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BBC HISTORY ARCHIVE - DESMOND HAWKINS

Interviewed By F.Gillard 8.11.89

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BBC HISTORY: DESMOND HAWKINS INTERVIEWED BY FRANK GILLARD: 8TH NOVEMBER, 1989

Cassette 1, Side A

F.G. It's the 8th of November 1989, this is Frank Gillard, and for the BBC History Archive I'm talking this afternoon in his home at Blandform Forum in Dorset with Dr. Desmond Hawkins, who has the distinction of having served his entire BBC career in one place - not many people can claim that - and that place is Bristol in the West Region. You'll forgive me, we're such old friends and colleagues, you'll forgive me if I call you Desmond and -

D.H. I'd be amazed if you didn't!

F.G. But you came into the BBC as a Features Producer in 1945 and then later on you became Head of Programmes and then Controller, great career. In the very early days of course it was radio only, wasn't it?

D.H. Oh yes, yes, because I grew up very much in radio and came after the war to Bristol.

F.G. And how many Regions were there in the BBC in those days?

D.H. Well there were six. There were three English provinces as I would say, North, Midland and West, and three National Regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so when we met as we did sometimes as a collective body there were six of us.

F.G. Yes, then there was the London area I suppose which was separate.

D.H. Yes. Looking back, you see, the first thing I ever did was on something which was called the Regional Programme in the Thirties, but that included the South East Region. It was a very misleading name really, it really was just a Channel Two but it was called the Regional.

F.G. Yes. Now the Region in BBC terms had a double role I take it?

D.H. Very much so. We had a duty first of all to cater for our Regional audience, and certainly in those days you could say that there was a distinctive Regional character, I mean the audience in the West Country had tastes and desires and demands and so on which were different from what you would find say in the North Country. Maybe we've become more mixed and mobile and so on since. But there was no doubt in our minds that there was a definable audience with definable tastes that we were there to cater for.

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F.G. Was it that that attracted you, because you were a metropolitan -

D.H. Yes it was, you see, because I'd grown up in London and worked a lot with BBC in London, and I'd written a good deal about the need to decentralise, I mean you know it was something I happened to believe in, and I loved the West Country anyway, so that when the war ended I'd first thought I was going to stay in London in the Features Department and then I was very attracted to the idea of going to the West, and it happened one of the war correspondents at that time, Frank Gillard, came home and I was working on a book on war reporting and he cast a fly over me and said "Why don't you think about coming down to Bristol?", and this seemed to me very attractive because it was what I wanted to do. I thought I'd had London and I was anxious to see provincial England, and it seemed to me there was something exciting to do there.

F.G. Well that was one half of the Region's job, to cater for its domestic audience. What was the other half?

D.H, Well of course the other half was to reflect it in the National networks, because rightly and properly they couldn't draw all their programme material from London or the South East. They were a National network and so in it there should be representative strains/ of material from the North Country and from Northern Ireland and Wales and the West Country, and that made for the richness of the National network, so that we had to learn to look in both directions. We had to play on the close intimacy to almost a family circle as / our Regional audience was, and then we had to say well now, we're going to go and talk to the nation about this lovely West Country where we are and we're going to make sure that in the National programmes there is a West Country flavour.

F.G. There wasn't a continuous Regional output was there, I mean it was limited to contributions, opt-outs as they call them, into the National network.

D.H. Yes, I mean for us the, what now is Radio 4 in those days was the Home Service, was a sustaining network and it was the job of the Head of Programmes to decide that at a certain point in the day he would leave that National network of Home Service and instead he would do what we called the West of England Home Service, we still used the word Home Service but we were now the West of England Home Service,

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D.H. and so we left the network and did whatever we had to do.

F.G. And about how much in an average week would you leave the network?

D.H. Well I'd be guessing because I was just a producer in those days but I would have thought thirty hours, something of that sort, and there were only one or two sacred cows. Obviously we couldn't drop the National News, we couldn't drop Schools programmes, they were regarded as essential, and things like Party Political Broadcasts, things of that sort. But on the whole I would have said the Regional Programme Heads really had a very free hand, I mean they really had true autonomy, and true autonomy let me stress does always mean that you have financial resources and technical resources and not just paper autonomy, it was real autonomy.

F.G. And was London riding on your back as far as the Regional output was concerned?

D.H. No, no, I think they were satisfied that the Regional Controller's job was to see that his Head of Programmes was doing a sensible job and that standards were maintained and so on. Where there could be clashes would be at professional level in certain areas, I'm thinking for example of drama where quite rightly Val Gielgud, who was Head of Drama, would say that he was charged with the responsibility for the standard of the whole of the BBC's drama output, so that he might at times say that he didn't like something or other the Region did. He couldn't actually stop it. I remember quite vividly Val at one point saying, speaking of The Archers and there can be no bigger success in radio than The Archers, nevertheless Val said "Could I have strangled The Archers at birth I would have done so". He didn't think it was up to the standard of drama as he saw it, but what was interesting was he couldn't in fact strangle it at birth. So that you had sometimes these two different positions, both of them worth defending in a way. I mean there should be good professional standards everywhere but equally it's no good giving Regions autonomy and then say you're going to censor what they do.

F.G. And The Archers was a Regional production of course.

D.H. Yes of course it came from the Midland Region, it came from Birmingham and was in some ways the great achievement of the Midland Region I suppose.

F.G. You mentioned drama. Was the Regional output spread right across the spectrum of broadcasting so to speak?

