separately, by Michael Peacock and Grace Wyndham Goldie. I remember Grace Wyndham Goldie noticing that I had a science background, I'd made science programmes while in radio and I was slightly in danger of no longer being a producer and being promoted to management. That's one of the reasons I wanted to go to television. One of her questions was, 'What kind of people could you bring for us?' and my lecturer on astronomy at university I thought was absolutely brilliant, he made the whole thing beautiful to listen to and enjoy, right in my field and I named him. And she said, 'No, no, we've got Mr. Moore doing that kind of thing already', so that didn't go down terribly well. But,

nevertheless, I got through at that point and was then assigned to current affairs, *Tonight*, making my little films. But I didn't like that very much, after I had a particular experience that, I think it was Peter Kanter was making a film, he later went and did some *Horizons*. He was told to make a film about some character in East Anglia who was waving something

00:10:37

over a map and finding people who were missing. So they wanted him, and he was really getting very good results it seemed, I thought that sounds a pretty silly story, I was supposed to be helping him do this. I said, 'Ok, this is what we'll do. I and the production secretary will go off and have lunch somewhere, while you're filming, and he will find us, he will say where we are', I didn't tell him where we'd be going, 'But I will ring you up and one o'clock and he will say where we were'. So I rang him and he said, 'Could you call back in ten minutes', so I rang back in ten minutes, still hadn't found us, the reporter then delivered the piece explaining that in a blind trial, where all the people present don't know what the answer is, that's how you test for something like that'. And I thought it was quite good, it was put together, it was taken back to the

editor of the programme, and it didn't go out. We asked why it didn't go out and he said, 'Well it wasn't very interesting, he didn't find anybody'. At that point I got

00:11:58 really cross and decided to leave because that's why you get results like that reported all the time, and how he gets his name because the negative results are not reported. So I went across from Lyme Grove to Kensington House to find Aubrey Singer had recently started up a science department, science and features, and I said, 'I want to come and work for you'. And I told him what my background was, and he said, 'Well, ok, what kind of pay grade do you want?' rather suspiciously, and I said, 'I'll come for what I'm getting now', which wasn't very much, and he said, 'Right, you can start on Monday'. So I went back to Alistair Milne and said, 'I'm leaving you, I'm sorry', he said, 'But we were going to renew your attachment'. I left and joined over there. *Horizon* didn't come until quite a bit later

Q: Had BBC Two arrived by then?

00:13:01 **A:** No, BBC Two was still a gleam in the eye. The science department was doing some major series, Peter Goodchild did one, Bob Read did one, Bronowsky series, *The Ascent of Man*, was made.

Around that time, I can't remember if *Horizon* started everything, perhaps it was.

Q: Can you repeat that?

00:13:46 **A:** BBC Two hadn't started up yet. Originally signs and features had been invented as a way of using outside broadcast equipment on Wednesdays, the middle of the week anyway because it was a financial justification for the department to start. They could take the outside broadcasting gear out to scientific institutions round the country and find out what was going on in these rather strange places. This was quite successful, there were major series as well; there was a series by Peter Goodchild, Bob Read, about The Manhattan Project and so on. One of which caused a major problem between my own professor and the department.

Q: So you were working on those?

00:14:44 **A:** I wasn't working on those, what I did, I worked on Tuesday documentaries, as they were called, they were on what was later BBC One but I was an assistant producer, I was shooting stuff for it, I shot 40% on a film about radiation as an assistant producer. But then Aubrey Singer asked me to make a series about young scientists, science fairs, things like that, a

lot of scientists have since told me that was the first thing that turned them on to science. I made four series of that and several other series, I made about 30 odd programmes of about half hour duration. I was still acting producer, but the guy who was working for me was really fed up about that, because where was he going to? I was an acting producer and he was my director of certain parts of the OBs and things like that.

Q: When were you made a producer?

00:15:57 **A:** I wasn't made a producer until after I joined *Horizon* as a producer.

Q: How did *Horizon* appear?

00:16:16 **A:** *Horizon* was one of the first programmes to appear on BBC Two; I'm not sure it was the first, I think it may have been in the second week. But BBC Two was structured to have a different theme every night.

Q: How did *Horizon* come to be?

