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**File:** 1st October 1986 Eric Fenn  
**Duration:** 1:04:20  
**Typist:** 948

START AUDIO

Male: BBC Oral History Project, History of Religious Broadcasting.  
Original reels, one through four.

[Break in conversation 0:00:10 - 0:00:41]

Frank Gillard: The Oral History of the BBC, Religious Broadcasting. This is Frank Gillard, and the date today is 1st October 1986. I have come to the village of Broome in Worcestershire, I think...

Eric Fenn: Yes.

Frank Gillard: ... to visit the Reverend Professor Eric Fenn who was, during the wartime years, the assistant head of religious broadcasting, Assistant Director of Religious Broadcasting was his title I think, when James Welch was Director of Religious Broadcasting and who, therefore, can tell us a good deal about what happened to religious broadcasting during those crucial years, from '39 through to '45.

You don't mind if I call you Eric, I hope.

Eric Fenn: Not at all. That is what I am normally called.

Frank Gillard: Good. The circumstances at the time were that for the first 10 years or more of religious broadcasting it had been entirely in the hands of the church. The BBC provided the airtime and the facilities, but it was the churches who decided who was to speak and from where and almost what the person was going to say.

Then a director was appointed, this was Iremonger...

Eric Fenn: Iremonger, yes.

Frank Gillard: ... who tried to get some grip on it. He was practically single-handed, but he did manage to introduce some sort of control in religious broadcasting. He did bring in the broadcasting of talks and discussions and things, so that there was some attempt to get away from just services, which had been...

Eric Fenn: Yes.

Frank Gillard: Then comes '39 and the appointment of James Welch, Iremonger having retired, or gone to Lichfield, didn't he?

Eric Fenn: Yes.

Frank Gillard: He went on to become Dean of Lichfield, and James brought you in.

Eric Fenn: That is right.

0:02:17

Frank Gillard: Well, how do you describe the state of the department when you came? There weren't many of you.

Eric Fenn: No. There was only James Welch and me, and three people out in the various regions who helped, but Iremonger had done an absolutely first-rate job, I think. He had begun to break down the suspicions of the churches over this extraordinary new thing that they were asked to [take to do with 0:02:48], you know? (Laughter) There was still a great deal of anxiety about what this thing will do, when, but, on the whole, he had made a very good start.

When I appeared, on 1st May 1939, the programme for which we were responsible was roughly this. There was a daily service which had been established after a great struggle. Iremonger had devised it, and it still continues more or less in the form that he made.

Then there was the Thursday evening, 20-minute service, which for a long time had been done by W.H. Elliott, and that was continuing. On Sunday, there was a morning service and an evening service, and two talks, one of which was usually a review of some religious book.

Then there was the epilogue. Now, the epilogue was, I think, much more important than people imagined. I was astonished

to find, when I took it over, that people of almost any eminence in the theatre and elsewhere would come for merely expenses to read 12 verses of scripture over the air. They were always extremely anxious to make sure that I, as producer, was satisfied that they were interpreting what St Paul was saying, for instance, as it should be interpreted correctly.

The astonishing thing to me then was that almost any actor would insist on two or three rehearsals, and then come out, at the end of the transmission, in a muck sweat of anxiety about it. It was very impressive because I had been accustomed just to climb up into the pulpit and read the thing without any preparation. (Laughter) It was a great kind of rebuke to me, which has stayed with me ever since.

0:05:22

Frank Gillard: Did you get any training as a radio producer?

Eric Fenn: None at all. (Laughter) That was the very odd thing, that none of the people who were working with Welch and me closely, during the war, had been through the staff training college. I can't think why, but I suppose it was sheer pressure of the war, really.

0:05:41

Frank Gillard: Yes. I would like to draw you out a little bit more about the attitude of the churches towards broadcasting, because, although staff were being appointed and the BBC was beginning to have some control over the whole business, the churches were still pretty apprehensive about it, weren't they?

Eric Fenn: Yes.

0:05:58

Frank Gillard: That the Christian faith had to be protected, did it not?