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D.H. Yes, the thing that I liked so much when I first went into a Region from London was that the conception of a Region in the late Forties early Fifties was that it really was a sort of facsimile in miniature of a total broadcasting service, so that there was no department in London that didn't have on a much smaller scale its equivalent in a Region. There was a Regional drama department, a variety department, a talks department, religious broadcasting department and so on, and that was a great thing I think in relation to the people of the Region because whatever their interest was they felt there was a door they could go and knock on. If they were a singer or a jazz drummer or a man with a good talk in him they didn't have to feel that it was London or nothing, you know, they could go their Regional headquarters where doors tended to be more open, obviously. There wasn't as much talent rushing around.

F.G. Was it an exciting environment, a small team of people dedicated and -

D.H. Oh to me enormously. I suppose it goes by temperament but I don't greatly enjoy taking over a great big success with nothing to do really except just maintain it. I found it far more exciting to be given a blank sheet of paper and told well there you are, mate, you know, press on, and when I got to Bristol of course there were cobwebs everywhere of six years of the war, you see, nothing had been done, and I inherited for example the filing cabinet with names of actors and actresses and so on with whom there had been no contact since the Thirties, and I had to devise a tactful letter which, although it didn't say in so many words, was really saying 'are you still alive and if so, where are you living?'.

F.G. Was there a reservoir of Regional talent, because it's all very well to have a staff there but they can't do much unless there are good actors and speakers and musicians?

D.H. Well yes, you see I believe in any part of England at any time there are always little exciting groups somewhere, and I think for example in North Region Newcastle has always been a place with things stirring in it, whereas in our Region Plymouth always seemed to me a rather barren place. There's no really accounting for these things. Bristol was always exciting, it had after all some very good drama schools, it had good theatre and that kind of thing, so that you looked around for what talent you had. We did a terrific lot of auditioning and

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D.H. we did a lot of encouraging people and we took risks, you know, we commissioned people to do something and sometimes it came off, sometimes it didn't, and the plain fact was that in a way the Region's starting up after the was was a big patron, so as far as opening doors and auditioning, we were I think fostering talent and I think for example of the connection between our Head of Music in those days, Rex Redman, and Michael Tippett. I guess that was important to Tippett at that time. In drama we did a competition to try and stir up talent and a young actor at the Bristol Old Vic called Peter Nichols won, not the first prize as it happened but the second, and went on of course to have a big career as a dramatist, Charles Wood was another, a young Bristol journalist who started writing plays with us, so that it was an exciting adventure, you know, there was much to win, much to try and build up, and to me that's, you know, that's the fun of it.

F.G. What about journalistically, did it become a journalistic medium in the Region?

D.H. Yes, you see we'd just seen the big revolution in the whole of the BBC when you look back on it. In the Thirties the BBC was not really a news and journalistic and controversial organisation at all, then came the war and the need for big journalistic coverage so we came out of the war with a big head of steam on for new ideas for change and, I mean again, we were lucky in a sense that our Head of Programmes had come out with all the prestige of a war correspondent who'd, you know, had grown up and matured in this new kind of journalism, so that we were keen I think to push that forward, I mean to get up to the frontiers and over the frontiers sometimes, and let me just pick on two examples, and one was during the war there had been the famous Brains Trust, and I remember that the Head of Programmes, Frank Gillard, saying 'that's all very mice but they sit in a London studio and dispense their wisdom. I would like to take a team out on the road and take them in front of West Country audiences and let them see what happens when they're in front of an audience', and Any Questions? was born in that way. It was to take the Regional flag out on the road, to get round the Region, but above all to give the ordinary man in the street, the ordinary customer, a chance to heckle, to put his question, and so on. And that was

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D.H. something new in its day and, you know, it carries on as one of the great institutions of broadcasting. And the other one, just a single episode but again I think it was very typical, was a controversy about the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra which was once more one of the things that the Region was very largely a patron of, and there was a controversy in the Bournemouth council, should it be closed down, should they stop the subsidy for it and so on, and on this occasion the Head of Programmes decided to hire a hall in Bournemouth, to call a public meeting, to announce it, and to bring the controversy right into the open. Well, this had a riveting effect of course on opinion in Bournemouth and in the Region because this again was something quite new. It may not seem all that novel now as I talk about it, but the idea that the microphone was going to be there for any man with an interest to come up and to say his bit, this was a very good revolution I think, it was good pioneering.

F.G. Can you give us some idea of the size of the outfit, the West Region, I mean the producer level for example?

D.H. Well the producers, I'm trying to think, sitting just round the board in that Board Room in Bristol on a Monday afternoon I think it was for the Programme Board, I suppose there would be a couple of dozen producers there probably, something of that order, and the Region itself, if you think of the South West peninsula, draw a line roughly from say Gloucester to Bournemouth and everything West of that, with some very pleasant islands like the Scillies and the Channel Islands and Lundy thrown in, that was our territory, that's what we had to cater for, that's where we had to find our material.

F.G. And were the staff people of quality or were they just people thrown out from London as it were?

D.H. No, I think you see because we were all recruited immediately after the war, London wasn't throwing people out, it wasn't trying to find somewhere to put some rather mediocre talent out to grass. Everybody was making fresh appointments and I think Bristol had this great advantage that it is after all a lovely place to work in and we, whether by design by the Controller and the Head of Programmes or by good luck, but we had a blend of what I think a Region needs, which was of people of some acknowledged national talent and other people with really deep

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D.H. regional roots, and I think you want both those elements in a successful Region, and I wasn't aware really that we were becoming stocked with mediocre talent at all, I think quite the reverse, I mean I think of Drama producers like Owen Reed, Brandon Acton-Bond, Pat Beech was News Editor, it was really, it was a very lively go-ahead team.