00:16:46 **A:** *Horizon* was a programme that the director of BBC..*Horizon* was a programme that the controller of BBC Two thought would be very good for a Monday event, it was part of the theme that he'd thought of for a Monday event. Each evening would have a theme, Tuesday would be Tuesday term, education, it was a

rather bad idea and I faded quite quickly. But, anyway, *Horizon* was always on Mondays. It started out, and this was long before I joined it, with a programme, rather bizarrely, that wasn't, in my mind, about science. It was about an architect, Buckminster Fuller, made by Ramsay Short. Buckminster Fuller made his buildings in domes, which was a kind of mathematical, topological concept, so I suppose there's that connection. And oddly later, of course, there were the carbon structures that were in the same kind of shape named after him, fullerenes, so in retrospect it does have a bit of science in the programme.

Q: What did you think of the programme at the time?

00:17:59 **A:** I thought it was a bit weird, I thought we ought to have a bit more science of the time, and the subsequent science programmes varied an awful lot. I watched every programme, just about, if I could, for the next 40 years actually. And some of those early ones looked a bit wobbly. They had two stories, two contrasting films, in the fifty minutes of *Horizon* sometimes, and that didn't, to my mind, give enough time for any subject to be developed, sufficiently, for what I thought *Horizon* should be about. But there were

good producers, Ramsey Short, who made the first one, also made very good drama documentaries. I think that we couldn't make in later years because they're just too expensive, and we didn't have that big a budget. There was Pete Gilling, there was Peter Goodchild; it was in 1967 that I watched a Peter Goodchild about smoking, *Smoker's Gamble*, I thought it was terrific. He treated the subject rigorously, scientifically, and I thought it was exactly what *Horizon*

00:19:21 should be doing, in fact I rang him up and said so. It was a couple years later, he rang me back when he was editor of *Horizon* and said he'd like me to come and join him, I presume he'd had other reasons that I'd praised one of this programmes, but I was able to join *Horizon* then. I'd been producing for quite a long time and I joined as a producer, even though I was still, at the time, an acting producer.

Q: What was the first *Horizon* you made and how did that go?

00:19:49 **A:** The very first *Horizon* that I made was about cancer, the subject was given to me, it was really a state of the art type of programme. Research of cancer, treatment of people with progressing. I was able to give the good

news but quite a number of cancers were more easily treated than they had been in the past, a rather limited number at the time, it's become much better since, but it showed the way things were going. It was quite an optimistic kind of programme, that evidently went down quite well.

Q: Where was it shot, and what were your feelings of making a whole programme on your own?

00:20:39 **A:** We shot it at Royal Marsden Hospital, around London mostly and so on.

Q: How did the insect programme come about?

00:21:09 **A:** I can't remember how we started the programme off, *The Insect War*, biological treatments for insect pests and things like that, instead of using pesticides. That was actually a very successful programme; I think I won an award for it, or something like that.

Q: How did the topics arise?

00:21:49 **A:** Topics came from all over the place. Sometimes the editor had found one from somewhere, sometimes I thought of things, I usually have a list of four or five things I'd like to make programmes about. You could pick them up from news stories, then you'd follow them up into research papers and research reviews and

people sometimes suggested programmes. Programmes came from scientists themselves, there was a science consultative group and they suggested ideas at times. I can't remember how the *Insect War* started at all.

Q: How did you persuade the scientists to appear on television?

00:22:52 **A:** When you decided on what programme you wanted to do, you found out the names of the people, obviously it went with the name. You rang somebody up and they would give you another name, and so on, you'd talk to a few people on the telephone. And as you talk to them, for me with a science background, I very rapidly learned the jargon that was used in that particular science. Quite soon I found myself become a member of a club, I went to the scientists myself, I talked to them and I realised they weren't talking down to me because they realised that I was, or thought that I was understanding all of this. They told me how their field was structured, who were the good guys, who were the bad guys. Some people were the orthodox scientists of the field, some people were challenging that, they were heretics as it were. Heretics was a very interesting idea

because they were the people who sometimes had good ideas, that turned out eventually to be right and could upset the apple-cart completely, there might be a complete paradigm shift on how the science was organised and so on. Those were the best programmes of course.

Q: How did you cope with translating what the scientists said for the audience?

00:24:59 **A:** I could think of our audience as being made up of several different strands of people, people who hadn't the slightest idea of what science was about and would have to have it explained to them in very simple terms; there were people also who did understand what science was about but didn't know very much about this particular story. We could tell them more, and there were a few people who actually knew what the story really was about and were watching to see if you were doing a good job on their subject.