Eric Fenn: Well, yes, in two ways. I think one was that it was ruled, I think in John Reith's day, that broadcasting should only be in the hands of representatives of the central strand of Christianity in the country, which meant, really, the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, and the assorted free churches, but not the [ \_\_\_\_ 0:06:34] [sects]. That was one safeguard.

The other was that they wouldn't allow any discussion on the air, anything which would tend to query the essential truth of the Christian message. That was one thing that we were very exercised about later on.

0:06:56

Frank Gillard: Yes, and there was to be no attack by one church on the dogma of another, if I remember?

Eric Fenn: No, no, quite, which is quite reasonable. (Laughter) Otherwise, it would be chaos. So the Central Religious Advisory Committee, which was set up I am not quite sure when but...

Frank Gillard: Very early on.

Eric Fenn: ... very early on.

Frank Gillard: In '24, I think.

Eric Fenn: As early as that?

Frank Gillard: Yes.

Eric Fenn: It consisted of official representatives of the different churches, and that kept a kind of eye on what was going on and would be responsible for advising the Corporation over such things as whether or not the Eucharist should be broadcast, whether or not Jews should have any access to the mic and that kind of thing.

Of course, when I got there I found a fat file of correspondence with Lord Lothian and others about Christian Science.

Obviously, there were safeguards of this kind which were quite firmly enmeshed in the whole machine.

0:08:09

Frank Gillard: Would you allow Christian Science?

Eric Fenn: Would I personally?

0:08:12

Frank Gillard: No, would the BBC allow it?

Eric Fenn: No, no, and that was why there was such a fat file. Interestingly enough, in 1939 I was staying for a weekend at Lord Lothian's place outside Norwich. He, finding that I had just begun with the BBC, attacked me good and proper for not allowing- And, of course, he was a very good example of Christian Science at its best, a most impressive person, but, anyway, that was that.

0:08:46

Frank Gillard: But, candidly then, who was really in control of religious broadcasting? Was it the churches, through CRAC, was it the BBC, or was it a partnership or what?

Eric Fenn: It was a mixture. On the whole, general lines of policy were in the hands of CRAC, tendered as advice to the Director-General. On the other hand, the Director of Religious Broadcasting acted as the secretary of CRAC, and he reported twice a year on the programme that he had put forward and might or might not have been agreed to by the BBC hierarchy. Then CRAC would discuss it and, on the whole, agree.

So it was a mixture. There were safeguards which the churches rightly insisted on, I think, but there was also a great deal of flexibility.

Frank Gillard: The churches also, quite apart from actual religious broadcasting, regarded themselves in some sense as the custodian of the Christian Sunday in Britain in those days.

0:10:06 Isn't that true?

Eric Fenn: (Laughter) Well, this is hardly the churches. It was Lord Reith. Reith was very anxious about this and felt that radio drama would get out of hand, you see, and they would say things, four-letter words and things, on Sunday which would shock people. Therefore, he ordained that Iremonger should have a veto on what was broadcast on Sundays, especially in drama.

This, of course, was greatly resented by the drama people, and I had every sympathy with them. We got this removed in the end, but it was a bit of a struggle.

0:10:48

Frank Gillard: Did you, indeed, have to follow, did you have to scrutinise?

Eric Fenn: Yes, indeed. One of the first things I did when I got there was to sit down with the scripts of the next Sunday and go through them to find the four-letter words. (Laughter)

0:11:04

Frank Gillard: That applied to all programmes, did it?

Eric Fenn: Yes, but, of course, you couldn't do anything about music. That was beyond- But it was mainly plays they were anxious about.

0:11:17

Frank Gillard: But there weren't any variety shows to worry about?

Eric Fenn: Not on Sunday, I don't think, then.

Frank Gillard: Well, let's talk about James Welch.

0:11:25 Tell us what you feel about his regime, about James himself, and how much success did he achieve, do you think? He had a difficult time, I consider.