F.G. I think it was a team that stuck together too, wasn't it?

D.H. Yes, I often look back on that with some surprise really because we must have run for the first ten years after the war with the same Head of Programmes, the same key producers all the way through, and then as Television came in and the BBC expanded it began to break up and people went off to other places to be directors in London or controllers in another Region or something or other, but in that ten years we were a very coherent group, we shared a philosophy and an enthusiasm about the Regions and luckily really we just held together and, I hope, ripened as a team and didn't go rancid!

F.G. A listener in the Region, would he be able to tell from the style of presentation what was a Regional item and what was a London item - was Regional presentation cosy and homely whereas the London programmes were more formally presented, or how did it run?

D.H. No, well I felt that the continuity business and the whole business of presentation was standard BBC, I mean you knew it was a Regional programme because it was announced as "This is the West of England Home Service", but the announcer who did it might very well be on loan to London for two or three months in the summer or whatever, he might have come from London, and they were very proud of their professionalism. I don't think they felt it was for them to be cosy and sort of matey and rural and all those sorts of things. There were programmes where the presenters, and I think for example of Bernard Fishwick, a much loved character, a great singer of folk songs, a wonderful teller of folk tales, and obviously when Bernard was doing a programme called Village On The Air he was going all out for the warmth and the friendliness and the homely atmosphere, but there were two gears, I mean there were moments when you were being thoroughly professional at national standards and other times when you were saying well now, we're just enjoying a nice little homely affair in our own part of the country.

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F.G. In newspaper journalism you don't expect the same quality of journalism in a regional or a local paper that you get in the national one necessarily. Was that true in Regional broadcasting, were Regional broadcasting programme standards high or low?

D.H. Well this interests me a great deal because for my money, you see, the Region was a big enough size, it had a big enough clout to get out of the provincialism, the blandness, the over-concern about local views and so forth that prevents programmes having any sharp end to them. To me this is the great peril that always lies in wait for local radio, that where you're too small, where the BBC is in what I call six ~~minute~~ penny packets, you inevitably, inevitably you're caught in circumstances where it is much harder to be objective, to be critical in the way that the Region was, I mean were were playing to six counties, not to one town, and if for example there was something that called for an attack in Weston-super-Mare or Penzance or whatever, we might annoy some opinion in Weston-super-Mare or Penzance but it was a very healthy way of annoying, and it was done.

F.G. And what about paying, I mean did you pay your artists, your performers?

D.H. Yes we did, and we paid as far as I know standard rates. I mean at the top end of broadcasting there will always be individual negotiation for outright celebrity stars and so forth, but I would have said anyone coming in to do a broadcast whether it was in Bristol or Birmingham or London, he would have been on the same level of contractual payment and so forth.

F.G. Well, of course if people are rewarded like that you expect the same standard of performance.

D.H. Oh yes, oh yes, and I mean it would of course have been disastrous in the early days of the Regions if the finger could have been pointed that we were, you know, letting through mediocre pianists or something or other, and the professional head in London was saying well, here we are in London turning down people who are better than that and you're giving these opportunities, and that would have been wrong. I don't think it happened.

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Cassette 1, Side B

F.G. Well, the golden days of Radio of course soon passed and the competitor came over the horizon, even for us of the West Region. In 1952 Television came to Bristol and the Bristol area from a transmitter in South Wales of all places. We had to share it with Wales. What sort of problems did that create?

D.H. Well, of course they were an omen because there'd been the same trouble really hadn't there before in Radio, that you really cannot combine of all people the Welsh with any form of English, West Country, North Country or whatever. I mean naturally they want to foster their own language, their own culture and equally it's not very acceptable to an English audience, so that it was a lesson that might have been learnt from the early days of Radio that you simply could not operate one channel for both the English on the South of the Bristol Channel and the Welsh on the North of the Bristol Channel, but in the case of Television I mean the technical argument of course was a strong one, that Television until then had been really a London toy, it had been experimental largely and confined to a relatively small audience in the London area. Once it began putting up transmitters to cover the U.K. it had to be done economically. I remember in those days there were still capital restrictions the Government imposed and all this sort of thing, so that to get a new transmitter was quite a thing, and I can see that if I had been sitting in the middle of the web in London I probably would have said we've just got to put up transmitters where we get the biggest proportion of viewers, and this means the big conurbations, so we obviously bang one into the North for Manchester and Liverpool and we put one in the middle for Birmingham, and then when we look at the Bristol Channel area we've somehow got to make them wear a single one, but in programme terms, editorially, it was just a botch-up we had already lived through once before and could have been foreseen.

F.G. Well this was 1952 but of course that transmitter, the South Wales one at Wenvoe, didn't of course serve the Western peninsula nor did it serve the South Coast, and they were all part of the West Region, after all. So what happened?

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D.H. Well, one by one of course, having got the biggest of the conurbations done, every time London had the finance and the capital freedoms and so on to develop, in went a transmitter on the Isle of Wight to cover the South of England, and in after a great deal of controversy on Dartmoor in amenity terms went the big North Hessary Tor transmitter, and so stage by stage we got the coverage.

F.G. But there was a big hustle over all that, wasn't there, because of the Coronation.

