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/

File: **CC578413 - ARTHUR PHILLIPS**
Duration: **1:00:44**
Typist: **874**

START AUDIO

Interviewer: Arthur Phillips, you joined the BBC practically within weeks- well, within years of when it was founded.

0:00:08 What do you remember about those days? What about yourself?

Arthur Phillips: I remember April the 5th, 1929, when I went to Savoy Hill and was interviewed by Captain H.L. Chilman. He was called the House Superintendent and was responsible for all the uniform staff, the page boys, the cleaners, the lift men, and also did the studio bookings.

He engaged me almost on the spot and this was at 5:30 in the evening. And he said, “Can you report tomorrow,” on the Thursday, “Can report tomorrow at 5:30. Your hours will be from 5:30 until 10:30. Your wages will be one pound a week with half a crown for dress allowance,” which was for a blue suit, a black tie and black shoes.

And I duly started on the following evening at 5:30.

Interviewer: So really you were on night duty at that stage.

0:01:04 I believe Chilman in fact had a very, very fierce habit of lining up all the page boys to make sure that they were properly turned out?

Arthur Phillips: He was a great disciplinarian, but he was very fair and one had a great respect for him and he wanted people to be tidy, to be well-mannered and well-dressed.

And I learned an awful lot from him and I'm almost grateful for having worked for him, my first job as a tough little schoolboy straight out of school. Well for the first night I was there, one of the jobs was to bring the news bulletins down from the studios to do general office boy work, fetch and carry, get the announcer's supper from the canteen and rush up into the Strand and hail taxis for VIP's.

Well, within two hours on my first night, I'd been up into the strand and got a taxi for Josephine Baker and C.B. [Cochran 0:01:54] and the tips from that amounted to about a quarter of my week's wages. And I thought I'd really struck a crock of silver, if not a crock of gold on that night, but that didn't quite last because within the first 48 hours, I nearly got the sack twice.

The first occasion was when I accidentally put the lift out of action at 5:30, just as all the office staff were going home. And the following evening, I was asked to deliver a letter for- an urgent letter. Now, in those days, the corporation's solicitors was in- offices, rather, were in Old Burlington Street, which was just around the corner from New Burlington Street.

Now, I deliver the letter to the wrong address. Now, in my mind's eye, after all these years, I can still see the capital 'N' on that envelope. So I duly delivered it to New Burlington Street. The following morning, there was all sorts of inquests going on as to why the letter hadn't been delivered, you see.

Anyway, everything blew over and that was that. And I still remained on the payroll. Thirty years later at some rather grand doo in the city, I met the secretary who had sent me on this

errand. She was something rather grand in administration by this time. And I said, over a couple of gin and tonics, “Do you know, you nearly got me the sack on my first night in the corporation?”

And I told her the details you see. And she said, “Oh, I always used to get those two streets mixed up.”

0:03:26

Interviewer: (Laughter) Now tell me about the atmosphere in Savoy Hill. In fact, tell me about Savoy Hill altogether. I think Jack Payne who called it a chummy place.

Arthur Phillips: Oh, it was very, very chummy indeed. And particularly after 5:30, you see, I used to start work just as the office staff were going home and the whole atmosphere changed.

And of course in those days there were no recorded programmes. All the artists and speakers came to the studio live. And as a small boy, as a page boy- I was a page boy they called me in those days and I would have to accompany people to the studio. I can remember taking up Amy Johnson, Gracie Fields, CB Cochran, Edgar Wallace, take them up to the studios and generally fetch and carry for the artists and the atmosphere as Jack Payne said was very chummy.

After all, there weren't many people on the staff in those days, we all knew each other. And so on. My greatest moment, when I found John Snagge knew my name. Mind you, he only said, “Phillips, go and get my supper.” But at least that was something.

0:04:29

Interviewer: And, so of course, who were the personalities in Savoy Hill at that time?

Arthur Phillips: Well, of course, one remembers most is possibly Stuart Hibberd because he had the most marvellous tenor voice. And whenever he was on duty, he would go up the stairs from his room to the studio, singing at the top of his voice, with lovely bathroom effect from the lift shaft and so on.

And so he would call it loosening up the tonsils. And you always knew when he was going to be reading the news because you'd hear him singing up and down the staircase. The chief engineer was a great personality, P P Eckersley. He had been one of the leading lights in Writtle at the start of the whole thing.

He was then chief engineer and when showing- he was a great showman and had a great sense of humour. And when he was showing people around the control room, he would go up to control panel with lots of dials and knobs on it and he would flick a switch. Then he would turn to the people he was showing around and say, "I am the only man who can do that and that's the regional programme."

And they all looked very impressed. Not knowing he just switched off of a spare amplifier, but it looked very impressive.

[Break in audio 0:05:37]

0:05:39

Interviewer: It certainly looked very impressive of course, but what about Sir John Reith, a very formidable person?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, very formidable, indeed.

And very stamped his mark on the whole development of broadcasting as you may well know, but a lot has been written about him insisting that announcers should read the news in evening dress. This is true, they always did, but there was a very good reason for that. In those days, people used to dine out a loss and go to the theatre a lot in evening dress.

And if they came to broadcast, we dressed up for the occasion. So at 5:30, Colonel R H Brand who was called the host, and he was also a tennis commentator, and the two duty announcers for the evening, used to don black ties and they would greet the artist in the hall as they came to broadcast. They would take them into the green room, just adjacent, give them a drink and then conduct them up to the studios and the announcer would stay with them, having made the announcement and bring them down afterwards, back into the green room where he would hand them an envelope containing their fee which the night cashier had given to him just prior to the broadcast.

Then they would be ushered out. And that was part of their duties, dressing for reading the news was purely coincidental to that.

0:07:00

Interviewer: Arthur, what do you remember most about the days when you had almost immediately joined Savoy Hill?

Arthur Phillips: One of the landmarks of that year, which happened soon after I joined was when radio stayed on, 2LO stayed on the air all night in order to broadcast the election results and that night Sir John Reith, in evening dress and [Ajax Farrah 0:07:24] sat in studio three all night and read the results.

