The Connected Histories of the BBC	
Provenance:	The file reproduced here was provided by the BBC to be made publicly accessible through the Connected Histories of the BBC catalogue hosted by the University of Sussex. It was selected in 2021 from one of five collections: • BBC Oral History • BBC History of North Regional Broadcasting • BBC Horizon at 50 • BBC World Service Moving Houses Project • Alexandra Palace Television Society Oral History
Clearance:	Interviews have been reviewed and edited to comply with GDPR and other requirements.
Copyright:	© BBC © Alexandra Palace Television Society
Conditions of use:	This interview is available for private research. If you wish to use any of the interview in a published work or for a commercial purpose, permission must be requested from the BBC at historyteam@bbc.co.uk apts@apts.org.uk (for Alexandra Palace material)
Partner:	The Connected Histories of the BBC research project was led by the University of Sussex, 2017-2022, funded by the AHRC.
More information:	The project's public resource including more information on terms and conditions of use are available at: https://chbbc.sussex.ac.uk/

HORIZON AT 50

8 APRIL 2014

INTERVIEW MARTIN FREETH

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

00 02 08 **A:** Well I think when I was at film school, and before I went into film cutting rooms, for a while; everybody had heard this series because a wide range of people watched it, it was thought to be good in terms of film-making with its content. I wasn't a scientist but I was interested in science, I found myself watching it for quite a while before I joined the series.

Q: Where had you come from before you arrived on *Horizon*?

00 02 35 **A:** I had been working, after film school I'd been working in cutting rooms, (er), and then I wanted to get a job as a researcher in the BBC, and I went to see Peter Goodchild, who was then the editor of the series and (er) we had a good conversation and he said, 'Farewell, there's nothing doing at the moment' and off I went. And then, the story has it that he had a row in a bar with John Angia, and they almost came to blows, and he sacked John, who later became a power in WGBH, and there was a sudden vacancy. So I got a short contract, renewed on the last day, four or five

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

times, short contract, a short contract, and then I stayed.

Q: So the first you worked on as a researcher?

00 03 26 **A:** Yeah, I did four or five as a researcher, assistant producer, yes.

Q: How was that? Were you surprised by what went on?

00 03 36 **A:** No, I learnt a lot from, from the people I worked with, in particular from John Mansfield, who was fun to work with. (er) Even then I was shocked at how few women there were in producer roles, I mean that really was, given that film school is so much more egalitarian, and so were the cutting rooms, actually, in those days. So it was very male-dominated at that time. That was a bit of a shock.

Q: That's a very good point, can you follow that up as that has changed since then.

00 04 06 **A:** Well it changed, yes, in all 26 years of the BBC, and by the end of that period the BBC had changed a lot. And even in *Horizon* we had Jana Bennett as a distinguished editor of the series. (er) And so that did changed, I'm pleased to say, it made the chances of some of us getting promoted a bit less, but there we

are.

Q: What was your first *Horizon* as a producer?

00 04 32 **A:** Well there was some footage from, filmed in China by Japanese television, of people having major operations under acupuncture anaesthesia, it was extraordinary footage actually. And (er) no other *Horizon* produced seemed to want to make that into a total film about acupuncture, and I said I'd do it. So that was the first, and it was, what we saw on that film and what we filmed for ourselves, of places like the Walton Hospital for Pain Relief, where, we had people getting up and walking who'd not walked for six months, with acupuncture, and so on. And then we, we filmed a Gravesend GP and we took him, he went, he had been to China so we were able to make it look as if we'd taken him to China, because he talked about the same operations that he'd seen going on in China. With people who had huge great goitres removed from their neck and all they were doing was, they were wide awake and they were given a cup of tea and given a round of applause, and you know, awake the whole time. So it was quite nice to start with a fairly sensational *Horizon*.

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

Q: That was a fairly sensational location to go to wasn't it?

00 05 41 **A:** Yeah, but we didn't go, we made it look as if we weret there, but by interviewing a doctor who had been there, and using his voiceover as commentary over the footage that Japanese television had shot.

Q: After filming four or five *Horizons* did you feel part of an elite group?

00 06 08 **A:** I think a lot of the things I did with BBC Science, or Science and Features as it was called, I enjoyed *Horizon* most and it did feel a bit elite, but I also thought it would be wrong to stay with *Horizon* the whole time. And I kept diving out into doing different series and to work on *Tomorrow's World* and so on, (er), because I always liked variety. Then I would come back to *Horizon*, often under a different editor and have another go.

Q: So you didn't choose that first topic?

00 06 51 **A:** It was offered and I volunteered to do it.

00 06 55 **Q:** So, when it came to your first own programme, which you shot yourself, how did that come alive?