D.H. Yes, actually I was up at Lime Grove doing this training at the Coronation time so I wasn't so aware of this but it was so, and of course as the ITV stations developed the same thing happened of course. We had to get into some sort of competitive posture not just in Bristol but in Southampton and in Plymouth.

F.G. But let me catch you up on that, because at the beginning when the Television Service first came to the West Region there was very grave doubt indeed, wasn't there, as to whether the Regions would be making television programmes at all.

D.H. Oh yes, oh yes, I mean you know I mentioned that I was in Lime Grove. I'd gone up - Nicky Crocker had gone up to work at Wembley with Outside Broadcasts, and I think I was the first Regional producer who went to Lime Grove to learn studio production, and in a way for a good reason, that the Corp knew that when ITV got under way the only place that they could recruit staff from would be the BBC so there would be a big loss, and I think they were training people like me as a reserve so that they'd got people with some skills if they lost more than they needed, and I can remember well going to one of the lectures on this course which was taken by Mr. Birkinshaw, who was the head man on Television Engineering, and he showed us the network plan, where the lines would run and so on, and there was Wenvoe and I drew attention to this little problem, do you see, and I said "Well, what happens when we try to start Regional broadcasting? Are we going to have to take Welsh programmes and are they going to take ours?", and I well remember Mr. Birkinshaw saying "Look, you must get these old radio ideas out of your head. There can never be Regional television, it would be too expensive, too complicated technically, so please forget all about it", and that was undoubtedly the view at the time, and I can understand it for what it was but I was equally sure that as time went on of course and the whole medium became more sophisticated there would be -

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F.G. I think - I think it's true to say the BBC soon realised that that position could never be held, could never stand.

D.H. Well they realised it of course when the ITV companies -

F.G. They did before that even because -

D.H. Do you think so?

F.G. Well the ITV people came in in '55 but by '52 we at least had an MCR didn't we?

D.H. Oh yes, oh yes. Oh yes, the outside broadcasting, but then you see, I mean that was very sensible simply to station, I mean it would have been crazy to keep every single O.B. unit in Wembley because they had to move about the country and to base them in the various Regional centres was good practical sense, and then it was a good concession I think to tell the Region they could have one coupon, you know, they could do one a week with a -

F.G. Full Regional audience.

D.H. Full Regional audience, yes, that's right, yes.

F.G. So in the West Region what was the situation then in '52 - you had the MCR.

D.H. We had the MCR, we had a magazine programme which was introduced by a wellknown Isle of Wight character who was not unknown in London at that time called Cliff Michelmore. Cliff was our very first presenter. I suspect we called it Westward Ho!, it sounds like the sort of title we would have done, and that was our very first effort in Regional broadcasting.

F.G. Was this mobile control room the property of the West Region?

D.H. Well, it may have been in a titular sense but in a practical sense it wasn't because the planning of MCRs was controlled essentially from London, and again in a way had to be, I mean they were limited in number and if you suddenly had some great national event it had to be possible no doubt for London to call them in, but it was very much at London's beck and call.

F.G. But it was shared with Wales surely.

D.H. I suppose it was, yes I suppose it was -

F.G. Two weeks at a time each.

D.H. I had no direct involvement in that, I simply saw it come in, de-rig itself, put its cameras into our big music studio, Studio A, because we had obviously no television studio, and the MCR was a goodish kind of compromise, I mean you could

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D.H. de-rig it into a studio and you could do something that looked like a studio production, and yes, now you mention it of course Wales must have had at least the same coupon that we had.

F.G. And the fact was, wasn't it, that Wales of course naturally wanted to broadcast in the language of Paradise.

D.H. Oh yes, yes.

F.G. And our audience just had to take it, like it or not.

D.H. Yes, yes, yes.

F.G. It was the only available channel.

D.H. Yes, I mean these were the troubles of the developing of television, I mean another one that we weren't involved in but I used to hear a lot about from my colleagues on the line that ran North, that when North Region decided that they were going to do some opt-out programme, Scotland had to take it or not because there was only one line running North, but these are, they're sort of teething troubles aren't they, when material's scarce and you're just building up a system.

F.G. But there were you, a Regional radio producer, a documentary producer, and you went to London and you were trained in television, so you became an ambidextrous person.

D.H. Yes I did, and the only way you could train in London, apart from Outside Broadcasts, was in Drama, so I did the full drama course which in a way was not foreign to me because as a Features producer I'd worked with actors in dramatic scenes and so on, but I came back sort of bursting to do something in a studio with all kinds of interesting moves across the set and all that sort of thing and there was nothing like that to be had.

F.G. And it really was a matter of driving in the mobile control room -

D.H. Oh yes.

F.G. The scannette, and adapting whatever building you could use.

D.H. Yes it was, and I mean the only suitable place we had of course was the music studio which had carried the West of England Light Orchestra and things of that sort.

F.G. Can you think of any of the big television achievements of those very early days from the West Region?

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D.H. Yes, I can think of one or two. One I remember vividly was a serial version of Lorna Doone, because in those days there wasn't the choice of channels and when a thing was a success it was a hell of a success, and everybody in the land seemed to be following Lorna Doone, and the other one was called The True Mistery of the Passion, which was done as an O.B. within Bristol Cathedral. It was a French mediaeval play, a really magnificent play, and done with an O.B. unit in the Cathedral, it was, in its day it was a great landmark.

F.G. The Region had a great reputation for innovation.