And my job was to bring the sheets of results down from the newsroom to the studio and give them to them on their table, in front of the microphone. I also ran to the Lyons' Cornerhouse, Strand Cornerhouse, to bring them supper boxes for about eight people who were engaged on this exercise.

Some many, many years later, as a producer on a similar exercise, doing a part of the job as one of a team of over a hundred people. And it was the development of how the elections were covered. On that particular evening, Eric Dunstan who was supposed to have been the duty announcer, got very angry because he wasn't allowed to do the job.

And I can remember a very angry scene taking place in the cubicle of the varieties studio because Sir John was going to read the results and Dunstan walked out never to darken the doors of Savoy Hill again.

0:08:27

Interviewer: Now, although you were on the evening shift when you joined, it wasn't terribly long before you moved to the day shift. I think, apart from anything else, your pay was a little different?

Arthur Phillips: (Laughter) Yes. The pay came down by five bob a week actually, but I was interested actually then in becoming an engineer and I asked to be transferred so that I could study electrical and radio engineering at the Polytechnic and, of course, on my way to and from Regent Street, I was able to see this great white ship growing out of the hole in Regent Street, was of course the birth of Broadcasting House and that of course became the centre of my life and workplace for the next 40 odd years or so.

But I didn't enjoy the day shift very much. I mean, the work was just office boy job, running errands and so on and so forth, setting up conference rooms and clearing up afterwards.

And once a week, visiting every office to pose the question, “Are you troubled with rats and mice?” I think the question frightened more secretaries than killed rats or mice, but there it was.

Interviewer: Do you know, I can just interrupt you there for a brief moment because many, many years later when I was on staff and I was standing in S2, right down in the basement with Alvar Lidell, at least Alvar wasn’t there, and he was just going to come in and read the news- No, it was Frank Phillips. I'm sorry.

Frank Phillips just going to read the news and the door slammed open and a voice said, “Any mice?” and went again, and that was many years later. So that's the tail end of that story.

Arthur Phillips: I think we were more polite to those days, but one of the things I did used to enjoy was to go to the 2LO transmitter which was on the roof of Selfridges to take the following day’s schedules up to the engineers. And this was something I really did enjoy. On a fine sunny morning, it took rather a long time.

0:10:16

Interviewer: So you didn't enjoy being what we might call an office waller and therefore you were looking for something rather more concerned with broadcasting?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, indeed, I was. But luckily enough about that time, the sound effects department was now being developed under D Hunter Monroe, and it was operated by Brian McKeon and

George Innes, later to become the television producer of ‘The Black and White Ministers’ of course. Now, I was given an opportunity of applying for the job and three of us were selected on a week’s trial each.

And by the toss of a coin, I was elected to bat first. Now, in those days, there was no dummy runs or trying things out, you were pitched into the thing straight away. And on my first day I was given a script. There was to be the transmission at 10:30 in the evening with our rehearsal at 2:30 in the afternoon. With the script, I was given a gramophone record, a tubular bell, a drum with some lead shot into it and two pieces of firewood and an elastic band.

Well I skimmed through the script and it looked fairly straightforward. There was the music, which was hula-hula music for the beginning and end of this Hawaiian drama. There was a tubular bell. That was all right. That was to note the passage of time. The lead shot in the drum was for the surf on the beach and then there was the two pieces of wood and the elastic band, which I found if I blew through them with some plastic sandwiched between the wood, it made a very passible imitation of a seagull.

In fact, it was the first BBC seagull long before the years of ‘Desert Island Discs’. Well the transmission, it went like a charm, all the cues came in alright. And there were no problems. And at the end of the programme, D H Monroe came out of the cubicle and said, “That was jolly good. You've got the job.” And I had. The other two fellows never got a look in at all. I hardly feel that would appeal to- the methods of promotion would appeal to the present day administrators or members of the staff association.

Interviewer: But of course, the production of effects was very primitive in those days?

Arthur Phillips: Oh yes, indeed. At that time there were hardly any recorded effects so that we had to use our own ingenuity to make them sound as realistic as possible. There were, of course the coconut shells for horses' hooves, and so on and the thunder sheet. The train, for example, was made by running a roller skate up and down the rivets of a large zinc bath.

And I recall a programme lasting 45 minutes, the action all of which took place on a train. And although three of us took it in turns to drive the train, we were all very glad when it eventually reached the Terminus.

Well, the effects unit was called upon to improvise all sorts of effects for the drama productions of [___ 0:13:13] [Lance Sevey] and so on. And also for the comic effects for John Sharman's variety programmes had people like Leonard Henry and Tommy Handley and [The Halberts] and so on.

It was a very interesting and enjoyable job. The hours were long, probably 12 hour days, very, very often, but it really was quite exciting.

0:13:37

Interviewer: Were there any particular occasions, you can remember, when anything went violently wrong or went extraordinarily well?

Arthur Phillips: Oh yes. Well, it had its hilarious moments.

One of the things in the effects studio, was an enormous wooden bath and the drain plug didn't fit very well. And one evening, and I recall the plug came out in the middle of the

transmission, and the drain under the tank couldn't take the rush of water and that the whole studio was flooded and we all had to take our shoes and socks off and roll our trousers up.

And this was a sea drama. In fact, we all rather looked like shipwrecked sailors by the time we'd finished. The other occasion was we always had a barrel organ in the studio. It was used quite a lot in those days for street scenes and fairgrounds and so on and we all wore headphones on long leads.

And on one occasion, Brian Mickey was winding the barrel organ and going merrily on and he didn't notice his lead had got caught up in the handle and he was getting slowly drawn closer and closer to the glass panel in front of the organ.

And with great presence of mind, George Innes seized a sword, which was going to be used for a scene later on and slice through the effect- sliced through the flex and saved the situation. (Laughter)

0:14:51

Interviewer: Because of course, Brian Mickey was slightly large to put it mildly?