Eric Fenn: Oh yes, indeed. Well, anybody was bound to in those circumstances. Well, I had known James for a long time. I had known him when he was an undergraduate in Cambridge, and he was then reading anthropology, then theology, and then he went off to Africa and I lost sight of him. He went to Ibadan, as, I think, chaplain to the university for some years. Then he came back and was in charge of the teacher training college in York. From there, he came to the BBC.

To my astonishment, he rang me up one day, after he had been appointed, and asked me if I would apply for the job of his assistant.

0:12:26

Frank Gillard: What were you doing then?

Eric Fenn: I was then following up with J.H. Oldham, following up the work of the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State, which had been in 1937, and working from Edinburgh House.

It was the last thing on earth I had anticipated being asked to do, but after talking to him I agreed to do it. For some strange reason they accepted me, which was, again, an astonishment.

Frank Gillard: A very wise move, clearly.

Eric Fenn: (Laughter)

Frank Gillard: A very wise move.

Eric Fenn: But, going back to James, he was an enormously powerful person in himself. I mean he was formidable, and I was not surprised to find that he earned the title of the Thomas à Becket of the situation, who would rid me of this turbulent priest.

As I gather from my talk with him in the early days, what he was concerned about was to make more available to the churches the techniques of broadcasting, to select the best people from the churches for the purpose of broadcasting, and especially to experiment with the use of drama. He had married an actress and had always been very, very keen on this, and we had to work this out slowly as we went.

I enjoyed working with him. I was exasperated with him sometimes, but we got on very well on the whole.

Frank Gillard: The records seem to show that he had not a great deal of patience with dogma, with denominationalism and that sort of thing, and that he aimed at some sort of highest common factor of faith.

0:14:43 Indeed, wasn't the jibe made against him that he was trying to invent a BBC religion?

Eric Fenn: Well, I know this was a jibe that was made against him. I don't think it was in his mind at all, nor in mine. We did regard ourselves, especially when the war came along, as the representatives of the church within the BBC, and, therefore, anxious, vis-à-vis the other programmes going out, to have the best possible religious programmes we could find and the best possible religious broadcasters we could discover.

This meant that he did appear to arrogate to himself some of the authority that rightly belonged to CRAC, but we found that as we worked this out and discussed with CRAC what we were up to, it worked out all right.

Certainly, we didn't think at the time we were creating another kind of religion, namely a BBC religion. In fact, I was greatly shocked when, after the war, I was invited to go and talk to an Anglo-Russian conference about BBC religion, and I refused. I said, "There is no such [animal 0:15:59]." (Laughter)

[Break in audio 0:16:01 - 0:16:19]

Frank Gillard: ... the Reverend Eric Fenn's contribution, and we are now on his take two. I wanted now to turn to those historic days when war broke out and the whole department, well, it wasn't a very big department, but you were all evacuated, of course, to Bristol.

0:16:36 Tell us about that, will you?

Eric Fenn: Well, it all began much earlier than September 3rd. Of course, there were plans for the distribution of the BBC all over the place much earlier on, in August, when war seemed so inevitable.

As far as we were concerned, it began to take effect on 1st September, the Friday, when my wife and I were told to go down to Bristol and we should be staying with the then Bishop, and James Welch and his wife will follow on the Saturday. So we went on a very wet evening, arrived in a blackout and couldn't find the Bishop's house, but we did in the end. I took the daily service the next day, and then Welch and [Claire 0:17:42] came to us on the Saturday.

Now, on the Sunday he had insisted that the Archbishop of Canterbury should come down to Bristol and broadcast to the nation in the evening if war broke out. This was very much against the archbishop's wish because he couldn't understand why he couldn't broadcast from London.

Now, this was because, the expectation I gather, the first thing Hitler would do was to bomb London. Therefore, the only people left in Broadcasting House were the news people. Everybody else had to be scattered in order to be able to continue broadcasting even if this happened.

However, nothing did happen. There was a scare, as you know, on the Sunday morning, but that was a mistake and all was well. So Archbishop Lang came down very reluctantly, and James took the service and he preached. I was in a listening room, which was full of people in a highly nervous state. Nobody knew what to expect, and the atmosphere was very edgy and very electric.