00 07 20 **A:** Oh, *The Long Valley*, I was very impressed, who's still around I think called Colin Murray Pakes, you see,

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

Chairman of CRUSE, an organisation for bereaved people. And he, I heard a lecture he gave about grief, and how people go through the stages of grief. And that seemed to be like a story for a fifty minute film. And that's how we structured it, through the testimony of bereaved people, through extracts from CS Lewis, *A Grief Observed,* and through Colin's lecture. So that was how we structured that one.

Q: Did you take that to Peter, or did Peter give it to you?

00 07 56

A: I think I took that to Peter. I mean one of the lovely things about *Horizon* in those days was that, I, I may be getting this wrong but how I see it is that you could sit in that office with Peter, he might reject things, of course, like any good series editor. But you also, though the power of film-making was such, that if somebody had said look, 'How about making a film about a grain of sand', let's say, we *Horizon* producers, directors are up to this you would think. And so there was always, and there was no competition, *Equinox* hadn't arrived, there was no competition in science film-making at all; *Nova* didn't exist in Boston. And you kind of thought that you could do almost anything, and

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

your task was to make it engaging, and indeed, entertaining. But the challenge was to find a clever way of doing it. And some of the producers at the time, for example Dennis Postle with his *Shadows of Bliss*, found wonderfully rich and imaginative ways of doing, of presenting difficult things in science, and that was about particle physics and the principles of it as they

00 09 02 stood at the time. So we felt that amazing potential, and when looking for subjects, even early on, and it went on through what I did, we didn't stick to a rigid boundary for what counted as science; so that some of the films I'm most proud of are least about science.

Q: Tell me about those.

00 09 20 **A:** Well, I think *The Other Kenya* is the film I'm most proud of and everybody said, 'What's this doing in *Horizon*?' And the joy of *Horizon* was that you could do that, it was really about the pressures that led people living in marginal land to go to, in fertile land, to go to marginal land and then to end up in the city slums. And we had testimony from people in the slums. So it was about the demographics of the Developing World, very much the human stories. And it was quite radical politically, you know, and reviewed as such, and it was

nice to be able to do that within the *Horizon* strand. And I think the strand was a way of protecting individual series producers and the series editor, from the structures of power within the BBC. Controllers and people. There was a sense, and I believe McKinsey analysed the BBC in those days and found there were more decision-makers than another organisation it ever analysed, and we felt like real decision-makers, not sat

00 10 25

upon, nor, indeed, constrained by, you know, 'This has got to have height, this has got to be a really important story, this has got to get huge audiences'. All those things that were used as pressures on producers in later years were, were not there. So we had this sense of freedom, and we had a sense that we could experiment with the form and the content.

Q: Did you have a style of film-making?

00 10 58

A: No, I don't think there was a Martin Freeth style really, what I enjoyed was trying very different things so that, (er), with the film I made for *Horizon*, called *Finding a Voice*, which was about a man who couldn't speak, write or move. And we took him to America to look at new technology, he had cerebral palsy, and it came to me that we would do that from his point. So he

couldn't speak, so he had to write the commentary with his feet. I mean, I'm not saying we'd put words in his feet as it were, but he wrote the commentary and narrated it. And I suppose one thing I always have done, is think a bit about point of view, something which *Antenna* did, routinely, when *Antenna* got started, there was always somebody who would lead a film. So with *Horizon* I made one called *The Fat in the Fire*, we had Phillip James play that role, and presenter and narrator. (er) And then otherwise we resorted to Paul Vorn, the voice of God, which was wonderful, but, so I suppose I always thought about point of view in telling a story.

Q: You weren't a scientist, the public perception of science is that it is for geeks, and boring. How did you cope with that?

00 12 17

A: Well, because I'm an out-and-out atheist I think science is the only thing we've got, and I think science is incredibly important and I've always thought that. So, you know, Darwin's insight into our existence is probably the most important insight human beings have ever had, that's where I come from. The fact that I didn't have a science qualification didn't bother me,

doesn't bother me, I still make science films in large numbers, sometimes about very difficult subjects, but if I can't understand it, nor can the viewer. That was how I consoled myself for not having a science degree, put it like that.

Q: Did you do programmes that involved complicated work?

00 13 11 **A:** Well, the film *The Fat in the Fire*, that looked at brown adipose tissue and obesity, probably the science behind it was rubbish, (er), it was different from the science *Horizon* I presented ten years before, and different again from what it presented three or four years back from now. But it had, (er), it put forward the view that this brown adipose tissue, behind your neck, between your shoulder blades, is the fire that burns up your fat, and the way that works determines if you're obese or not. (er) And that was really quite complicated science, and the way to make that hold attention, apart from the fact that everyone's interested in obesity, or a lot of people are, was to give Philip James the role of explorer, say, 'Well it might be this, it might be that. So we then went there and we then went there', so. I think films are completely useless as a factual medium,

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

00 14 03 they're useless at getting across theories and facts and information, that's not what they're for. Films are about atmospheres and attitudes and hopes and, (er), beliefs and if you engage people that way then they go and read the books, and they go and pass the exams. Somebody did a study of *Horizon*, I think around that era, and found that the average viewer retained only three facts from a *Horizon* that they'd watched, maybe the night before, I'm not sure how long before. That never bothered me at all, if they, if they became entranced by a subject, that's all that I thought the film was for.