Arthur Phillips: He was an enormous man. Yes, he was great fun and ran the department very well and full of humour and worked there.

I mean, he would be it, all with the horses hooves and the gravel box and so on and so forth.

0:15:05

Interviewer: What about the move to Broadcasting House from Savoy Hill?

Arthur Phillips: Well, that, as far as we were concerned was a great red letter day. I mean, from the cramped, rather scruffy quarters of the basements of Savoy Hill, we came to this magnificent two-tier studio on the sixth floor Broadcasting House, and it had everything.

It had electric motors, it had enormous thunder sheet. It had pulleys and chains and an enormous table, which revolved around them, which there were six different surfaces for various types of horses' hoofs and it had an enormous bath and this one didn't flood. And it had absolutely everything you can think of; different surfaces on the floor and at the far end there was another little studio, a big studio rather behind a curved glass panel in which there were six gramophone turntables, which we were able to use for incidental music in dramas.

And some of the recorded effects, recorded commercially, which were now coming on the market, so we were moving ahead very well.

0:16:06

Interviewer: Broadcasting House was absolutely a new venture, of course, it was absolutely a battleship off the top of Regent Street. How did people take to it? Do you think that everybody thought it was a good idea or was there a nostalgic look back to Savoy Hill?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, I think there was a certain nostalgia for Savoy Hill, but everything was so new and sparkling clean and white and fresh, and the studios were big and airy. The equipment was new and it all worked. I think we very soon forgot about Savoy Hill and decided that we'd enjoy ourselves in the new surroundings.

0:16:46

Interviewer: So now firmly settled in Broadcasting House, your next move to a different department wasn't very far away, I think?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, that's true. Well, sort of, having developed a certain expertise in the handling of gramophone turntables in the effects studio, I was transferred to what was then called recorded programmes executive, headed by H Linton Fletcher.

Now, at this time before the acetate metal based disc records were introduced any recordings were made on the Blattner phone system. These were recordings made on magnetised steel tape. In fact, it was the forerunner of the now very portable [MidgetTore 0:17:26] tape recorder. But it was impossible to do any editing.

If the tape broke, it had to be spot welded, which was a long and cumbersome job. But it was very, very useful for recording plays, full length. Or for letting artists hear what their performance was like. And it enabled us to build up the- to start the archives library, but everything had to be copied from the tapes to the gramophone companies and transferred onto wax.

And then they made shellacked recordings, which are breakable, of course. And that was the start of the BBC recorded programmes library as such.

0:18:09

Interviewer: And of course it had one other advantage and that was that you could, with the Empire service inaction and also the requirement to perhaps use inserts into the news, It was now possible?

Arthur Phillips: That it is true but it was very cumbersome and took some time. There wasn't a quick turnaround of this stuff at all. So it was a

great day when the corporation started to record its own- make its own records on acetate discs, because these could be processed much more easily than the wax recordings.

And it was very much cheaper. I, myself, was involved in the selection of some of the material kept, which went into archives. There were a lot of speeches by Bernard Shaw or Winston Churchill and so on. And I remember spending a great deal of time editing and transferring down the line to the gramophone company, extracts of the new and very controversial opera by Alban Berg, 'Wozzeck'.

We also selected items from big sporting events, the Derby, Grand National, Cup finals, and so on and put those onto the tape and then transfer them to disc. And it wasn't until many, many, many years later, as a producer wanting to use the material, I realised how inadequate for my selection had been in those days.

But we were rather confined by the cost of the exercise and storage space at that time. However, with acetate discs this all came much easier.

0:19:37

Interviewer: And of course, this brought you to editing in various forms, including the famous or infamous jump cutting?

Arthur Phillips: Yes. When we were playing discs in those days, we had no device for parallel tracking which came later and we'd have to mark the disc with a yellow pencil and then lift the needle and jump it across the gap and plonk it down, hoping it came down on the right word or the right note of music and so on and so forth. And it very often did.

0:20:08

Interviewer: But I think nevertheless, there was one particular and historic piece of editing that you did at the time of one of the proclamations?

Arthur Phillips: Oh yes. This was the proclamation and the accession of Edward VIII at St James's Palace. When the garter king had got himself into a fair, old tango. What he should have said was “Rightful, Liege Lord.” And he said, “Our right Liegeful Lord- re- ra- Lord.” And by taking it apart, word by word, and on two discs one was able to get it right, but it took quite a long time.

0:20:48

Interviewer: Arthur, what about the type of equipment you used in those days?

Arthur Phillips: Well, it had all been pretty primitive as far as the gramophone programmes were concerned with the arm pivoted from the right hand corner and the radially across the diss. There was then developed a device called the TD7. Now this was a two turntable gramophone bank on which each pickup was attached to a cam-operated bar and travelled across the disc parallel to its surface and was operated by pulling a small lever so you could drop the needle precisely on any given groove which was shown up by a graduated scale or a chalk mark put on the disc itself.

And this together with the pre-fade facility on headphones made editing a very simple matter and greatly facilitated the production of some of the most elaborate recorded feature programmes, which were produced by Laurence Gilliam in the features department about this time.

0:21:46

Interviewer: Lyndon Fletcher, of course, is a name very much concerned in this period?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, indeed. Well, he had been an engineer in schools department until he changed horses and became a programme department administrator. He was an energetic man and full of ideas, many of which became part of corporation history. He laid the foundations of the current and permanent record libraries and was instrumental in developing this new technique of using recordings in actuality programmes of one form or another.

0:22:18

Interviewer: So now you were getting towards the stage where you needed to get out of the studio, out of the buildings in to the open air?

Arthur Phillips: Well, of course the natural follow-up to the static recordings in the studios was the demand for something far more portable, something which could be used outside the studio, could supplement outside broadcast and be mobile enough to move at short notice to any given venue and record on site.