Well, Lang disappointed us bitterly. He had nothing to say on the supposition, that we felt was quite certain, that everybody was feeling anxious. He simply told rather pleasant stories, and I think probably we were then judging him too harshly. I think he may have felt, "Well, it is no good arousing undue pessimism at this stage, and so we will play it lightly."

Anyway, when he had finished my secretary turned to me, she was sitting next to me, and said, "What on earth does that man think he is for?" This was echoed by all the people round about. They felt this was an opportunity which was completely missed.

Well, we were very disappointed, and we had a long discussion about it the next day, which ended with Welch saying, "Well, look here, Eric, you had better take the Thursday evening service and see what we can do."

Now, the Thursday was a thing allocated to W.H. Elliott. He was ill and so couldn't come down to Bristol, so I said, "All right, I will try to do what I can."

So I worked very hard at that script. It still exists. What I tried to do was to say four things very simply. The first, that the war breaking out did not mean that God had died. God was still a reality and still in charge of things, even though it didn't look like it.

Secondly, we were going to get hurt. People were going to be killed, people were going to be wounded, people were going to be extremely sad with all kinds of bereavement, and, therefore, we ought, at this stage, to in some way or another come to some decision about death. In doing so, we must take the Christian faith into account.

Thirdly, that since the last major war, the state of mutual recognition between different churches in different countries had grown enormously. The whole ecumenical movement was now a reality, and we mustn't think that that was over, even though we seemed to have broken it to bits by the war.

Finally, the church, qua church, must always hold on to ultimate reconciliation if it was going to be true to the Gospel.

Well, I don't know whether anybody except me was concerned about this, but I only got one kick about it. That was from the Lord's Day Observance Society, who wrote to Welch. After congratulating him on his own behaviour in the office, mildly regretted that this Thursday evening service had occurred. Otherwise, I don't know what people made of it.

Frank Gillard: Of course, it was a crucially important moment. I mean not only for you, for the whole country. The first thing we ought to say here is that there was only one radio service by now.

0:23:10 Isn't that true? There were no alternative services.

Eric Fenn: Yes, yes.

Frank Gillard: So anybody who wanted to listen had to listen to this.

Eric Fenn: Yes.

Frank Gillard: Which meant you had a vast audience.

Eric Fenn: Yes.

Frank Gillard: Of people who were absolutely distraught with anxiety.

Eric Fenn: Yes. That is what one felt. I suppose one could have been exaggerating this, that a great many people didn't know what was happening at all, but it was an enormously large audience and a very crucial moment.

Frank Gillard: But that is the sort of thing the archbishop should have been saying.

Eric Fenn: I agree. That is what we felt so bitterly disappointed about. Going on from there, one of the things that happened immediately with the outbreak of war was that religious broadcasting was limited to four people. Welch and myself, the Dean of Bristol, and S.E. Swann, who was Vicar of St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol.

This was a safeguard, a kind of temporary measure, until they got things organised. It was quite ridiculous, but there it was.

0:24:29

Frank Gillard: No other cleric could be heard?

Eric Fenn: Nobody at all. Well, this only lasted a short time, but after that we had to be very careful whom it was that we invited. Gradually, a pattern of control and of censorship was established, so that nothing could be broadcast which had not got the stamp of the chief censor, who was Sir Richard Maconachie, the former Director of Talks.

The script must be quite rigidly adhered to. You couldn't put in anything. Now, this was because they were terrified that somebody, some extreme right-wing or extreme left-wing person somewhere, would convey messages to the other side in this way, as, indeed, was quite possible to do. So that was a kind of straitjacket in which we were fixed.

The third element was a very, very rigid ban against all known pacifists. That included people who were very well known to me, like George MacLeod, Donald Soper and Charles Raven. People as remote from political life as, say, the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, which was also banned because Sir Hugh Robertson was a pacifist.

0:26:26

Frank Gillard: He was the conductor?

Eric Fenn: Yes.

0:26:31

Frank Gillard: But there was no law, was there, against the preaching of pacifism from an open pulpit?

Eric Fenn: Oh, outside the BBC, you mean?

Frank Gillard: Hmm.

