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BBC'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEW BIDDY BAXTER

28 MAY 2010

Q: Give me your name and the title you had at the BBC.

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A: My name is Biddy Baxter, and I was editor of *Blue Peter* for something, I think it was 26 years, a very long time. I'm like a sort of dinosaur.

Q: When you first came to Television Centre, what was your first experience of the building?

A: I joined television from the radio, one of the marvellous things about the BBC is that it is extremely democratic, and all the jobs and the attachments, the training attachments, go up on the notice board. And I joined as a studio manager in radio, making all the sound effects, ringing telephone bells and what have you. And then I got a job as a producer in schools' radio, doing programmes for the under-eights, and also *Listen With Mother* and *Listen On Saturday*. And I just had the feeling all that time that, really, for the audience I was interested in, which was children, how much pictures were needed. So I was very keen to go to television, and I had an attachment which I thoroughly enjoyed, and on this attachment, because most of

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children's departments were dying, or ill, or otherwise incapacitated, I actually had to plunge in and do programmes of my own, which were tiny little 15 minutes programmes, but for me it was like doing a three hour documentary;. *Mickey the Martian* with poor late lamented Ray Allen, so sad he's no longer with us, and stories like, small programmes like that, *William Timmin* and *Bengo The Boxer Puppy* and I thoroughly enjoyed this attachment, it was marvellous. I spent a few weeks in the *Blue Peter* office and when I went back to the radio, the second day I was back there was a job on the board for producers in television, in children's programmes, and I didn't think I had a chance at all of getting the job, but I thought it would look extremely lily-livered if I didn't put in an application, so I did. And I had an absolutely terrifying board but I actually did get the job, so it was amazing, really, coming from radio, with no television experience, and I learnt afterwards that all the assistant producers in children's programmes were absolutely furious that this non-entity, this ignoramus from radio, had one of these jobs.

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Q: Tell me about the first day at Television Centre, do

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you remember your first day?

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A: Well I didn't approach Television Centre immediately, because what I approached was Lime Grove, the Lime Grove Studios, because that's where a lot of the *Blue Peter* programmes were being made. There's so many things that hit you, like the general dinginess and untidiness of everything, cables all over the place, and tripods and it's all meant to be neat and clean and tidy, but of course it never is. And also, particularly in Lime Grove, how small the studios seemed, but of course it was different at Television Centre, because of course it was sparkling and new and it was just really like an Aladdin's cave. You felt very, very humbled walking into the lovely TC1, the biggest studio in Europe; I think it probably still is, and TC3 and TC4, and it was inspiring because you started to think of all the marvellous things you could do to fill the studio up.

Q: Was part of your concept for *Blue Peter* that you wanted to exploit these facilities to the max?

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A: The challenge with that was because it was for an non-captive, multi-age-ranged audience. It was very simple in schools' programmes, because you were

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working for a specific age range, you knew they'd all be six, or they'd all be eight, or they'd all be ten, or whatever. And that they were captive, you know being held captive by their teachers, so they wouldn't switch off or switch over. But of course totally different, and so it doesn't matter how much missionary zeal you've got, working in television children's programmes, if you can't make the subject exciting or gripping or fascinating, you've lost your audience.

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Q: Coming to Television Centre, does your imagination start to run riot operating in somewhere like TC1?

A: Well of course, TC1 was a huge challenge, and we all had an ideas meeting every week, and first of all I was working with Edward Barnes, who was put with me when I joined, because he was so experienced. I learnt a few years afterwards that he was terribly fed-up that he had to come and hold my hand, because he'd been one of the production assistants, not producers' assistants who'd been working on the programme, and had put in for the job. But what was really challenging was finding material that would have great visual appeal; more often than not great visual appeal, not always, but was something that could interest all

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sections of the age range. And so if it was something that was a little bit challenging, the youngest children would watch because it was beautifully shot, and the pictures were good, even if they didn't understand all the words. And if people in the audience weren't particularly interested, because it was a magazine programme they knew that there'd be another item fairly soon, so if they sat through the thing that didn't grip them there'd be something that might grip them coming up.