And this was a great development and the answer was the design and provision of a two turntable recorder installed in a [Thirty hundred white van 0:22:51], its fleet number was M53 and frequently known affectionately as the laundry van. Now the first use of this vehicle was made by Laurence Gilliam for two feature programmes, one called ‘Gale Warning’, and the other ‘Dinner is Served’. ‘Gale Warning’, followed the activities of the utility services having received a forecast of high winds and a big drop in temperature.

And as a programme assistant, working on these programmes with two engineers, we turned out with the fire brigade from Lambeth fire station, visited the newly opened Battersea power station and spent a day among the blazing furnaces and huge gas holders of Becton gasworks.

And we also listened to the warnings sent out by the coast guards. Now, the second programme was how our food reaches the table. And for this, we visited the London food markets. We saw how the trawlers had sailed up the Thames straight from the fishing grounds and unloaded their catches right onto the quayside of Billingsgate. Nights were spent at Covent Garden and we had a day with a herring fleet out of Yarmouth with all the girls on the quayside, gutting the herrings they came to shore.

And now it plan that this new facility, now the commander producers would open up an entirely new field of radio production. And the mobile recordings went, sort of, hand in hand with the introduction of the TD7s, which I've already talked about. And were now installed in all studios in banks of six turntables.

Now Laurence Gilliam, that great innovator, was the first producer to exploit these facilities. And for his ‘Dinner is Served’ programmes, I found myself playing 98 recorded extracts of interviews and effects in a 30 minute programme. In those days, everything went out live. There was no room for errors.

0:24:37

Interviewer: Do I not know? Of course you were talking earlier on about being an effects boy, but now effects were not so much conceived and constructed as actually recorded onsite, I think?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, yes. Now, with the recording van, we were able to go out and record real sounds. And this became part of my job for some time. And with the corporation, the railway companies, we decided to embark upon a comprehensive collection of railway noises.

0:25:08

Interviewer: I would have thought that probably produced some rather interesting locations?

Arthur Phillips: Well, it was enormous fun. On one occasion, a guard's van was put at our disposal attached to a long distance express. We put microphones on the foot plate, on the outside of the locomotive and to recall the most difficult sound of all, the beat of the wheels over the rails, we found the best results were obtained from a microphone down the lavatory pan.

You can imagine the other passengers going to and fro up and down the corridor and found a couple of chaps dangling a wire down through the toilet. It was hilarious.

0:25:41

Interviewer: But of course you were now traveling and to cut down on the amount of actual travelling, I suppose, vans were spread throughout the country were they?

Arthur Phillips: Yes. Well, very soon M53 was joined by two much larger recording vans. These were huge, think it was a Green Lyon bus and each designed and purpose built from the chassis upwards, and one was stationed in Manchester and the other in Bristol and up until the outbreak of war, I suppose it was, these three vehicles travelled throughout the length and breadth of the

country, collecting material, not only for current use, but for the permanent library as well.

And many an old custom is preserved for posterity in recorded form, as a result of this. And in fact, form the foundation, I suppose, of the archives.

0:26:28

Interviewer: But of course there were other ways, Arthur, in which mobile recording was going to be used and the field was being opened up?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, yes, indeed. Well, this was for news coverage.

Now in September, 1936, a new and very colourful personality joined the staff of news departments. Richard Dimbleby, a journalist on his family newspaper wrote to John Copeman, the news editor suggesting that there should be a much wider coverage of news in the bulletins and that a team of reporters should be recruited.

And, of course, he offered his services for this job, in order to cover – and his letter said – 'in event of a big fire, civil commotion, railway or pit accident; reporters could be sent out to cover the event'.

In fact, little, did he think at that time that he would be the first one to cover the most spectacular fire at Crystal Palace. Anyway, his letter bore fruit and he was soon to join the newsroom staff together with Gardner. He became one of the first two news reporters.

Now big news stories in those days, unlike the present day, seemed to be few and far between. There were no terrorists and that, sort of, thing. And I was sent to look after him on his first

reporting assignment. Cherry, a champion cow had broken all milking records on a farm near Amesbury, and we went off to cover this world shattering story, arriving after dark in our large van, we set up the microphone in the cow shed by the light of a hurricane lamp.

And this was the scene for Richard's first radio interview with Cherry breathing steamily over his shoulder and interjecting the occasional ‘moo’, he talked to the farmer with. However, with a satisfactory interview safely on the disc his trouble were not really over.

This item was wanted for the 10 o'clock news. So it had to be transmitted from the Bournemouth Studio, which then was a primitive lash up in two rooms over a cycle shop. Now just before transmission, the only gramophone packed up. It was one of those with a dog on the front and an acoustic one at that, which meant that standing the microphone in front of the horn; the quality was terrible.

The real problem, however, was that the turntable would not revolve. So when we were cued in from London, I did manage to turn the disc with my fingers, for the duration of the interview and all was well. Now, throughout all this, Dimbleby seemed quite unmoved but he later confessed to me, “I was in despair and I thought if my first ever broadcasting has been a failure, I would lose my nerve and never be able to broadcast again,” and would a loss that would have been.

Richard was diligent in his search for suitable stories to be covered by this new style of reporting. And in March ’37, I think it was, his big opportunity came, following a period of heavy rain. There was serious flooding in the Fen district. And as a team, we quickly set up headquarters in Ely. We were able to send daily recorded reports to London, usually by handing them to the guard of the afternoon train.

These reports by Richard were so factually accurate that they were welcomed by the staff of the catchment board, as they gave information to workers as danger points in remote areas. And later when the floods were debated in the House of Commons, these reports were actually quoted as an authoritative source.

Now, by this time, David Howarth had joined Linton Fletcher as his assistant and together with Gardner and Dimbleby and myself, we spent many hours devising more ambitious schemes to develop actuality news coverage. And this coincided with the introduction of the first recording car, which made the operation far more flexible.

0:30:17

Interviewer: That was a Chrysler, I think, yes?