Q: Did you use music a lot in your films?

00 14 42 **A:** Yes, once or twice, no, a few times, (er), we did have music specially scored for a couple of films, particularly *What Little Girls Are Made Of*, we did, got the music especially scored. And (er) I didn't like it at all, we had to do it all over again, it was quite an expensive business then when you had to have all the parts written, and the session men come in and record it. So I ended up doing sound, not just for *Horizon*, but for other things with the Radiophonics Workshop, which was a wonderful, flexible tool at the time which

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

allowed you to try things and change them during the editing rather than have to commit yourself to an orchestrated, recorded music. So I used music a bit.

Q: When you finished a film how did you know if it was good film or not?

00 15 35 **A:** Well, to be honest, the, the responses of colleagues and correspondence from, and it was written correspondence in those days, sometimes in green ink, but from viewers, was what I went by. And I kind of knew myself, too, (er), a film gets a life of its own, I certainly didn't put any great reliance on viewing figures. We got some pretty good figures for things that we did, but the figures would depend on the weather, what was on the other side, as we all know, and as for the Appreciation Index, that's a load of rubbish.

Q: That wasn't how you put it before.

00 16 14 **A:** As for the Appreciation Index, I think that's a load of bollocks.

Q: Why?

00 16 21 **A:** Well they did a study of, there was a film that, arts features, (er), music and arts were very much, sort of, canteen (er) colleagues of ours in those days, as you remember. (er) They did a film called *Schalken the*

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

Painter. *Schalken the Painter* was about a Dutch painter who had sex with dead bodies, and very shocking, it was a very beautiful film. Now, the audience of that consisted of people who were absolutely horrified and people who thought it was a wonderful documentary, and the AI was kind of in the middle at 72, or something. And that AI is just an amalgamation, you know, I would be pleased if I knew that I had (er) upset people, I would be pleased if I knew I'd delighted them. You put upset and delight together you don't get much of an AI, that's what I mean. It's sociological junk.

Q: How did you negotiate your budget?

00 18 47 **A:** There was a budget, but don't forget that back in the 70's, and this was a time when people were switching from black and white to colour, therefore they were paying more licence fee automatically as they switched to colour. And the BBC's income was kind of doing this. This didn't really, therefore, concentrate the mind of controllers, and others putting budgets into things, that they had to be enormously controlling of their budgets. And, although, the BBC did have a lot of people who had their feet up at the time, I won't mention who they

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

were, based at the Film Department, and things like that. But a lot of us were working like crazy to give value for money, so I would say, you know, hand on heart, that I gave good value for money in what I did, but sometimes it was way over the original budget. So we would say, for example, some of the films I did I would slave away at the editing and some editor of *Horizon* ought to have said, 'This should be shorter, you've got to cut this to 50 minutes', or 49, whatever it

00 19 51

was. And I would say, 'Look it must be an hour long', or whatever, and (er) in those days, believe it or not, if an editor accepted that it was good at an hour long, in the case of some of the dramas 70 minutes long, or 55, whatever. They would just call up, through the Head of Department, the controller of BBC2, and say, 'Very sorry, *Horizon's* longer than usual, *Newsnight* will have to go back'. They could never do that now. So there's a sense that the programme came first, if someone came up with a great new idea of a way of doing it, suddenly turn an ordinary documentary into a semi-drama, the money would get found. Of course you had to ask for it, but it did get found. (er) John Mansfield was very good at keeping within budget every time, I'm afraid I wasn't.

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

Q: And with production timescales, how did you operate that, did you stick to the timeframes?

00 20 51 **A:** Well I've always found, and I still find now, that if you've got several projects on the go, something can mature whilst something else is on the go. So I, I didn't tend to make films in a block of three months, whatever it normally took, that would be spread over a longer period. But I wouldn't put more weeks into it than that. It didn't need the six or seven weeks' editing, it really did, editing on film, and it probably still would need, I don't know what they use these days, but five or six weeks of digital editing probably. (er) That's the time editing takes, and editing is absolutely most important process of all.

Q: What about the shooting period, how long was that?

00 21 26 **A:** Well, I think we had, we had fourteen days, I think in those days, of shooting, but sometimes you had to travel and you increased that a bit, or, and again that wouldn't necessarily be in a block. A bit of filming here, a bit in the States, couple of weeks later a bit more while doing something else.

Q: And the research period?

00 21 46 **A:** Well the whole period of research, filming and

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

editing typically was supposed to be, you were supposed to be able to do three, perhaps three in a year, so it was three months plus a bit of holiday, plus a bit of waiting around, (er) and we kept within that.