Q: How could you handle those different groups?

00:26:00 **A:** I never wanted to make it simple for everybody, I wanted to get as much as I possibly could get into any programme. I wanted to make it, however, that people who didn't understand very much what the subject was

about, and got about as much as they could take in the programme and they were constantly being told interesting things, so they kept on watching. People who understand more would get a lot more out of it and I was going to give them more. And I would put as much into a programme, in fact, as I thought anybody could possibly take but everybody would be satisfied. I wouldn't want everybody to come out with the same amount of information, the same amount of ideas, but I would want more to enjoy it.

Q: Do you see it as part of your job to criticise scientists and their work? Can you give an example?

00:27:32 **A:** I'd made a programme about DDT, which wasn't *Horizon*, that was in response to previous programmes that people had made about Rachel Carson and her silent spring. And it was one of the things that I felt that we should be doing. If a bandwagon started, the first thing we should do is, having helped to start the bandwagon, the first thing we should do is to jump off, and to consider whether it's going in the right direction. In the case of DDT I decided that it wasn't quite going in the right direction, DDT ought still to have been used in very specialised places to help keep malaria at bay.

There were ways of doing that. I made a film later for *Horizon* about how malaria had come back to a country, Sri Lanka, after they'd stopped using DDT. And it was a very bad idea not to have been using DDT in the way that they had originally been using it, which was putting it under the huts where mosquitos went and digested the blood that they'd taken. If they found DDT there they didn't pass on the malaria. Instead they were using organophosphate pesticides, which is worse than DDT. So, if something like that happens, you do have to question. Science, at any time, is worth questioning. If we lived in Russia 80 years ago it might have been worth questioning the orthodoxy of the current way that… They should have criticised how Lysenko was doing his research, and all that kind of stuff. You couldn't do that, we're in the same kind of

00:29:57 situation now. You can't criticise stuff on climate change, we ought to, we ought to be examining that in great detail, seeing which bits are resting on good science, which bits aren't. I made the first programmes about climate change, not for *Horizon* as it turns out.

Q: Was this for Nova?

00:30:20 **A:** In addition to *Horizon* we had some things called

Science Specials. They were two hours long, the same principles were used as for *Horizon*, except that you could get a lot more in them, you could cover a complete field. And one was about weather, it was supposed to be about how the new computers, this was 1973, the new computers at The Met Office were going to be able to make the forecasting so much better, we could forecast several days ahead, instead of one or two days ahead, we could forecast maybe for longer. So we did our research on this and came to the conclusion that however powerful they made their computers, they weren't ever going to be able to forecast more than a few days ahead because weather was chaotic.

Q: How did climate change come into that?

00:31:19 **A:** Climate was also in the brief, we found climate much more interesting; there was a lot of interesting research going on in climate at the time. So the programme included, at the smallest end, it included bits of stuff about the hole in the ozone layer in The Arctic, something which could be addressed quite quickly in the short-term. Although we still don't know quite as much about that as we should. There was stuff

on the inexorable growth in carbon dioxide being produced and how this might produce a kind of global warming effect, so we put that in. That might happen over the next 50, 100, 200 years or so, medium term. There's also, which we actually found most interesting of all, the longer terms cycles in climate included ice ages, which it had recently been discovered happened much more frequency, and in much greater numbers, than research, until that time, had suggested. Indeed the next ice age is pretty much overdue, plus or minus a few thousand years, so, you know, it probably wasn't going to happen tomorrow. So there was these three elements of which the most interesting science was in the ice age stuff for which our programme was most

00:32:50 remembered. The Met Office was very critical indeed because they didn't like the bit about the…

Q: Which bit didn't they like?

00:33:00 **A:** Well I suspect the bit about us saying their computers weren't going to be able to forecast the weather all that well and they still weren't going to be able to forecast it a few months in advance. Seasonal weather forecasts wouldn't be very good, we didn't think they would improve very much, as indeed they

still haven't. In spite of a recent *Horizon* which suggested they were doing very well. What they attacked us for was being so alarmist about the coming ice age. The fact that we were saying it was due in the next few thousand years was really beside the point, that's what they could attack us on.

Q: There were a great deal of firsts in that time for *Horizon.* Can you remember some of those? You did the first AIDS programme for example.