Arthur Phillips: It was a big Chrysler. Yes. And it meant that we could dispense with a uniform driver, we only needed one engineer. So the whole thing was far more flexible. Charles Gardner specialised, mainly in [air 0:30:30] stories and much time was spent in Croydon, Heston and other aerodromes seeing off departing or returning record breaking flyers, but coverage was not confined by then to this country.

And I went with Dimbleby to the rededication of [___ 0:30:47] and Reims Cathedral.

0:30:50

Interviewer: So really this was a new field, features and Laurence Gilliam?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, it was indeed. But of course, by now recording, it mad a very large contribution to all the corporation's output. And many

of them were very ambitious and of course, Laurence's Christmas Day programme was one of these and he used to mastermind that every year.

Now, this was basically a live programme because the short wave radio links from distant parts were far from reliable. Overseas items were recorded on site as a standby and the discs flown to London. When the programme was broadcast on Christmas Day, it was hoped that every relay would come up live, but just in case of a circuit failure, a disc operator – and I was one of them – would shadow the relay line by line on the standby discs.

Now, another occasion and for a different reason when this procedure was adopted, it was on the evening of George VI's coronation. Now because of his speech impediment, it was felt that after a long and emotional day, he might not feel able to deliver his speech live. He was therefore recorded some days beforehand, carefully edited, and to be used as a standby. In the evening, it was my job, my studio in Broadcasting House to either play or shadow the speech.

I was in direct communication with the control room at Buckingham Palace where Sir John Reith was with the king and would make the decision as to what should be done. Just before eight o'clock, I was told that the king would make the broadcast live, but to stand by just in case. In the end, the speech was delivered faultlessly, much to the relief of everyone.

0:32:30

Interviewer: I think we ought make it quite clear that on the Christmas Day programme, there were new radio telephone circuits as such. I mean, yes, they were radio telephone circuits, but they were not telephone circuits as we know them to this day. They were air circuits?

Arthur Phillips: They were short-wave, they'd be short-wave circuits and they could fade. And as the case may be, the timescale over the world was such that in some areas it was- the circuits were good and others, they weren't. And it was just the luck of the draw on the day whether they'd all come up or not. Hence the standby recordings.

0:33:03

Interviewer: Of course, you were covering practically every form of news event in those days? You particularly. And there must've been a great many of very different natures?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, yes, indeed. There were. From comic events to serious events and some rather tragic. In 1939, for example, Charles Gardner, Leonard Lewis, the engineer and myself we were sent to cover the Thetis disaster in Liverpool Bay. We'd been recording the Duke of Gloucester, presenting some new colours to a regiment, somewhere in the Midlands. But on checking with the newsroom before knocking off at about 10 o'clock in the evening, we were told to go at once to Liverpool where it was thought that there had been a serious accident to a new submarine out on acceptance trials.

We drove through the night arriving at the dock side in the small hours, just in time to join a tug that the press had hired to take them out to the spot where it was now known the submarine had sunk. After about three hours or so, steaming and as dawn was breaking, we could just see the stern of the Thetis sticking up right out of the water.

We arrived at the same time as destroyer, which set off small explosives to indicate to the submarine crew that, I suppose,

help was at hand. And in fact, within a few minutes, three of them wearing escape apparatus came to the surface. Now we all thought that we were about to witness a sensational rescue and our tug even might be called upon to pick up some of the survivors.

Alas, this was not to be, there were no further escapes. And after some hours, the stern slid beneath the waves, taking with it some 98 crew and builders' technicians. It was a sad and frustrating event for everyone to be so near and yet so helpless.

0:34:49

Interviewer: Do you think, in fact, that despite the fact it was a sad occasion that there was a justification for taking this, sort of, harrowing event to the public?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, yes, I think so. The answer is, it was news and sensational news at that time.

0:35:07

Interviewer: And you would still reckon that dictum would go today?

Arthur Phillips: We've been doing it ever since, even more so.

Interviewer: That's an interesting picture.

[Break in audio]

0:35:15 Is that Blackpool?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, it's Blackpool. We happened to be in Blackpool on some story or another and looking out of our bedroom window, we saw clouds of smoke coming up from the sea and looking out, we realised the pier was well and truly on fire. So having, sort of, got the idea of news coverage and so on and so forth from Richard and I knew he was in London, I rang him up and said "The North pier's on fire."

He said, "Get to Manchester, get to Manchester, we'll have you on the air live." But how to get to Manchester? I had my own car, but I couldn't drive there in time to get into the news. So to the airport, I went, and chartered an airplane. Me chartering an airplane. This was the Dimbleby influence, of course, but alas, it took so long to do the paperwork and I realised that it would be no good because by the time I got to the studio, the whole thing would have been- the news would have been over. Alas, I had to go back to my hotel as an RPA and not become a news broadcaster.

0:36:08

Interviewer: So, Arthur, what happened to you after that?

Arthur Phillips: Well, later that year, clouds of war gathering, there were still two firsts in overseas news reporting. The first was when Dimbleby went to America and Canada for the King and Queen on their first Royal visit to north America. And at the same time and also travelling westwards, I joined Charles Gardner and his team on the maiden voyage of the new Mauretania.

Now this really was a trip. I mean, she was the success of the famous ship of the same name. Sister ship to the ill-fated Lusitania. And with our recording gear installed on a specially built trolley, we were able to broadcast nightly descriptions of the

day's events and the tumultuous welcome the ship received on her arrival in New York.

And that really was peacetime. Arriving back in England, we found that how to cover the war from a radio point of view was uppermost in many people's minds. And by the end of the year, Dimbleby, Gardner, Howarth, myself and some of the engineers we found ourselves in uniform as war correspondents on route for France.

My point of view, it was the end of my first tenure with the corporation, 10 interesting and exciting years, and the next 10 were to be even more so.

0:37:24

Interviewer: Yes, I think so. You of course, went to the BEF in [Arris 0:37:29], I think I remember rightly?

Arthur Phillips: No, no, Gardner and I went to Reims, Dimbleby and Howarth Harvey [Sawhney 0:37:36] went to Arris.