D.H. Yes, I think this was very true particularly in outside broadcasts. Of course we'd been early into the business of outside broadcasts and you know, I always think that you build up expertise bit by bit, it doesn't happen overnight. We had a very good outside broadcast crew and they were eager always to find a new mountain to climb each year, and of course there were many mountains to climb. The very first television programme from a submarine came from Bristol, the very first television programme from the air, I think from a helicopter or from a 'plane, that came, and they relished that sort of technical challenge, and of course in those days what we called the built O.B., I mean not the outside broadcast of an event but something you created as an outside broadcast was very popular in television. The whole business of strip planning gradually destroyed the built O.B. and that was a great grief really to the engineers you know, who had been very inventive, very resourceful.

F.G. And the way the Region went led it much more in the direction of film work than of studio work, film and O.B. rather than the studio, would you agree with this?

D.H. Oh very much so, yes I would, I think for a variety of reasons really. You see one was I think we'd learnt the lesson that when any sort of material supplies were scarce we were pretty well down the pecking order in Bristol. We weren't a big Region numerically like the North or the Midland, we didn't have a political angle to us like Northern Ireland or Scotland, so that in any big capital expenditure, you know, new buildings, new studios, we were going to be well down the list, whereas film, you don't need great buildings, you need good cameras and you need cutting rooms but, you know, they're relatively simple in capital terms, so there was that incentive of that kind. Then I think we had also learned that we didn't have many of the things that Television or radio wanted, big events, big box-office

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D.H. events and we didn't have Test Matches and Cup Finals, we didn't have big music halls, but we had magnificent countryside, we had the sort of English landscape that people like, so that again film was a very good way of dealing with that, and I think those two things came together really, that this was a kind of resource that we could get at and we had a subject matter that suited it. And then I think the third thing was in a personality, in Pat Beech. Now Pat was the only one of us I think who had been on the staff before the war, he'd been O.B. producer in radio in the late Thirties. He'd gone off to the war and served with a film unit in Burma, and he'd come back full of the possibilities of film, and let me just add that at that time film was almost a dirty word in television. I can remember a meeting where Cecil McGivern, who in those days was Mr. Television and he was the boss of the outfit, and I remember Cecil slapping down the Head of Films, Jack Mewett, who had put up a programme idea, and Cecil said "Television is an electronic ~~meeting~~ medium, Jack, you must realise that. You are a supply department, I do not want programme offers from you". It's forgotten, but that was the view. So that Pat was a bit unorthodox in saying that we should concentrate on film, and that's what we did.

F.G. And Birmingham and Manchester got great palaces with studios which they didn't quite know what to do with actually.

D.H. Well now you see and of course the other thing is that television was moving so fast, and the business of getting capital approval and actually erecting a huge building, they were always ten years out of date at the time they were built.

F.G. Yes, yes.

D.H. We had a lot of old huts and they served us very nicely.

F.G. I mean it wasn't only in Bristol, was it, that we became active in programme-making, I mean Plymouth and Southampton also had to come on to the scene.

D.H. Yes, and I suppose the credit for that goes in a sense to the birth of commercial television. Once you had a separate autonomous company operating in Southampton only, what was the BBC answer to that to be, I mean we had to meet it. We had somehow to break up our Region to a degree into, in our case, the three areas, Plymouth and Southampton and Bristol, where in each case we had a commercial competitor. In each case I'm happy to say we managed to see each of them off

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D.H. because their franchises were not renewed, so I don't think we did that badly against them, but we were ill-equipped really to meet them. I remember when Westward was the company opening in Plymouth and the only way we could get any film on the screen in a local news bulletin was to hire a mobile telecine in London, drive it down to Plymouth the night before the Westward company opened, and do a news bulletin with a bit of film that way, but it wasn't really satisfactory, I mean we weren't really equipped so early to think about developing individual areas as we were forced to do.

F.G. Yes, it's very primitive in -

D.H. It was very primitive. I remember as a matter of fact saying to the Director-General at that time, who had said "Well, what you must do is to have a newsreader sitting in front of a camera reading a written news bulletin" and I remember saying to him "You know, you're sending us into battle with paper hats and wooden swords and we will do what we can but it's not good enough", and it wasn't good enough.

F.G. I'm surprised you reached the rank of Controller after saying that to the Director-General.

D.H. Well, he was a big and noble man, one of the few to whom you could say things like that.

F.G. You'd better give his name I think.

D.H. Let me name him. He was Ian Jacob and he was a very good friend of the Regions. He's probably from the Regional point of view the best D.G. we had. But he didn't take offence - well, I think he knew.

F.G. It's interesting that this development of Southampton and Plymouth, in television terms, was paralleled when VHF radio came along, in radio was it not?

D.H. Yes, of course you see VHF gave us a great chance in a way to develop a much more interesting sort of radio that, I mean I was very keen in, I mean Frank Gillard in his various roles as Head of Programmes or later as Controller, and then also when he was in London, was spearheading the idea of a more local kind of radio, so I was always looking round for the kind of programmes that would lend themselves to operating in an area format and we did in several things, in news obviously but we did it in things like religious programmes, saying to them would the Church like, and the Chapel, like to join in and feel they had their own channel for half an hour

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D.H. a week, purely for the area.

F.G. You then renamed the Region, it became South and West. Now what was the reason for that?