00:34:15 **A:** AIDS, well in the early 1970s I went to make a programme about cancer in Africa and I was shown somebody with something called Kaposi's Sarcoma, which is nasty spots on people, which normally only happens to old people in The Mediterranean area and things like that. And it was a young man with this nasty disease, this nasty type of cancer. Nobody knew anything about it at the time, I didn't film it, I went on doing the film I did, but I remembered that. Then, about ten years later, I was in America making a QED film about lie detectors and I read again about something that they called, rather nastily I suppose, as we would now say, 'The Gay Plague'. This disease didn't have a proper name, nobody knew where it was coming from.

It was certainly affecting the gay community, it was affecting intravenous drug users, it was affecting haemophiliacs; it was affecting some people from north Africa, coming over from Haiti and so on, to Florida. I found that really quite interesting, and rather alarming, that this seemed to be developing in the States. It was hardly happening here but I took a little time off and

00:35:47 used a bit of film to shoot some interviews with a couple of gay men, one of whom was dying of this disease. And did it in human terms, about them and their life and what was happening to them. I brought that back.

Q: Were you making another programme at the time?

00:36:11 **A:** I was making a programme about lie detectors, the polygraph, did it work? Was it better than the sort of evidence from other ways of determining the truth? Actually it's slightly better but you can defeat it.

Q: And you found this topic in New York when you were there?

00:36:32 **A:** I found this topic in New York, while I was there, I read about it in a magazine and I read more about it. I came back, I proposed it, and the editor of *Horizon* said 'No, it's something which is a long way away, doesn't

affect us here, nothing much to be done about that'. I tried it again and while that particular editor was away.

Q: Go on.

00:37:04 **A:** While that particular editor was away I had heard that there was a stand-in editor who was Ed Goldwin, and I said to Ed the story again, and he said, 'Well, yes, ok, well maybe you should go and do that'. So I got on with it and made this very first programme about AIDS. Most of it shot in America, a little bit shot in Britain.

Q: Say that again.

00:37:52 **A:** I sent to America to make a film, not *Horizon*, *QED*, about lie detectors and when I was there I heard about a curious disease that was affecting gay men. They called it 'The Gay Plague', it didn't have a proper name, but it was clearly beginning to kill people and it was progressing through the gay community. It was also developing amongst people who used needles on themselves, drug users, it was affecting haemophiliacs; it was affecting some black men who had come over from Haiti to Florida. It was very strange, very weird and very new. I came back home an offered it the editor of *Horizon* who said, 'No, it's faraway places,

doesn't affect us, let's see what happens'. I kept an eye on it, it seemed to me a very good story. And then the editor went away for a few weeks and Ed Golden was standing in so I decided I would try again with another editor. Ed said, 'Yeah, ok, I suppose, go ahead'. So I went off and made this film and, indeed, it turned out to be the first major programme about AIDS, which got the name AIDS shortly before the programme went out. And nobody had the slightest idea what AIDS was caused by; I made it purely as an epidemiological programme, as I described the various groups of people who were affected by it.

Q: And it was called what?

00:39:55 **A:** We called it *Killer in the Village* because of the effect that it was having on the gay community. Initially, as I'd first shot a sequence for it in Greenwich Village, in New York. Later this programme was offered, well it was co-produced by Nova, and they were supposed to be putting it out in their own particular version some time later, but that didn't happen.

Q: Did you feel that you had a particular style of making a film?

00:40:53 **A:** I never regarded style as particularly important. The

important thing about making a *Horizon*, I felt, was the content, it had to be about the use of scientific method in pure or applied science in technology, in medicine, or so on. It also had to be presented as part of our national culture, in the same way that arts is part of the national culture. These were much more important, getting these things built into a *Horizon* than any style that was used to make it. I did have a style, it was as simple as possible in fact. I used very old-fashioned film-making techniques. I built sequences out of shots, with the main story being told in one shot, and cutaways that were used to make sequences fit together. This was a very simple way of doing things. The cutaways are in fact the most important part of that, in a way, you have to have lots and lots of things that you can intercut with the main things that you are shooting.

Q: You had a particular relationship with a particular lens didn't you?