And there we stayed until chased out just prior to Dunkirk some months later.

0:37:45

Interviewer: Of course, technically, things had really moved forward, virtually because of the war hadn't they? I mean, the recording vans had become recording cars and all the development that went with that and the development of the recording era as well?

Arthur Phillips: And then subsequently they developed this little thing, like, a portable gramophone, which was very portable and it had a disc on the front and you wound it up; very much like an old hand

gramophone, but it was a recording machine. And that was used by the reporters in the early days of the war.

In fact, they all landed on D-Day with them and one went to Arnhem and so on. This, alas, was long before the days of tape recording.

Interviewer: Yes, indeed. Tape would have been much easier.

0:38:29 Now you yourself came back from France and RPD had been somewhat reformed in the late thirties, so that you were in a very different position? You were in charge of mobile cars, I think?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, I did all the booking for mobile recording, but at the same time went as a programme assistant on the job so that we covered the Blitz, Robin Duff and Charles Gardner, so we were off with the fire brigade. We covered the Blitz on London, Blitz on Coventry, visiting airfields when bombers were taking off for Berlin and so on and so forth; all with the recording cars.

0:39:10

Interviewer: And you also, I think, went down to Dover and had a bit of a hairy time down there at one point?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, the Dover trips. We used to go there quite often. And on one occasion, we went down and we installed ourselves on the cliffs of Dover, just as a convoy was coming around the top, around the cliffs, and in no time, was a fair old battle. The Luftwaffe came over and bombed the convoy like mad. There were aerial fights all overhead. Charles Gardner was the commentator and did the, the sort of- Well, now, commentary on the bombing of

the convoy in Dover which a lot of people thought was in very poor taste.

It sounded like a sporting event, which it wasn't, but that was the first live actuality of the war happening, if you can understand what I mean.

0:39:53

Interviewer: That was where the war was really beginning to [dig in its heels 0:39:54]?

Arthur Phillips: We so happened to be there too, on the day of the first shell landed in the middle of the harbour in Dover, we were looking out to sea just after breakfast and there was a mighty great splash right in the centre of the harbour.

And there were no aircraft about, and we realised that we were being shelled. And that was the first time that enemy shells had landed on this country. (Laughter)

0:40:15

Interviewer: Now, you were in 1941 sent to Cairo to represent the recording side of things over there and take control of it, I think?

Arthur Phillips: Yes. I went as a programme assistant with the team mainly to be the link between the correspondents up in the desert and London and would handle their discs and the dispatches coming in from the desert.

See it through the considerable censorship in Cairo, take it to ESB, that was Egyptian State Broadcasting, where we would have circuits to London daily. And I would, having seen the stuff through the censorship, pass it up the line to London for

subsequent broadcasting. And I was there, I suppose, for two years or more doing that, sort of, job and occasional trips up into the desert where originally I was working with Richard, Richard Dimbleby, when he went home, Godfrey Talbot, Frank Gillard, Denis Johnston came out and we all moved on.

They went off, followed the Eighth Army to Tripoli and beyond, and I stayed in Cairo until I was almost out of reach. And then I joined them subsequently in Naples and Rome.

0:41:27

Interviewer: But it must've been quite an important outpost? I mean, it was not only for reporting the war, but also for getting, sort of, message programmes- so message programmes played a very important part in the war?

Arthur Phillips: Well, yes, we did a lot of message programmes with Hadden, Major Hadden who was doing message programmes for the Forces, but also an awful lot was done for the Arabic Service. We were asked to record Koran readings, recordings of oriental and Egyptian music. And we spent a lot of our time organising that sort of cultural stuff for the Arabic Service and then flying the discs back home.

0:42:10

Interviewer: Did the corporation regard you as the chap who was running Cairo or were there other people who were in charge of the whole station or what?

Arthur Phillips: No, they decided it was becoming rather an important area and they sent a head of whatever they called him and an assistant as civilians to run the office. Whereas we were war

correspondents, although we weren't actually correspondents, we were in uniform, whereas [Perry Thorn Hughes 0:42:39] and his boss came out purely as civilians to look after the wider issues of the corporation's image in the Middle East.

0:42:53

Interviewer: But in the meantime, of course, the development of recording equipment must have been of fair import to the correspondents who were up at the front in the desert? I mean, were they just ordinary recording trucks still?

Arthur Phillips: They were enormous [___ 0:43:07] weight trucks with very elaborate disc recording on board, which had to be shielded from the sand and goodness knows what else. There was nothing easy about it.

They were trundled around by an army driver, an engineer and Godfrey. Godfrey Talbot or Richard or whoever would travel in an army car and join them at various locations. And then the disc was sent back by dispatch rider to the studios in Cairo where I would carry on from there.

0:43:39

Interviewer: Was there a great deal of censorship carried out in Cairo before things ever left?

Arthur Phillips: Well, there were three or possibly four, depending on what the subject was, but it always had to go after the military censorship, Army, Air Force and Naval through the civilian censorship, in case we said anything rude about Egypt.

So you had four lots of censorship to go through before you could get the stuff on the air.

0:44:00

Interviewer: Now this brings me to a point, of course, you said in case we said anything rude about Egypt; was that a very touchy area?

Arthur Phillips: It was a bit, yes. Yes, it was a bit. And King Farouk wasn't very popular and the British weren't very popular And as the Germans got nearer and nearer to Alamein, the conditions got rather dodgy and, in fact, even war correspondents were allowed to go about armed which tells you that they didn't like the situation.

Yes, things were very touchy, indeed.

0:44:32

Interviewer: And how about your contact with the UK? I mean, yes, circuit wise, you could talk, but in practical terms for administrative purposes, were you sufficiently in touch with what was going on in Broadcasting House and so forth and so on?

Arthur Phillips: Not really. We had to rely on cables. The circuit we had from ESB Daily was a radio telephone circuit, but I, as a BBC official was not allowed to talk direct to London. It had to be through the ESB licensed man to talk live on the air. So though I could sit in the studio and hear my friends, even my wife in London, I couldn't utter a word to talk to them at all.