Q: How did you operate with the different editors in practical terms? Were they hands on or were they laid back?

00 22 29 **A:** I think they found I could be quite (OVERLAP – oh dear, just pulling the lead, hang on a sec). I think they found I could be quite (er) awkward (LAUGHS). I'm not sure that they found it very easy to control me, especially when I was away on location. I mean, my argument was, if it was different from what was in the treatment but it was good and held, then everybody would forgive us, and they did. (er) But editors were very useful at the rough cut stage. But I would be, and I still am, I tend to get the rough cut as near to a final cut as I possibly can, so nobody can say, 'There's something needs doing here'. (er) But the editors were useful at that stage, indeed, and often, one particular film (er) Peter Goodchild turned upside down; it was a film called *A New Green Revolution*, and that was the film I had volunteered to, I was the only *Horizon*

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

director/ producer to volunteer to be followed around by a sociologist while making this film. And he followed me and my assistant producer Sophie Robinson, who went to Bangladesh, he followed me to The Philippines and to Mexico, he followed us into the cutting room, he followed to entire process. And this was a film about 'is the green revolution all it's cracked up to be?', and (er)

00 23 41

we got thrown out of The Philippines (er) halfway through the filming, because a, another producer in the BBC had made a film about a dissident in The Philippines called Geochno (phon), a dissident lawyer, and, and Marcos said, 'No BBC', so we couldn't go back, we filmed in the dry season, we were going to come back in the wet season but we couldn't, so we had to go elsewhere, so it was traumatic in the making, it had a sociologist documenting all the trauma, and all the arguments we were going through, and eventually publishing a book called *Framing Science* about it. And then when it came to a rough fine cut, Peter looked at it and said, 'This isn't radical enough!' I thought, 'Ooh, aah, gosh', did I think the BBC was a radical organisation? Not really! I was doing this, like in the case of the other, Kenya, against the odds, but here he

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

was saying, 'It's not radical enough', so we had to get lots of film in of guerrilla fighters, and showing that the whole thing about green revolution crops was really a

00 24 37 political business. And it made a better film, and he stopped it going out, it was due to go out fairly soon and he stopped it and said, 'This has got to be more hard-hitting and more critical of the politics of the scene', and we did that, and I'm really pleased with that intervention.

Q: Was it Peter Goodchild or Graham Massey?

00 25 23 **A:** So let's just recap and say I took the rough cut to then editor, Graham Massey, who wanted it to be more radical, got backing for that from Peter Goodchild, as Head of Department, and that made a much better film.

Q: Go on.

00 25 41 **A:** That Roger Silverstone was a sociologist working, initially he was at (er) Brunel and then at the LSE, he became a really quite important Professor of Media, and he had written books previously about television drama that was so full of sociologies, jargon of the most appalling kind that nobody would want to, in my view, nobody would want to read them. But I still volunteered to be followed up, and he, he followed us

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

round and he, he said, 'Well why do you want to talk to that person about such and such?', and I would tell him everything that was subsequently in my heart, as to why, and (er) then I would say, 'Well what do you think Roger?', 'Oh I couldn't possibly affect my subject, I'm a sociologist, I can't comment'. So in the end I said, 'Go and make the tea', I got really fed up with this process,

00 26 28 in the end. But what he produced which told me, and readers and everybody else who read it, how constrained documentary makers in the BBC, or anywhere, actually are, by the relationships you do, the deals you do with contributors, by the demands of the edit to make things compelling. All kinds of things pressing on us to do things in certain ways, which he delineates in that book, I think, in a brilliant way.

Q: So he didn't overstate it at all?

00 27 03 **A:** He didn't overstate those pressures, they are real pressures. And (er) he describes them really well in that book, as I say, called *Framing Science, The Making of a BBC Documentary*.

Q: Who arranged all the logistics for all this travelling and shooting, which the BBC operate, to support you?

00 27 31 **A:** Oh well there were, there were three different

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

support areas. One, you would have a research assistant, or AP, assistant producer, and a PA who would do a lot of the organisational things. (er) Then there would be the film operations manager, the FOM, of whom the most memorable is David Ziegler, who would arrange for practical things, booking film editors, arranging for the rushes to be viewed, liaising with the laboratories, and things like that. (er) And then, what else was there? Well, there was the *Horizon* Unit Management, who, (er), Patrick Ducker, I think, was there at the time and then Maggie Bebbington more recently, (er), and Rosemarie Gillespie, who were wonderfully helpful in some of the other practical areas, looking after aspects of the budget, looking after aspects of the planning, transmission and things like that. So there was good support. And now I do it all myself, the way it is, that's what I do.

Q: How did you find these people and how did you work with them?