00:42:20 **A:** What I found in the very first *Horizon* that I made was that there was a lens that was available for the cameras that were then around, called a 90mm packshot, and it allowed you take a picture of

something the size of a raindrop. You could focus with it and doing various other really interesting things as well, but it was a lovely lens for making, for use in science programmes because you would look at details, and stuff. Not a lot of other people seemed to be using this, and it gave some of my early films a distinctive character, I felt, for no obvious reason than I was using a rather strange lens. But, more important, I felt, almost more important than picture was the way that the sound was used. The sound was what gave the pictures their meaning, so the sound was the most important part for me. I came from a sound background, and I wanted every word of speech, every word of dialogue, every sound effect, to be carefully placed so that it made the pictures give their…Our attention is concentrated on the picture, but the sound is what tells us what those pictures are really about. Those were the main characteristics of the film-making style that I had.

Q: Did you use music at lot, at all?

00:43:56 **A:** Music is always a contentious subject; yes I did use music, I liked music, I think we all wanted to use music. It could tell you where things were going to, what was

happening next. It could set the scene. I felt that we shouldn't use very much music, I felt that we should use the real-life sound as much as possible. But occasionally, for mood purposes, it's called mood music, it should be used, and it helps blend things together. The audience, then and now, rails more strongly against music than any other component of film-making. Particularly when music is overused, when you can't hear the dialogue for the music. I hate that sort of programme, I hate that sort of film in the cinemas as well. It still happens far too much. And they don't win awards, those films, either, for sound anyway.

Q: What about narrators and presenters? You did start using presenters occasionally. What style did you use?

00:45:12 **A:** We would have presenters who would talk on camera, occasionally. I didn't have many presenter programmes, I had a few where I felt it was somebody who had had a really good idea, it was their idea, they were going to tell the story, that's fine. Mostly I would prefer *Horizons* where there was no presenter on camera, nobody there interpreting the subject for us. That was on the film itself, there would be a narrator, the narrator would tell the story. The narrator wasn't the

story, I didn't want a really dramatic actor being the narrator. We had a narrator called Paul Vaughn who would do it very quietly and he didn't become the story. Occasionally we had narrators who were actors and I didn't think that worked out so well. We started out by having Chris Chataway as a narrator in the very earliest days of *Horizon*, he was the voice of *Horizon* for a while. Then he became a minister in the government, and for *The Insect War* I thought, 'Ok, well if we had the minister on one side we'll the one who is no longer a minster from the other side'. I had Tony Wedgwood Ben do *The Insect War*. I think Tony eventually decided it was a bit of a disaster because to

00:46:47 get him to be quiet enough and to interpret what I wanted him to interpret for the thing, he had to tone himself down in such a way that he'd never done that before. We rehearsed it for eleven hours before we could go into the studio and actually record it, he never did one again.

Q: So he was recording the narration you'd written? What about Chris Chataway?

00:47:21 **A:** Tony Wedgwood Benn recorded the narration for *The Insect War*, just that one film ever. Chris Chataway

had done quite a lot of narration for earlier films; most earliest *Horizons* were by Chris Chataway. Later we had Paul Vaughn and a lot of other people in fact, but Paul Vaughn was the voice of *Horizon* for quite a long time, because he could be low-key. You didn't actually, he wasn't overbearing, he didn't get in the way of the subject matter, and the subject matter is all important, the content is important.

Q: Can we move to the logistics of making a *Horizon* programme. How did you negotiate the budget for a film, and how did you manage to keep to the budget, and was that important?

00:48:11 **A:** The *Horizon* budgets in the early days were extremely, it was a small amount of money that was sent across to us by BBC 2. It wasn't enough to make a film, we had to get extra money from various other sources. We chased it up ourselves in some ways, we made deals with other broadcasting organisations, other media people. One of the first that we made with was TimeLife in America. We, as it were, sold an idea to them and they would put money into it and then they'd have rights in the States to show those films. I remember once, I was told they wanted to have an idea

from me pretty fast and I was in the States at the time and I went into a telephone box somewhere in the middle of New Jersey, off the freeway, and talked for about 35 minutes about the two programmes I was currently researching and wanted to make. One was about the Channel Tunnel and tunnelling in general, and the other one was about astronomy, about one object in the sky called The Crab Nebula. And I really thought he was going to take the one about the Carb Nebula, I thought that was going to be a great film. He listened to me and at the end of all this he said, 'Well I'll tell you one thing Mr. Nisbett, you cannot make a programme about one object in the sky because where are your pictures.' So he took the tunnelling film and he was wrong. We later had lots of other co-producers and we needed all those people in order to get the money.