0:45:13

Interviewer: It was all second hand?

Arthur Phillips: Was all second hand. Yes.

0:45:16

Interviewer: Must have been very frustrating?

Arthur Phillips: It was very frustrating, indeed. All the things you wanted to say you couldn't say, unless you wrote it down and gave it to this chap and he passed it on to London.

0:45:25

Interviewer: So you were using ESB equipment and studios?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, indeed. Oh, yes. Yes.

0:45:31

Interviewer: Were they co-operative?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, very cooperative as much as they were allowed to be. And it was all run by British personnel, but the Egyptian Government laid down the rules, by which they had to abide.

0:45:43

Interviewer: In all the time you were in Caro, any particular stories or anything that you can remember about it, which crosses your mind?

Arthur Phillips: I suppose one of them is being at the sharp end for the runs of the Christmas Day programme. And I think I've indicated that the standby recordings had to be made before the day, and about November, we had a signal from Laurence Gilliam asking if we could record the choir and congregation of Cairo Cathedral,

singing ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’. And could we also provide some ideas for the end of the Christmas Day programme that year which was when the Eighth Army were way up beyond Tripoli and on their way out of north Africa altogether. And this was to be a rather celebratory programme as far as the Middle East was concerned, but could we have some standby?

So I arranged for the Dean of the cathedral to have a special service and we recorded ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ and duly sent it off. Only to get a cable from Laurence the following week saying, ‘please, could we re-record in E flat because that was the key in which the orchestra were going to play it on the day?’

So we had another service in Cairo Cathedral, and we duly recorded ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ in E-flat and sent that back. Well, the other idea we had was that we knew there was going to be a great gathering on the banks of the Nile on Christmas Day with all the allied forces representatives and all the allied forces; New Zealand's, Australia's and so on and so forth, have a great Christmas dinner with the Cairo Aero Military Band playing and so on.

And we thought this might be a suitable place for a piece on Christmas Day. But how were we to get, sort of, suitable pre-recordings? We did our best by getting some chaps together and recording some pieces, which we duly sent off to London. On the morning we had a long cable saying ‘this wouldn't do, would we please do this, that and the other and change this and change that and add some Americans’ because the Americans were largely in it now. It was difficult to do, but we recorded some standbys and these were still being sent to London when the programme had already started.

Well, my colleague went- who was producing the barracks piece with Denis Johnston, they arrived and the place was in chaos. The band were half drunk. There were bottles flying around, there was noise and shouting, and they quickly disappeared behind a marquee so they could do this in comparative quiet. And that was all right. Now, the scene in Cairo Cathedral was that we put loud speakers in so as they could hear the king following the- at the end of the broadcast, and there was a special service of course, on the day and the engineer outside had set it all up and he heard, ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ coming out of his loudspeaker on the feedback from London and on taking his headphones off, found there was complete silence in the cathedral.

What had happened was they'd run out of time in London and they decided to put the record on and not go live to Cairo at all. So the first thing that people heard in the cathedral was the voice of King George and they hadn't sung a note. So I had to go back on the Monday and apologise to the Dean who had to apologise in the sermon next Sunday, for the fact they weren't broadcast.

0:49:08

Interviewer: One of the important things in which you were very, very much involved, and I’ve only got to look around here to see on the wall something that should tell me how deeply you were involved, and that was the Apollo missions. Now this was very much your organisation and the flair which you have and had for organising?

Arthur Phillips: Yes, I came into that at the- From about Apollo 9, I think it was. Apollo 9 to 17. I ran the studio coverage of all those. And that was fascinating. We had circuits all the way to NASA, all the

time and we listened almost to every word that was said between the astronauts and NASA throughout the length of the missions.

And this was a very fascinating experience to hear everything that was going on. And then we used to broadcast round the clock as necessary with all the effects and the sounds and the astronauts' voices interspersed with experts in the studio. Arthur [Garrison 0:50:18] and people like that. And ___ Apollo 13 when there was that disaster with the explosion, and we listened to every word for 85 hours without leaving the studio, almost, covering every moment of it.

And this was a great experience and the thrill of it, when they eventually landed. And I remember sitting in that studio for an hour and a half afterwards, winding down and couldn't leave. I was still reliving the last 80 hours or so; the excitement and the anxiety of what was going on.

And that was a great experience. And similarly we covered all the other- the first shuttle and the link up with the Russians. And this was a great technical achievement to be able to hear, round the clock what was going on 250 odd miles away- 1,000 miles away.

0:51:22

Interviewer: It must've been totally exhausting for you both physically and mentally, I think?

Arthur Phillips: Well, it was long hours, but the excitement was there and we were, all the time, deciding how we were going to put the next package together and getting together the most important facts and exciting facts. I mean, the first actual walk on the moon, Armstrong's arrival on the moon and what they were finding.

“And here's a bit of this and here's a bit of that.” And the moving around and playing a golf shot, all these little snippets, we would take out of the tape and put together for the next package on the air.

And we would go into- all the networks were round the clock with these, sort of, items.

0:52:10

Interviewer: But it did need all your expertise to get these things edited in time? The demand was heavy?

Arthur Phillips: Well, the demand was very heavy. We had a big and splendid team of operators. The studio managers were there, all of whom were extremely expert in their own particular sphere and the tape editors.

And it was wonderful teamwork. It really was.

0:52:31

Interviewer: Now, one of the other things I know that you’re particularly proud of having been involved with and which must have now run for well over 1,000 editions, or a great many more than 1,000 is, ‘Down Your Way’. Tell me how it started and why it started, and really what you can remember about it.

Arthur Phillips: Well, this goes back to the very early days- Well, it’s before Dimbleby. Although he was on the staff at that time, Light Programme decided they would do- I don’t know who thought of this, actually. I think- yes I do. It was Leslie [Parone 0:53:05]. He thought of an idea to talk to people and find out about them and then ask them what, sort of, music they would like.