Q: Tell us about when the Chinese acrobats came.

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A: We had a great help from Victor Hochhauser who was an important agent who brought all kinds of foreign companies to the UK. And he got in touch and said that the Chinese acrobats were coming over; they'd never left China before, it was an amazing achievement of Victor's to have got them, and also very exciting for *Blue Peter* to have the challenge. And they were quite utterly, utterly sensational, and we were very thrilled. We had to record them because they didn't have much time, they couldn't spend all day in the studio. And then we had done the rehearsal, and we'd gone into the line-up where the cameras had to be looked at and

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mended and whatever, and got ready to do this recording, and they'd vanished, they had completely vanished. There wasn't a Chinese acrobat to be seen. And the dressing rooms were searched, the tea bar was searched, and I suddenly thought I heard a noise, and I went behind the cyclorama, which was this huge cloth which circled the studio, and there I found them, and they were all there, reading *The Little Red Book*, Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, so we had to wait until they'd finished reading their daily dose of Chairman Mao before they would perform for the BBC.

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Q: Can you explain the Christmas specials, and how you used the bigger studios for them.

A: The Christmas programme was always really very magical and very special; we had the lighting of the fourth candle on the advent crown, famously made by the marvellous Margaret Parnell out of wire coat hangers and tinsel. When the fourth candle was lit you really, really knew Christmas was practically there, and the other high spot of the programme was at the end, when we had a huge walk in of, I should think easily 100 children, ranging from very, very young ones to sixth formers from various schools, and they would

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walk up the hill leading to Studio 3, and they would be carrying their lanterns and singing either *Oh Come all Ye Faithful* or *Hark The Herald Angels Sing*, and it was an absolutely magic moment, and after, I think, the third verse, the presenters would say, 'Well we're going off now, hope you all have a Happy Christmas, and you'll be coming to see us when we come back in the New Year. And now here's the last verse'. And it was quite moving. It was very, very special.

Q: You once had a large group of Cubs and Brownies around a camp fire, and that didn't go quite smoothly. Can you explain that story?

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A: There were always elephant traps, working on the programme, the unexpected always happened, nearly always happened, no matter how carefully planned everything was. And we had what we thought was a marvellous idea, with a load of Girl Guides and Brownies singing campfire songs. We had loads and loads of them, filled the studio with all these Guides and Brownies, and we had a rather wonderful campfire, which glowed, and little tiny flames flickering at its base. Anyway, the Guides and Brownies were singing a song called *If You're Happy And You Know It*, and it

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was, 'If you're happy and you know it clap your hands, if you're happy and you know it clap your hands, if you're happy and you know it and you really need to show it, if you're happy and you know it clap your hands'. Anyway then it went on to 'Stamp your feet', with great gusto, and the final verse was 'Shout 'We Are!', and everybody shouted 'We are!'. And I'd been aware that this fire was growing slightly bigger, and the tiny little flames were growing into really large flames, and at the moment when finally this whole crew of Guides and Brownies shouted, 'We are!', in rushed two BBC firemen with fire extinguishers, and put the fire out.

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Q: What about when you got an adult lion rather than lion cubs?

A: All kinds of animals came into the studio, quite apart from our pets, who were very, very studio trained, and on the whole extremely well-behaved. But we were told that there was a dear little lion cub, I think it must have been Chessington Zoo, or something like that, and would we like to have this dear little lion cub on the programme, and I said, 'Yes, we'd absolutely love to have this dear little cub on the programme'. Anyway,

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we were all waiting for the lion cub to arrive, and there were distant sounds of awful sort of snarls and growling, that got louder and louder and louder. And into the studio was literally dragged a rather upset looking gentleman, and this enormous lion! I mean it really was, it was not a cub, it was a fully-grown lion. And, you know, all the cameramen got behind their cameras, out of the way, and the motorised cameras headed up, and they were nice and safe, and the people up in the gallery looked absolutely aghast; we all were aghast, and then this so-called cub lunged at its keeper and drew blood, and that was the end of that. We had a very bloody lion keeper, and a really dangerous wild animal, so that was the end of that.