00 28 52 **A:** Well, those were the days, I mean I also worked with Nigel Corben on one of the big science specials, and we would both go on a recce. In the case of *Horizon* we didn't both, I mean, you know, I didn't go

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

with my AP usually on a recce. But I would go, or somebody would go, on a recce, something that I'm sure that they can't afford to do anymore now, except via Skype, you know, but we actually went to see people and places, and got to know things before filming at all. Because there was no ability to film with a small digital camera, you had to spend a lot of money on 16mm film and heavy kit and the only way to really get to know people, and get, get them to be your allies, if you like, was (er), was to do a recce. I don't think I regarded contributors as enemies at all, I did often see that they didn't understand the process and that I kind

00 29 41

of knew I could do things in the editing that might, or might not, shock them. But most of them didn't end up being shocked, and (er), you know, it, it's very difficult, often I would make a film that would be somebody's point of view. Which I think was absolutely fine, the need for the BBC to be balanced, should not apply to individual programmes in my opinions. And if you look at *Horizon* you saw Mike Barnes's *Due to Lack of Interest Tomorrow's Been Cancelled*, followed up a year or two later by Alec Nesbitt's *How They Sold Doomsday*, putting completely the opposite point of

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

view. And I think that's absolutely fair, and on the whole my films tended to be on the one side in a debate, (er), leading to the BBC as a whole, and *Horizon* as a whole, to attempt the balance. So I didn't have disgruntled contributors, on the whole, (er) and (er) we did do one film in which the balance of contributors, in fact the very last *Horizon* that I made was called *Small*

00 30 44 *Arms, Soft Targets*. And on the one side, looking camera left, were the weapons designers trying to make things to destroy you. And on the other side, looking camera right, were the war surgeons and Red Cross surgeons, attempting to put the bodies back together again. So we had a film structure in which, sort of experimental a bit, in which they were firing at each other. And I was really proud of that film, it was the last *Horizon*, last *Horizon*, also the last piece of film-making I've done on proper sprocketed film. But, no, that was, that was contributors, they knew they had their opponents as it were, and their critics, coming up opposite them. And it worked.

Q: How did you work with the other people in different fields? Were they helpful or difficult?

00 31 47 **A:** Well, I did do some big international co-productions

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

in the department that were not *Horizon*. But in *Horizon*, the only collaborators in other countries were people from, sometimes we would hire a film crew, but we didn't have any co-producers, except for (INAUDIBLE) Boston on occasion, which you know about. (er) And I don't think anybody in the world was doing science programmes the way we were doing them at that time, so I'm not quite sure what it is you're looking for.

Q: The way the BBC was seen, did you get terrific help from other countries, or did they say, 'What are you doing in our country?'

00 32 29 **A:** Well, it's interesting, (er), in those days if you called up an American scientist he or she would say, 'Oh, be my guest, I'll help you as much as I can', they kind of knew they were being paid for by the public, ultimately, and they were very welcoming. And so, you know, many dinners in the Harvard Faculty Club and Stanford and so on, I remember, with scientists who couldn't do too much for you, and the BBC had a very high reputation. But, back here, it wasn't the same at all, there were a lot of scientists, and still are, but there were then, a lot who were very stuffy about these

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

television people simplifying. And they would complain after a *Horizon* programme that everything that they wanted to be in the firm wasn't in the film. You would say, 'It's only 50 minutes, you know, covering a whole field', and, you know, a particular person I worked with on *Horizon*, and then subsequently on a whole series,

00 33 24 was Colin Blakemore, who's very, very good on camera. But, (er), he had been, (er), his children had been threatened with bombs by the anti-vivisectionists, and, (er), but he was willing to stand up and be counted and talk about animal research, in this case in the field of vision. And a lot of British scientists were not willing to appear, who were doing animal research, (er), because either they were scared or, and there was this sense that, you know, 'These television people…', but not in America, or elsewhere in the world.

Q: How much prior knowledge did you assume that audiences had, and was there a difference between doing a BBC1 programme and a BBC2 programme?

00 34 25 **A:** Well, one of the things I jumped away from *Horizon* to do, was one of the last ever series with James Burke, of the Burke Specials, for BBC1, where we got 11.5 million viewers, you know, which for a science

focussed, technology-focused programmes, was very gratifying. (er) No, I think we assumed BBC2 would be, generally, educated audience, but not necessarily knowing anything about that particular field. So you did have to speak in a straightforward language that everyone could understand.

Q: What sort of reaction did you get from family, friends, colleagues?

00 35 09 **A:** Oh certainly from colleagues, and there used to be, sometimes rather awkward, meeting within the week following an airing, when we all sat round, the whole department sat round and sometimes attacked each other. (er) That was quite sobering on occasions; I can't remember the detail of it. But, otherwise, I would hold a party every time I finished a *Horizon*, invite everyone who was involved, and everyone I knew, and all my family, to a party at home, and projected it on a big screen. And then, of course, they were obliged to applaud.