Q: Did you ever go over-budget?

00:50:10 **A:** The budgets were always very small but you knew exactly what you had. You'd want to use all the money you could to put it on the screen. You'd want to go slightly less than the total, so that you didn't get into trouble later. I didn't go over-budget, or very, very rarely went over-budget, and I got a reputation for

using my resources, maybe up to the limit, but not going over the top. That was very important, you need the freedom that that gives you.

Q: What about the production time-scales and how you kept to them?

00:51:05 **A:** We had very little time to shoot *Horizon* at first. There was one year in which I made four *Horizons,* and allowing for an occasional bit of time off that was about twelve weeks per programme. That would be about four or five weeks to work out what the subject was, research it, go and see everything, talk to everybody, find out what you wanted to do, and begin to work on a treatment. Three weeks, no more, to film it, even including travel, even if we went to the other end of the world to film it, that was the time you had. Then about four weeks to edit the film, edit on film, it's now much longer than that, even though it's easier. Then you had, of course, to do all the final bits like writing promotion, writing things for *Radio Times*, showing it to critics, all that kind of stuff. It added up to, eventually, twelve weeks. Later the budgets increased slightly, the timescale got longer, we actually finished up with the same number of people working on *Horizon* because if

you add at one end you take off the other, so the unit stayed the same.

Q: What about the effect of film on the timescale, it took several days to get the programme through the labs before transmission?

00:52:43 **A:** That all had to be included from getting the film printed, going from a negative cut to a print being made, that all had to be done within that. That could go on a little bit because in fact the film might not be shown within that twelve week period, I suppose, that allowed a little freedom there. But the important thing about the use of film at that time was the discipline that it imposed upon us because film was very expensive. It's not like as things are today, you record on tape, you can go straight to memory and so on, you can record forever and it doesn't cost anything. But film cost a lot of money, it was a major part of the budget. I once made a film that was shot on a four to one ratio; eight to one ratios were normal, nine or ten, maybe even. You couldn't shoot much less than that and actually make a film. It cost money, and it also imposed a tremendous discipline on how we did the, how we made the films. You had to know what you wanted to

shoot and how you wanted to shoot it. You had to have some flexibility within that but you had to plan, and you had to say, 'Cut', when it was time not to shoot any more of this very expensive stuff. That was one way of keeping within budget.

Q: Over 28 years you have made programmes for a wide variety of editors. Can you tell us something about that, whether you liked the differences or they were all the same?

00:54:50 **A:** Editors varied a lot. I worked with Peter Goodchild to start with and this relationship worked very well. We enjoyed working together, he gave me the freedoms that I wanted, and I used them adequately, and nearly always everything came out ok. I did work with a whole lot of other people though; I even worked with editors from *Horizon* who had been, in the past, my researcher on one occasion.

Q: You wrote, 'As long as they were different from the last editor'. In what ways were they different?

00:55:48 **A:** Well some had a science background and some didn't, that was one thing.

Q: Were some hands-on, laid back, did they interfere in the cutting room?

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00:56:07 **A:** Well, I think, possibly, Peter Goodchild was probably the easiest editor I had to work with. I think that the very last film that I made, this was after I left the BBC in fact, I'd left the BBC five years before, I had retired or been retired, because the BBC chucks you out at the age of sixty. And I was still making *Horizon* programmes, and I wanted to make a programme about the way that rock fell off mountains, and in a few occasional cases something very strange happened. The rock stopped behaving like chunks of rock falling down, became a liquid, and flowed out for huge distances, you know, they could go out tens of miles, even further, and wipe away everything in their path. I put this to, I think it was John Lynch. John and I had always had differences in how we felt *Horizon* should be made, and John eventually was convinced that it was a good story and he let me go and make it. When I brought it back and showed him the rough-cut he felt it was in the wrong order. I think he often felt that programmes were in the wrong order, this was something that didn't simply apply to other people, his own programmes, he sometimes felt, were in the wrong order, and he spent ages trying to sort them out. Like

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the one he did on Easter Island which took forever to make. So it wasn't just me I felt. But we switched it around, as he wished us to, changed the order, he didn't like that, it didn't work, changed it again