Q: Did you have to think of things like health and safety, and other logistics, or did you not think about those things and just make the bookings?

A: Planning a programme was very carefully...sorry I've got that wrong.

Q: Feel free to start again

A: Because *Blue Peter* had, and has, this multi-age range, non-captive audience, we had to do our best to please everybody pretty well most of the time. If some

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viewers were bored with some of the items, they knew that if they stuck in there there'd be something else coming up they probably would enjoy. And one of the things that we exploited to the full were these lovely, lovely big studios that we could, anything could happen; you could drive all kinds of vehicles in them. And because we had the big studios, there was always this element of surprise, and sometimes viewers would write and say, 'Oh I love *Blue Peter* because I never know what's going to happen next', and that was certainly the case when we had a group of children come in singing a very popular song at that time, *Matchstick Men*. It was all about Lowry's paintings, with the very famous matchstick people, and we had been lucky enough to have a real, genuine, not a repro, Lowry in the studio, and we had this group of children, who were the children, I think on the recording of the *Matchstick* song. Anyway there we were, all raring to go, and we started off, and unfortunately one little girl was so overcome by excitement that she wet her knickers. Well that was very bad luck for the little girl, but it was bad luck for everybody because we always had the studio floor painted, and the paint was soluble,

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and so of course the result of wetting the knickers meant that the studio floor paint began to dissolve, and was highly dangerous. It was like being on an ice rink, very skiddy. So how we got to the end of that item without any broken legs I really don't know.

Q: Were you interested in exploiting the building in other ways?

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A: Keeping the viewers on the edge of their seats was the greatest challenge, and we were absolutely thrilled when we heard that Karl Wallenda, who was a member of the great Wallenda high wire act that was famous throughout the world, and particularly in America, was coming to the UK, and he was willing to do a tightrope walk for *Blue Peter*, and so we fixed up this wire, that I think was, forgive me being non-metric, 60 feet above the ground, and it was 50 feet long, and it ran from the outside edge of the Television Centre studios, over to the BBC canteen, which was on the edge of the *Blue Peter* garden. And we did this, and nobody interfered with us at all, which was fine, and Karl Wallenda had already said to us that he never, ever used a safety net anywhere, and so he would not perform if we had a safety net, so we didn't have a safety net. Anyway, he

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got up on this wire with this 20 foot pole that he carried, and he started to walk, and in the middle of this walk he stopped, and he stood on his head! And then he suddenly announced that he didn't think that was good enough, so he stood on his head again. It was just amazing, he really was, an incredible man, we were so lucky to have had him, and the audience was thrilled. Wouldn't be allowed to do that now of course.

Q: Tell me about Claire Francis's boat

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A: One of the challenges that we had, it's a very fashionable word now, 'challenge', anyway, one of our challenges was that we wanted to keep the audience with us, and we wanted to please everybody, from the smallest child to the early teenager, and to do this we had to produce the unexpected. And this was, sorry (OVERLAP – you were doing so well), what was I going to talk about?

Q: Claire Francis's boat

A: One of the challenges of the programme was to keep this multi age range, non-captive audience, switched on. We didn't want them to switch over and we didn't want them to switch off. So when we heard that Claire Francis had completed her solo round the

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world yacht voyage, we immediately wanted to have her on the programme, and also, we wanted to have her yacht, which was absolutely enormous.. It was so big, we got it into the studio, but we couldn't actually put the mast up, because it was too tall. But there was Claire Francis's yacht, and it was absolute magic. She was a natural contributor, and she took us and the viewers almost on the voyage when she was describing, you know, how she used the yacht and, you know, where she ate, and, the galley and the cooking, and also, what to do about the lavatory, because that was something that preoccupied quite a lot of our audience; it was like when poor John Noakes had an accident on a toboggan run, the Cresta Run in Switzerland, he was quite badly, well very badly bruised at the end of it, came off his sledge, and I said to him, 'John, you've absolutely got to show your bruises'. Well the biggest bruises, the best bruises, were on his bottom, and he was terribly worried about this, and he said, 'Oh, I don't know'. This was on the day, we're actually in the studio and he said, 'Well, I don't know, I've got the wife's silk cami knickers on', but anyway, bless his heart, he did bare his bum, and

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there was the most ginormous bruise and I think that entertained very many members of the audience.