Q: How much did the audience reaction affect what you did?

00 35 54 **A:** If I had, if I had, like I did a film about old age, I did a film about bereavement, and so on, which were not

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

going to get very big audiences, but they did get lots of letter from people saying, 'We found that film particularly helpful', same with a film about epilepsy. (er) After that film, called *The Spike*, which I'm quite pleased with, about epilepsy, we had a lot of people who found it helpful, but it did include (er) the use of drug called Sodium Volparate, which has since come under more suspicion, and I had (er) a bereaved mother, whose a daughter who had died from an overdose of this drug, calling me after the film, and she still calls me now, 35 years later, every couple of

00 36 37

months, to wage a campaign against the evil medical profession. And I take her cause because I think she's right, and bereaved and grieving and you get put in that sort of position. So there have been some audience members that I've kept in, individuals that I've kept in touch with and I took the letters very seriously. We also did a film with young people looking at careers in science and going round the country saying what bollocks they thought some of these careers were. And I've kept in touch with them, 'cause I followed them up seven years later, in a sort of *Seven Up Horizon*, and I could follow them up now, one of them became a kiss-

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

o-gram girl. So I've kept in touch with all of those. So some contributors you keep in touch with, some audience members that write in you keep in touch with, (er), but it's a very small sample.

Q: Do you think that *Horizon* has changed science in Britain?

00 37 31 **A:** I think there are some films that were very influential, I mean the one that's often quoted, rightly, is Ed Goldwin's *Now The Chips Are Down*, which had questions asked about in the Houses of Parliament. And really people were very unaware of what the chip revolution, if you want to call it that, was going to do to our society. And that *Horizon* woke up a lot of people in politics in, I think, in the research councils, to the importance of silicon chips. So, some of the films have definitely had an influence of that sort.

Q: It sounds as if you are quite in favour of campaigning films. You don't think that affects the way scientists work on things?

00 38 23 **A:** Well I do, I mean, I think there's another classic example which Graham Mersey made which was about, (er), dentistry, with the lovely title of *I'm Sorry I Opened My Mouth*. And that film drew attention, I think,

amongst other media coverage, but for the first time in a major way, to the fact that dentists were being paid to do fillings and extractions, therefore they did lots of fillings and extractions. They were not paid to do preventative treatments on teeth and after that the law was changed. There was also *Don't Get Sick in America* by Michael Barnes that, (er), that showed just how bad the American healthcare system is, and was. I've just done a film about over-treatment in America and over-treatment and under-treatment is still bad, nothing's changed there. But I think it did give people here a sense that, actually our NHS wasn't that bad after all.

Q: Was there a collegiate feel about *Horizon*?

00 39 37 **A:** No, I think generally there were chats in the canteens, but we were all isolated little cells, really. Indeed responsible to the series editor, but no, I don't think we, we certainly felt part of an elite, that's true. Some people, so much so, that they really didn't want to work on anything else, which was a problem for the head of department at times. I wasn't one of those.

Q: Did you discuss programmes with others?

00 40 13 **A:** Yes, but I don't recall it as being vastly influential, I

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

thought the people I actually worked closely with, the assistant producer or researcher, and often the production assistant, were quite influential on how we did things. But I'm not sure other *Horizon* producers were.

Q: How did *Horizon* change your life?

00 40 43

A: Well, I think *Horizon* was a wonderful institution and, to some degree, still is and I'm very proud to have made the *Horizons* I made, and I keep putting in ideas these days, I'm too old I guess. But, no, *Horizon* is something I'd like to go on doing if I could. The constraints on what I do now, I mean I make films now for things now for *Nature*, the science journal *Nature*, and the *British Medical Journal*, and they may have a paper that wants illustrated. And we just get given the contributors and I have to make them into film, and it's very hard sometimes. Or we get sent off to a meeting of 40 Nobel Prize winners, and you think, 'Oh my God how are we going to make this interesting and engaging?' But in *Horizon* you could choose the contributors and, (er), and there was this freedom from oppression from above, (er), real delegated decision making which, (er), may not be the same anymore and,

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

00 41 39 certainly, it was something that will, I think, very important to me.

Q: At a more personal level?

00 41 54 **A:** Well, since the, I, I made a film for *Horizon*, a film for *Antenna*, a film for *Tomorrow's World* in Kenya and one in Uganda and I've often been back to East Africa, so it gave me a love for Africa, that's for sure, the red soils of Africa and the people of Africa. And we support some families, my wife and I, ever since then we've supported some families in Kenya who, (er), who need our support to survive. One family has nine sons, most of them unemployed, so need our support. And it's given me a great love for East Africa. My, my passion about science has not gone, has not been diminished, it's increased greatly. It was a wonderful privilege to work on such a wide range of subjects.

Q: How did Avril feel about you being away for long periods of time?