And the first person to do this was, was Stuart McPherson. And the first ‘Down Your Way’, I think, was in Billingsgate or somewhere in London. I think he did seven or eight programmes, found it was a bit taxing and didn't want to go on. So Lionel Gamblin was given a trial. He lasted about a month. He found it rather too much for him.

And then John [Schuster 0:53:39] and I, we worked in the same department and Brian George, who was head of recorded programmes, we discussed this and said, “What about this fellow, Dimbleby? I’m sure he would come back from overseas. Perhaps he would like to do it.” And Richard was approached and thought it was something he'd like to do.

And he set off and did it. And I recall he did about 300 programmes and only missed 2. And that was when he had chicken pox. For those two programmes. Winford Vaughan-Thomas deputised for him. And that was quite a record, 300 programmes with only two weeks missing.

0:54:18

Interviewer: And then of course Franklin Engelmann followed on?

Arthur Phillips: After Richard had died. After- yes. Engelmann picked it up and he did far more programmes than Richard. And then when he died, after a few weeks, Brian Johnston picked it up and he's gone on for 15 years, I think, doing it. And his programme still lives.

0:54:43

Interviewer: Do you think when it all started and you got involved and it was being discussed you could ever have seen that it would have gone on as long as this?

Arthur Phillips: No, one didn't, but looking at it now it's a programme that doesn't- it can't die. It just goes on. The formula is such that people are always interested in people, there are always different sorts of music. And it's a natural vehicle for a very entertaining programme.

And providing the interviewer's interested and can talk to people, it can go on forever.

0:55:16

Interviewer: Is there any particular occasion you can remember in your period with 'Down Your Way' which sticks out in your memory?

Arthur Phillips: Well, people were always very hospitable. I'm talking now, very soon after the war, when food wasn't very plentiful and they always wanted to entertain you and you would always… whatever time of day, they always wanted to either give you a cup of tea or a sandwich or something.

And I recall in Aberdeen, in the middle of the afternoon, we went to a little fisherman's cottage, somewhere in the harbour and we'd recorded and then they said- we'd been to the hotel earlier. And the headwaiter said, "You're coming for dinner tonight, aren't you?" We said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I'll lay you on a very nice steak dinner."

In those days that was quite something. So we said, "Thank you very much." On getting back to this fisherman's cottage, after we'd recorded the interview, the housewife said, "Well, of course you will stay and have some tea, won't you?" And Richard said, "Oh, I don't think-" And at that moment I looked through the crack in the door and there was a table laden with all sorts of food, you see. And I kicked him smartly in the shins and said,

“No, I think- Yes, yes, I think we'd like that, Richard. We haven't got anything else to do this evening.” He looked daggers at me until I pushed him around the corner and he saw what it was all about and he realised what I'd done. (Laughter) These people would have been mortally upset had we, sort of, just walked out, leaving that spread behind us.

0:56:42

Interviewer: There must always in these cases, be some risk of mortally offending someone who's given their little all and you’re totally unaware of it?

Arthur Phillips: You see, that's Richard all over. He would never go away offending anybody. And he was so grateful afterwards for catching him in time before we'd gone out, he would never, never go away leaving someone saying, “Oh, what a miserable lot the BBC were,” or, “What a nasty man,” or, “How unkind or rude.”

He would always make sure he went away leaving a good impression.

0:57:11

Interviewer: Give me your assessment of Richard, just quite briefly and quite freely. I mean, we all know what a wonderful chap he was, but what do you think of him?

Arthur Phillips: Well, that is quite a question. Indefatigable energy, a marvellous companion, most entertaining. He was a good musician. He was a good storyteller. He was a good listener. He was a jolly good companion. And what more can one say?

0:57:40

Interviewer: Now looking back over one or two of the people whom we have discussed one way or another over these hours, tell me about Linton Fletcher? He was a clever man, I think?

Arthur Phillips: Oh yes. Linton had been an engineer. A good engineer. He'd worked for schools department. He crossed the Rubicon, as they would say, between the engineering division and the programme division, became head of recorded programmes and was bursting with ideas.

He would always be thinking up new ideas for our technical improvements, the reproduction of recordings were concerned, developing new techniques for using recordings. He developed or thought up the ways of developing the recorded programmes, both current library and permanent libraries.

And I think he made a great impact on the development of broadcasting in those days.

0:58:40

Interviewer: And of course, very much involved in the foundation of sound archives?

Arthur Phillips: Oh, yes. Yes. At the same time, the two things ran parallel for the time being, you know, the current stuff and then it was assessed and kept for possible posterity, processed and went into the archive library.

Whereas the current library, I think just ticked over after every so many weeks and the records were destroyed.

0:59:09

Interviewer: I would have thought, perhaps, it wouldn't be unfair to say that Linton Fletcher was somewhat of an eccentric?

Arthur Phillips: The engineering division thought so, most certainly. Well, I wouldn't say eccentric, but dedicated to improving broadcasting as such.

Interviewer: I think he saw recording as an extension on its own. It wasn't anything which had been conceived in any way before and from all I can read and all I can hear that he regarded it as an entirely new area for the development and [extent in broadcasting 0:59:49].

Arthur Phillips: Oh, that is so, and he did whatever he could to further that idea in which it’s exceeded to an enormous extent.

I mean, some of his ideas and adventures didn't quite work out, but the idea was right.

1:00:05

Interviewer: His inventions, such as what?

Arthur Phillips: Well, the idea was that the pickup could be remotely controlled from the panel. And he built a device to further this, but by and large, it didn't work. It was far better for the chap to pull the lever and make sure of it rather than it having to be done by remote control.

But that's only just one small thing that didn't quite work out. Many of the other things he wished to do to further, were really successful.

1:00:34

Interviewer: Arthur, in a word, is there anything you regret about all those years you were with the BBC?

Arthur Phillips: No, not a bit, except it might've gone on a bit longer.

END AUDIO