Q: How did the change to colour change the way you worked?

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A: When we went into colour it was a marvellous extra dimension for us. In the past, when we were in black and white, we never made any concessions to the fact that we weren't in colour, but the fact that we had it did add, of course, an extra dimension to the programme. But we couldn't bang on about it because there was still a huge number of viewers who didn't have colour television, and it would have been appalling to have rubbed their noses in the fact that they didn't have a posh enough set. So we, quite honestly, I don't think we would ever choose an item just because it was colourful; it had to have some sort of substance, it had to be funny, or it had to be mysterious, or it had to be intriguing, but not just because it was hugely colourful.

Q: You finished in 1988. Was the building still working for *Blue Peter*, did it seem the right place still to be?

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A: It may seem increasingly unfashionable, but I'm very keen on doing programmes in studios for audiences like *Blue Peter*, because there is something very

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00 26 45

magical about bringing exotic and weird and wonderful and enormous and tiny items into the confines of the studio. I mean the studio, it's very exciting, I mean it's almost like having these things in your living room, well I mean it is in your living room isn't it, when it comes onto the telly. But I think we were so lucky to have had these big studios, and it was always a fight to get them, because Programme Planning didn't want us to have the big studios, they wanted us to have little tiny studios, and we said, 'No, no we can't have ten ton trucks in Studio 2, it's ridiculous, give us Studio 3 give us Studio 4 give us Studio 1', and I do think that having, a lot of the material we used was made more exciting by the very fact that it was in the studio. You saw this in the Christmas programme, to be able to, as opposed to doing an outside broadcast, which would have seemed terribly tame, it was a marvellous moment when one of the presenters said, 'I think I can hear our carol singers now, they're opening the studio doors and they're coming in up the hill', and then of course it was dark, and the magic of the lanterns glowing; it was really very, very special.

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Q: Take me through the production process of a *Blue*

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Peter week.

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A: The important thing about running the programme was we had a huge open plan office and it was absolutely vital, because everybody needed to know what was going on. And also it segued into the *Blue Peter* Correspondence Unit which was absolutely key, because right at the very beginning, when Edward Barnes and I, and then later on Rosemary Gill, were planning, as it were, the new *Blue Peter*, we did want the audience to join in. So we thought about a badge, and I'm pretty sure the badge was Edward's idea, and then we wanted a logo for it, and Tony Hart came up with the famous blue galleon. And then we wanted a badge that it was possible for every single child to win disregarding their age, because giveaways are meaningless, nobody appreciates a giveaway, you had to win it. We had to make it easy to win, easy to win for the little ones, so we said, 'Send us a good idea for the programme, send us an interesting letter, send us a picture or a story or a model', so it meant that even the smallest child could draw a picture and then we could write back and send the badge and say, 'Well done'. And all the badge winners were indexed, originally on a

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card index, and so then all the badge worthy incoming letters were checked against the index so we could say, 'Dear Elizabeth, it was very nice to hear from you again, you remember last time you wrote to us your hamster had a bad paw...' and then you could progress from the blue badge to a silver badge, and then after that there was the gold badge that was for very special achievements, saving a life, or representing your country. And then, after my time, they had a green badge, which was wonderful, for helping the environment, and various other badges. But the principle remains the same, they have to be won. And by doing that we got, oh, certainly I should say about 80% of material in the programmes arose directly or indirectly from the viewer's letters. And we were getting an average of about 5 or 6,000 letters a week, including competition entries. So we really did have a finger on the pulse of the viewer, and I think that's terribly important.

Q: Tell us about Tina Heath's baby.