00 42 59 **A:** She is one of the, my wife Avril, is one of those classic wives who support their husbands, as I support her. She had a career and went through some difficult times in it and I supported her, and she was always supportive. In retrospect, I wish I hadn't travelled so

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

much, I was doing a big series with WNET called *The Mind Machine*, about the brain, and I was away once for about nine weeks on end, going to and from New York and other locations, and I wish I'd been around more in my children's early childhood. That's a regret (er), but no, (er), we're solid.

Q: What made you stop doing *Horizons*?

00 43 46 **A:** I think being in, (er), science and features with a mind-set to think about new things. When the multimedia era came along we, as a group, the producers, all had a positive interest in new media, because it was a new thing, especially for *Tomorrow's World* in that incarnation. So when John Birt put out a call, he said, 'I've got two million pounds and I want to give them, I want to make, setup a CD Rom fund, CD Roms are the things of the future'. We took one look at this and thought, 'No they're not, CD Roms are interactive media, but then, of course, online is the most important thing really', and we bid for the money, and we got all the money, and we set up something which then, set up in White City called The Multi-Media Centre. Which was the beginning of BBC Online, with collaboration with the Education team and of interactive

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

00 44 39

media, including the red button stuff that goes on now. And now the BBC's really big in all that. So I became a sort of multimedia evangelist pioneer. I'm now back doing proper storytelling on film because there's so much garbage that goes out on the internet every day. Hundreds of hours of garbage, and I like to keep the old flags of storytelling in a traditional manner flying. But then, I left *Horizon*, and science, because I was the head of the multimedia centre in the BBC. Then I got made redundant because of politics between the Director General and Deputy Director General, who almost came to blows about where multimedia should be in the BBC, and I took the money and went off and have had a good time ever since.

Q: Can you describe how *Horizon* changed over the years?

00 45 40

A: What happened in the era when producer choice came alone, and so on, was a tightening of the budget, so even I had to start making films with less shooting days and so forth. That was terribly painful, of course, so there was that. (er). I think it has become, over the years, then and since, much more focused on what, if you're being pejorative, you would call hype, you know,

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

in those days if we wanted to do something valuable and important and interesting, it might be important in science, or not, we could do it. We believed it was our right to do it, and sometimes we got a good audience in and sometimes we didn't. Now, if there's no, sort of, selling handle, no sort of 60 word description that makes you watched it against the opposition. I quite

00 46 29 understand it, we now have opposition, we have fifty channels to choose from and thousands of internet experiences to look at, and foreign rivals and so on. Obviously it's got to change in that direction, but it's a bit of a matter for regret that they need to make everything hyped, (er), I'm glad to see the personal approach is still favoured, occasionally by *Horizon* whether it be Michael Moseley's films, and things like that, which are fun. (er) But I do think there's a need to, every time I put an idea into *Horizon* I have to make it, well it's not as bad as Channel 4, put it like that.

Q: You had a few goes at doing drama, can you tell me about those?

00 47 57 **A:** Well, one of the attractive things about the *Horizon* strand, was the addition of drama documentary, which was particularly encouraged by and led by Peter

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

Goodchiled, who then went on to do his Marie Curie series and then *Microbes and Med*, history of medicine series. And so we all along felt that if something needed a dramatic approach, it could be done. And, (er), my experiences were brining Darwin back to life for *Darwin's Dream*, which worked nicely. I did something, I don't think it was *Horizon*.

Q: Tell me about *Darwin's Dream*.

00 48 34 **A:** Well, it struck me that Darwin, whilst having this great insight about evolution, had absolutely no idea how the mechanism worked, how the mechanism of inheritance worked, how mutation might work. So he kind of knew it was true but didn't know how it would work. So I thought, bring him back to life in the 20th Century, as it was then, and so we find Darwin, first of all, coming up an embankment on a country walk, and there he is in front of a motorway. So he's transmogrified himself hundreds of years into the future. And then we took him round different labs, and the scientists went along with this in quite a game sort of way, they agreed to talk to Darwin, who came in full costume into their labs, and asked them questions. And Darwin's thoughts about what it is we know, and what

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

00 49 28

we were learning was not the narrative of the drama, but his thought about what we still don't know, was a really important other output of that drama. And the main drama was with, about, fraudulent psychologist, (er), Cyril Bert, who, more or less, was responsible for the introduction of the 11+ in Britain. We had some fun inventing a mythical co-worker, that he invented, because he invented lots of co-workers, he invented lots of (INAUDIBLE) who never existed. And we had some fun with that, with John Shrapnel in the lead role as Birt, and Annabel Leventon as his wife. Lindsay Baxter is the beautiful, mythical researcher. So I enjoyed that. But I want to say one thing, which is that the difference between drama and documentary, it's all invention, it's all lies, get that straight, there isn't any difference really, you just have a bit more control with your actors than you do with your contributors. You have to have integrity at heart, that's the point, but you are, it's all invention, in the filming, in the editing. And it's wonderful to have the control you have in drama, but I look for that control in documentary all the time.