D.H. Well, when I had the good fortune to become Regional Controller and I, you see Southampton was very much my baby in a way. The original Controller, Gerald Beadle, for whom I've great veneration and he had his own form of wisdom, and he always took the view the Region should never move East of Bournemouth, that we would lose our identity if we moved along the coast, but our dilemma was that in radio we had the Start Point transmitter, a magnificent transmitter that sprayed right up the English Channel with a lovely signal up to Worthing, Hastings, you know, you name it, it was still battering away up there, and then when television came of course the Isle of Wight transmitter at Rowridge, again that was the signal that was all over Sussex, and so I'd taken the view that we should develop Southampton and you have really to accept the fact that your audience is largely dictated by your transmitter coverage. I mean if every night the programme they're going to get is coming from this transmitter, then that transmitter has really got to cater for them a bit. So I was conscious of the fact that we had this audience in the South but it wasn't recognised, and I learnt it in an odd way from the Radio Times, that there was great complaint you see that they constantly got the London Radio Times because the distributors worked that way, and so they couldn't get the right programmes even in the Radio Times, and it was one thing I had felt strongly about and I tried to get Radio Times to alter their thing and bring out a South edition and so on you see, and so when I was offered to be Regional Controller I said could I make this one condition, instead of being Controller of the West Region could I please be Controller of the South and West Region, because that would do us a lot of good in the South if we can do that. So that was the story.

F.G. And one last thing on this role. The Region was accountable to its people through an advisory body, was it not?

D.H. Yes it was, and these I think could be underrated because they grew in importance. They were very carefully chosen, I mean you tried to get, you know, differences of age and all the rest of it and type and sex and where they lived, and they gave us

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D.H. something to play to, and in terms of London they were something that London had to respect that was not staff, it was outside people who could sometimes be very powerful and very critical.

F.G. And which had constitutional status, because in fact it was named in the Charter.

D.H. Yes, that's something that I sometimes forget but it is true of course, and to be named in the Charter is also very helpful.

Cassette 2, Side A

F.G. Wherever you go in the world today, if you talk to people about British broadcasting they talk about Bristol and the BBC and the Natural History Unit. It's an incredible fact, Bristol BBC became a crossroads to the world in that sense. How did it all begin, the Natural History specialisation?

D.H. Well, it began in practical terms when I arrived in Bristol, this was at the end of '45, and we were taking stock on what sort of things we would do, and the Head of Programmes then said to me, I mean we decided that among our assets was the countryside and the wildlife of the Region, and so the Head of Programmes said to me "You're interested in that kind of thing, aren't you?" because he knew I used to go birdwatching and so on, "Why don't you try and develop something on those lines, try and develop one or two programmes and we'll see if we can get a run for them and see what happens". Well now, my back history was that I'd been a freelance in the Thirties and my very first appearance in Radio Times was in 1936 with a programme which was called A Nest Of Singing Birds which was highly prophetic, it was a programme about English poets, and I tell the story because in those days they wanted to get a sound of a nightingale or a cuckoo or something. There was no recording of any wild British birds so they brought in Mr. Imito who was a variety artist, who was a mimic and who did imitations, and that was '36, and I look back on that with great interest because almost to the day, a refugee from Nazi Germany called Ludwig Koch arrived in England, went to see Julian Huxley and Max Nicholson, and began to start recording British birds. So that I met Ludwig a few years later when I was working with Jack Dillon on Country Magazine, he was very fond of Ludwig's sound pictures, and so my first thought when the Head of Programmes said "Why don't you develop this?" I thought well, what has radio got, it's got certainly this great new asset, that it can take people away from print,

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D.H. away from books and newspaper articles, out into the wild in the sense that it can at least give them the real sounds of the things we're talking about. So this was my particular asset, and I designed a programme called The Naturalist and the other thing I thought was, I don't want a signature tune, in those days every programme started with a signature tune. I thought I don't want a signature tune, what I want is the sound of the wild, and to me the typical English sound of the wild is the calling of a curlew and so I got Ludwig's recording of a curlew and made that our signature tune and we started a thing called The Naturalist and the subtitle, which Geoffrey Grigson suggested, was 'a programme of science and observation' because I wanted to get away from all the sort of sentimental romantic stuff about 'dear Mr. and Mrs. Blackbird' and, you know, the staple stuff of Fleet Street in those days. So we started, and I've mentioned Ludwig because he was in number one, which was right and proper, and with him was the President of the Devon Birdwatching Society and somebody from the Marine Biological Station at Plymouth, so that we were using the regional resource and we were doing something with some sort of scientific air to it, and we did a few programmes and Head of Programmes was happy enough with them, and he succeeded in selling them to London who I think said they'd take three and see what happened, and I think we must have run through ten or twelve years after that, anyway on we went. And it became clear that a programme with as broad a brief as The Naturalist was too broad so that, I mean a lot of people didn't want to hear about toads or foxes or - I mean we for example had Miriam Rothschild doing a spirited piece on fleas, and if you were really a birdwatcher as most of them were in those days you were wondering when the birds got a show. So we started something called Birdsong of the Month with Ralph Whitlock, using Ludwig's records, exploiting this ability that I thought was so important to keep getting people into the wild, and we started something called Birds in Britain, and what I was always aiming to do was to bring two strands together. One was the scientific strand, so I always wanted somebody who really was at the top level in the science of that particular animal that we were dealing with, and then I wanted somebody who knew it in the field. I wanted a water bailiff or a gamekeeper, a good field naturalist, somebody who talked the ordinary person's ordinary language, didn't get lost in scientific jargon, and putting those