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A: We were very lucky when Tina Heath came to me one day and announced that she was pregnant, and she was terribly apologetic about this, 'So sorry', and I

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said, 'No, no, it's got great possibilities, Tina'. Anyway she was lucky because she had the most marvellous GP, and this GP agreed, and more importantly Tina agreed, that she should undergo a prenatal examination on the programme, which we did, and Tina's baby's heartbeats were broadcast live from the womb, which I think must be some kind of a record. But I think typical of pretty well all of the *Blue Peter* presenters, they were game for anything, and very good they were too.

Q: The Christmas panto was always a special event.

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A: One of the magical things about the programme was leading up to Christmas, and we'd always try and have some kind of Christmassy spectacular incorporated in the last programme, before we all had our short break. And we liked the idea of pantos, and having all the presenters involved, and one year we had Cinderella, I think it was the first time Cinderella was done on the programme, and we had John and Peter as the ugly sisters, John Noakes, Peter Purvis, and we had Valerie as Cinderella, and Leslie Judd as Prince Charming, and we had Arthur Askey as Baron Hardup. And Arthur Askey was absolutely wonderful; I think he was

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celebrating his fiftieth year in showbiz, and he entered into the spirit of it, and it was superb, and we were very lucky to have him, because I think it was one of his last public appearances.

Q: Tell us about the Red Army Dancers?

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A: We were always keen to put unusual, unexpected things, in the studio, so when I heard that the Red Army Dancers were coming over, I think they were brought over by the amazing Victor Hochhauser, and I got onto Victor, 'Oh, I don't know', but I said, 'Victor, we've got to have them before anybody else'; that was a great maxim on the programme, we had to have things first, because most children don't understand the subtleties of seeing something they've seen on another programme but with a different, as it were, treatment. They don't understand, 'Oh, I've seen that'; so we did have to have these things first. Anyway Victor Hochhauser eventually agreed, yes they could spare a short while, a very short while out of their very busy schedule, so they came. We had to record them in the morning, and they came at something like half past nine and were in the studio at a quarter to ten, and by twelve o'clock they were in the canteen. And on the

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menu there were three main courses, and it was fried fish, ravioli, and roast chicken, and the Red Army Dancers all had all of them, each dancer had the three main courses, and one of them had every single bread roll, and all the butter.

Q: What were you doing, doing a corset display programme?

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A: One of the surprises that we gave the viewers was really quite an academic item on the history of the corset. In Market Harborough there's a very famous firm, Symingtons, they made suits, and they also made corsets, and they had the biggest collection of ladies' undergarments in the country, and so we had this absolutely superb array of every single kind of corsetry imaginable. And we had some very pretty girls to model them. We had Sarah Green, who'd just joined the programme, Isla St. Clair, and Tina, I think, was in a corset; Sarah's little sister, Laura. Apart from Laura, who was very young, of course, they were all stars, and there they were arrayed in these absolutely delectable undergarments, and we didn't have a single letter of complaint from any child, quite a few appreciative letters from teenagers and one or two slightly horrified,

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disgusted Tunbridge Wells letters, but it was a great item, and most enjoyable.

Q: What one memory will you always cherish about working here?

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A: The real bonus of working at Television Centre, where I spent most of my professional life with the BBC, at Television Centre, was the magic of being involved with a live programme. Because with a live programme there are no second chances, everyone pulled their fingers out, the cooperation you get is absolutely sensational, and it sounds rather soppy to say so, but it's quite emotional, because everybody's keyed up for the countdown, we all know there aren't any second chances, we all know that if the presenters don't say, 'Goodbye see you next week', the programme will be cut off, and because we were hard up against *The 6 O'Clock News* a lot of the time, so it was just this incredible spirit of everybody working to the same end, and everybody was important, no matter they were doing, whether they were floor assistants or whether they were directing the programme, or presenting. And I have absolute huge admiration for presenters doing a programme like that, with no

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autocue, never any autocue. We started to have autocue when the appeals became very complicated, because we thought it would be unfair on the viewers and unfair on the presenters if we gave them a huge memory test. But it was just a terrific example of everybody wanting to work for the best audience in the world. And I think the best audience in the world is children.