Q: Were there any particular fashionable stories in science when you started out?

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

00 51 43

A: Well I think a lot of us, those who'd been to film school and were not scientists, and so on, coming into the BBC (er) always wanted to be in dispute with authority in the BBC, always wanted dispute with authority outside the BBC, very willing to be campaigners. Which is why, (er), *Due to Lack of Interest, Tomorrow's Been Cancelled*, that Mike Barnes made, did trade on that environmental movement based on the limits to growth, famous Forrester Report, the limits to growth. That was very much in the air so that you would have, on your kitchen table, the last Whole Earth catalogue, in those days. So there was the environmental movement, and part of that, I made a film called *Genetic Roulette*, and part of that was the protests about genetic engineering. Which is another thing that was very much in the air at the time, (er), Thalidomide, of course we'd passed Thalidomide, but Thalidomide was a very big story. So we were looking

00 52 40

for ways, as journalists, as reporters, if you like, as producers, (er), to question the establishment; that was part of what was in the air. (er) The genetic stuff, I mean I look back and I think, 'How ridiculous', you know, journalists are still saying, 'Frankenstein food',

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

and other complete nonsense. There's no harm in genetically-engineered, turn into a chicken because of that. And so, you know, but, raising the questions, it was our job to raise the questions. What else was in the air?

Q: Where was your inspiration coming from?

00 54 41 **A:** I think if you ask about the, you know, what ideas there were in the air, those ideas were mediated through us as individuals. And I was somebody always looking for a socially relevant angle, hence *The Green Revolution* film, hence the, the long, hence the, *I Don't Want to be a Burden*, about aging. I always wanted to hold science to account for its social consequences. So, had I made a film about the space race, it probably would have been about how, how could we possibly spend all this money on getting a non-stick frying pan. So again, mediated by me, has things moved forward? I would have said, 'What's the social question here?' And I also liked, I liked people who took a contrary point of view, which is why I like the climate change deniers these days, I'm not saying they're right, I don't think anybody knows who's right, but as a filmmaker I think, 'Ah, deny the establishment', and that's what

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

00 55 36

Peter Goodchild's whole series about the history of medicine was, the people were always the guy against the academy. The general view was always wrong. And so, whether that's, whether we still have this in the nineties and now in the noughties, twenties, whatever we call ourselves, I don't know, but I certainly do, I'm old fashioned I guess. I like to attack the establishment if I can.

Q: Is there anything extra you want to add?

00 56 52

A: I was a multimedia pioneer, saying that the internet mattered, because it was a new idea and we were always interested in new ideas. And the online world is a crazy world, we all know that television as we know it is going to disappear, it should have done by now according to us evangelists ten years ago. But it will disappear and people will not be watching in the way they are now, except for certain things like *Strictly Come Dancing* and the news. You know, we are not going to watch our science programmes in the way we do now. At the same time, every day, hundreds of hours of complete garbage goes up online, nobody can find their way through it to get what's really good, so the BBC, its brand, and the brand of a series like

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

Horizon, which may have exists for more than forty, fifty years, though *Horizon* may have existed for more than fifty years, it needs to go on existing. Because the

00 57 44 *Horizon* brand, the BBC brand, protects something which tells you that real thought and work and people have challenged themselves, they've put a lot of technical resources, they've put a lot of effort into something. So it's worth your watching against all this garbage online. And so, you know, we need brands like the BBC and like *Horizon* in the multimedia age in particular.

Q: What is this new thing that you're talking about?

00 58 23 **A:** Well there are a lot of niche audiences around the world for things that there weren't before, they can't easily be turned into money, that's the problem I find as an independent film-maker working mainly online, how to get the money together to do things properly, (er), given these fragmented audiences, and how many hits you get on a particular film. If you make something really silly you might get millions of hits, you know, if you have, if you run after your dog in Richmond Park suddenly three million people will watch it, or if you do a *Gangnam Style* video. But it's, if you talk about

INT. FREETH CONT – HORIZON AT 50

serious things it's very hard to build the, the economic model that supports quality storytelling in science and technology. But the fact is that people are going to be watching differently, a television will not be different from a computer in, say, ten years from now, there will be no difference. You'll call up what you want, when you want, sometimes you'll watch it live, mostly you

00 59 19 won't, and you'll watch it from all over the world. And that's why brands, in that context, are important.

Q: So we won't be watching scheduled programmes?

00 59 32 **A:** No, I don't think it will go, but it's like when, you know, when cinema came along it radically changed television. Television is going to be radically changed by this, of course there'll be some scheduled programmes, if only *Masterchef*, you know it will go on. But it's not going to be the main way in which people get their knowledge of science, technology and medicine, that's for sure.