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D.H. two together I reckon was always a very fertile mixture. So that's what we tended always to do, and gradually I think we built up a connection of experts in all sorts of fields which were to be very valuable later. Well then, when television came - should I go on to that? - when television came I had done this training course in London, I'd come back full of dreams of doing great work in drama which was clearly never going to happen, and Peter Scott, who was working with me in radio, had moved from East Anglia down to Slimbridge only less than thirty miles up the road from Bristol which was marvellous, and Peter at that time to raise money for the Wildfowl Trust, which he was forming, was going round the country taking, hiring town halls, putting on a programme, a one-man show of his own, to raise money, and in it he was doing very quick lightning sketches on a, you know, on a big scale that people could see in an audience, he was showing little bits of film that he had, and he was talking and so on, it was a very nicely put together show. And he said he thought this might go in television and what about it?, and I went and watched him do it and thought yes, it might go, and luckily when I had been a Features producer in London I'd worked a lot with Cecil McGivern, who had also been in Laurence Gilliam's Features department in those early days, now he was Head of Television, so I could go to Cecil fortunately as, you know, as a friend and colleague and so on, and say "I think we've got something, will you give us a bash?", and again, you know, we were given a chance to do two or three and see what happened, and so we started. What was undoubtedly the turning point was Peter Scott going to the Ornithological Congress in Basel, it happens every four years and in a different country, this year it was at Basel. He saw a film by a German called Heinz Sielmann on Woodpeckers which was far, far in advance of anything that had been done on film before. He showed woodpeckers inside the tree, which of course was to most people a miracle, and Peter came back from Basel and said "You must get this man, we ought to do this programme". So we did a programme on woodpeckers and, though I mean looking back on it it's often forgotten that Sielmann's film was twelve minutes long, we had a thirty minute slot to fill, so I had my drama moves, I had James Fisher in the programme with Peter, we had the skull of a woodpecker to show the amazing muscle that goes right over the top of the head you know to give it this power to hit and so on, and the supervisor of the Lime Grove switchboard rang

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D.H. me next morning and said "You may like to know we were blocked last might for - " I don't know what, it was two or three hours, you know, and she said the switchboard was just solid with people ringing in to say how marvellous this programme had been, and even when Sielmann got back to Dover on his way home he said the Customs man said to him "You're the woodpecker man, aren't you?", so it had really landed in a big way, and after that, you know, I could get the backing I wanted from McGivern.

F.G. But then the programme into which you put the Sielmann item was, what was the name of it?

D.H. Well, I called it Look. I'm a great believer in monosyllables, short titles, and I liked Look very much as a title. It seemed to me to say that that was what television was about. Peter was a little doubtful because there was an American magazine called Look, and I didn't see that that had anything to do with us and anyway, so we called it Look, and it ~~treadled~~ settled in to a run, but that was a 30-minuter you see and that stretched us, I mean in those days film, any kind of wildlife film was very scarce. There were a few feature films that Hollywood made, there might be one perhaps the National Geographic was doing, but mainly it was Disney who was a great danger to me because Disney wanted always if he found someone to buy them up lock stock and barrel, every foot of their film, their credits, they wouldn't even be given credits but they would get a lot of money, so I knew you know very often I was competing against Disney's money to try to get hold of the film if I ever heard of any.

F.G. And what would be in a typical Look programme?

D.H. Well, Peter would be there always as host and of course he was invaluable because in those days he was a very popular national figure, and then there would be one or two speakers and as much film as I could get.

F.G. And animals?

D.H. No, very rarely, in fact never I think, no.

F.G. Models?

D.H. Yes, occasionally models, but -

F.G. Did he do sketching and drawing?

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D.H. Oh yes, that was important, I mean that made good the fact that we often hadn't got film, you see.

F.G. Tell us about the ways in which you developed the availability of wildlife film.

D.H. Well, I tried first of all of course, you know, going anywhere in the world where I could find anybody who had any film. One of the problems was you see that television was going to use 16 mm. and in those days all people in films, editors and everybody, regarded that as holiday snaps and they all wanted 35 mm. So that was one problem. Where I found good film it was so often designed for another purpose, you know a man had got a film that accompanied his lecture so there were great longeurs in the film which was where he told his funny story or whatever it was. So this was very unrewarding often, and we had somehow to develop our own film making and what I thought to do was to try to encourage, where there was a good naturalist who did some filming, to try to professionalise them, and so we developed this idea of anyone who showed any talent at all in Britain, I mean as an amateur filming but you know, a good naturalist with some skill with the camera, we'd bring to Bristol, we'd show them the Sielmann Woodpeckers, and we would say "If you think you can professionalise yourself to that pitch, you're going to be very welcome here. If you think that's too hard, let's not waste each other's time", and that's what we did, and I suppose the classic example was Ron Eastman who did The Private Life Of The Kingfisher and taught himself to do everything that Sielmann did, I mean he went inside the river bank where the kingfisher makes its nest and so on, he did it diving under water to catch sticklebacks, and that was I suppose the supreme aahievement but a lot of other people did gradually develop those sort of skills. And then we ran competitions and one competition brought forth the team of Thompson and Skinner. They were two forestry scientists at Oxford and they'd never made a film before. They made a wonderful film of a very specialised kind on an insect they were studying and they won a prize and they never looked back, of course they went on to found what became Oxford Scientific Films which was a big force in the development of wildlife filming. And gradually the units of that sort, you know, began to appear. We did some development with our own people, I mean Tony Soper was equipped with a camera and went off to the Galapagos with Peter Scott, but on the whole our staff units in those days were

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D.H. much more general and they were not specialists (?) and we didn't have the kind of budgets then to send big teams all over the place, you know, we could send perhaps three people, Peter Scott and someone with a camera and somebody to do a bit of sound and all the rest of it, so that to get to the professional standard we have now, we simply didn't have the resources.

F.G. But you did buy in stuff from Armand and Michaela Denis, and Hans and Lotte Hass, I mean funny to look at now.

D.H. Well yes, we did - they were wished on us in a sense, you see, that when the Unit was set up - I should perhaps explain that when Frank Gillard had gone off to London and I became Head of Programmes, the great difference between being a producer and being Head of Programmes is you can begin to pull levers in the BBC that you obviously can't pull when you're a producer, so it was easier for me to make a case for having a proper set up Unit, and I was very lucky in the sense that Frank Gillard was still there in the background, Gerald Beadle similarly as first Regional Controller, he'd gone off to be Director of Television, and so at various stages I had marvellous senior allies, and I know I'm sometimes called the founder of the BBC Natural Unit but nobody in the BBC founds anything single-handed, and I mean it happened it was a time when there was money around and when Board of Management I knew I had very good allies on it, so that we could set up a Unit and get started.

F.G. Tell us about the Michaela and Armand -

D.H. I beg your pardon, yes. So one of the conditions of course, of course London always imposed its conditions and not least in London the professionals. Dear Joanna Spicer, who'd suffered a bit with some of the buying that had gone on, said "of course you'll take over these programmes" that she was very anxious to get rid of because she regarded them as overpriced. There was one absolutely dreadful one that McGivern had bought of some Australian couple that was unshowable, and so we had just one or two unwelcome matters put on us, but I mean Hans and Lotte were good in many ways, I mean he was a good scientist. Armand was a good scientist but they'd grown up in the Hollywood tradition of the big feature film of danger in every fourth foot and so on, and they just became rather old-fashioned so that - but there it was, the contracts had been made, I mean not by Bristol but they had

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D.H. been made and, I mean to be fair, they had a big following, they had an audience, and they all helped but they weren't the future, you know, they, inevitably they were the past.

F.G. But how much editorial control did you have over these programmes?

D.H. Over Armand and Michaela practically none. Armand had a great sense of humour and I used to plead with him to let it show instead of this rather pompous style that he did but he never would do, he would never change his style. With Hans who was a more flexible man and a more flexible mind you could brief him, I mean we partly commissioned some of his later ones, some of his exploration of the Indian Ocean where he was using remote cameras at great depth in the ocean, I mean you know that was great, but the thing was commercially made and he didn't want to put too much good footage into any 30 minutes, you know, so that they weren't quite as good as they could have been.

F.G. Then, as you were saying, there came a time when this activity, which had been a kind of specialisation of the West Region based on its general purpose resources became a properly recognised department really -

D.H. Yes, yes.

F.G. And properly staffed.

D.H. Yes, that's right, and that, I mean that was the beginning of the big takeoff really because now, I mean when we began Look it will sound incredible now but the first editions of Look, when I had to go up to Lime Grove to do it because we had no facilities in Bristol, no studio facilities, I was given one half day of one assistant film editor per programme, which meant he just about had time to wax the film before we went down to the studio, and Peter had to busk his commentary live against the monitor, I mean that was it, whereas once we got the Unit, of course we began to get proper cutting rooms, we began to get much better dubbing facilities and all the rest of it and we became more professional, and I think you see the important thing always is that a thing grows organically stage by stage, you don't suddenly leap into making enormous masterpieces overnight. Never mind if you've got all the money in the world, you have got to grow, and we could do after a while, we could do the 30 minute Look very well and we weren't ashamed of it and we could export it, but it was only 30 minutes. And then when

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D.H. BBC-2 came and we had mercifully David Attenborough as Controller of the new BBC-2, we could then do the 50-minuters, and a 50-minute programme compared with a 30 minutes is not just twenty minutes different as you will know so well, I mean you're in a different league altogether. And we were ready for it then, I mean we had the expertise, we had the experienced directors, we had the contacts throughout the world with the sort of scientists we wanted. And then there came a third stage when finally it seemed that we could tackle the big blockbusters, it was the age of Kenneth Clark on Art and Jacob Bronowski on Science, and it seemed possible for a unit to say well, we similarly could do a big blockbuster of that kind, and programmes like Life On Earth with David Attenborough, they followed there so that, you know, I see these three distinct stages as ways in which something grows and develops and it's a very precious process. I don't think you can speed it up beyond a certain point, I don't think money can always quite buy it, you know I think it comes with experience, with development, and may I say with good leadership because I was well out of it, and for example people like Chris Parsons, Nicky Crocker, people of that sort, highly professional but also very good in their subject matter, they were developing skills, I mean I look back on my efforts as the Stone Age.

F.G. It is a unique kind of organisation within the BBC is it not, and it's carried a great deal of réclame for the BBC round the world.

D.H. Yes, I think that's so, I mean I was simply amazed when I was shown the list of universities that had been consulted over for example Life on Earth, I mean there were literally hundreds of names of experts everywhere who had been drawn into this, and they'd been drawn in because gradually that knowledge had been built up, I mean nobody had stuck a pin in a directory, they were known individually to people. And similarly with I mean the film side of things now with somebody like Mike Kendall in charge of that, the amount of film that comes in from throughout the world to be seen is fabulous.

F.G. And the awards?

D.H. I'd rather deal with that -

F.G. We're out I think. I think we're out now.

D.H. Oh we're out. Oh yes, sorry.

F.G. Never mind.

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