Eric Fenn: No, there couldn't be, really, and, indeed, Leyton Richards had preached a sermon close up to the beginning of the war. I don't think in the war. I am not quite sure. Was a very convinced pacifist, and this was, of course, of great alarm to the authorities, but-

0:27:07

Frank Gillard: That was when he was talking about the weaponless love of Christ?

Eric Fenn: Yes, yes. I can't remember quite when that took place.

Frank Gillard: It was after the outbreak of war.

Eric Fenn: Oh, was it?

Frank Gillard: Yes. It was in the February of 1940.

Eric Fenn: Oh, really?

Frank Gillard: Hmm.

Eric Fenn: I missed that.

Frank Gillard: Yes. Well, Donald Soper says that nobody ever told him that he was taken off, nobody ever told him that he was taken off because he was a pacifist. He just ceased to receive invitations.

Eric Fenn: Yes, that was true.

[Break in audio 0:27:45]

Frank Gillard: After the interruption, we are resuming.

Eric Fenn: Yes. Well, now where do we go from here?

Frank Gillard: Well, I was saying that Donald said that nobody had told him that was taken off because he was a pacifist.

Eric Fenn: Oh yes. I don't think any of them were formally informed about this, but, of course, we knew that that was why they could not

be invited. That was a very considerable blow, because they were all very good broadcasters.

Frank Gillard: I must press you a little bit on this. The evidence of the written records, which I have seen, is that James Welch fought this bitterly, right the way up to the governors.

Eric Fenn: Yes. Indeed, yes. You see, there was a principle involved, which was for both of us, both James and for me, of very great importance. There was a split between pacifists and non-pacifists throughout the country, and especially in the Christian churches. Ought it to be impossible for a pacifist and a non-pacifist to cooperate in preaching the Gospel, a Gospel from which they drew different conclusions, but an objective Gospel which was there whether you were pacifist or not?

Now, this seemed to us to be very important. To me especially, because at the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State in 1937, in one of the international sessions it had been very carefully discussed, this issue, and it had been agreed that no such impossibility existed, that there was an objective Gospel and that pacifists and non-pacifists could combine in preaching that.

Here we were, having to ban pacifists, qua pacifists, in spite of the fact that they were good preachers of the Gospel. This, we couldn't put up with.

This went on, oh, reverberating and, as you say, Welch had to fight it through the BBC, but it came to a head, I think, when there was a meeting of CRAC in, I think, the new year of '40. Iremonger had been asked to do a review of the life of Dick Sheppard, which had just come out.

Now, Sheppard had been a very distinguished pacifist, and no life of his could ignore this fact. Nor could Iremonger's review. But his script, which he submitted, was turned down because he would not excise this reference to the Peace Pledge Union, which was the thing that people knew about.

He appealed to CRAC, and when CRAC met in January, I think, '40, the Director-General was there and Archbishop Garbett. No, well, he wasn't an archbishop then. He was the Bishop of Winchester, who was Chairman of CRAC, who was there in the chair.

Iremonger made a statement in which he recounted the facts of the turning down of this script, up to the point when in order to go further he had to have permission from Ogilvie to quote from correspondence.

[Break in audio 0:31:56 - 0:32:08]

Frank Gillard: ... religious broadcasting story, as told to us by the Reverend Professor Eric Fenn. This is tape three, and before I go back to Mr Fenn I want to say a couple of things.

First is you may hear some wildlife crowing away in the background. This is because of this lovely house in which Mr and Mrs Fenn live. There are wild duck and all sorts of wildfowl out there on the lawn.

Second, Iremonger is I, R, E, M, O, N, G, E, R, and he was the first Director of Religious Broadcasting. The Reverend F.W. No-

Eric Fenn: F.A.

Frank Gillard: F.A. Iremonger, that is right, yes, that is it. There was something else I was going to give you, but it has slipped my mind now.

Of course, CRAC is the Central Religious Advisory Committee.

Eric Fenn: That is right.

Frank Gillard: And this was a special meeting of CRAC, called at the request of Doctor Iremonger, if he was a doctor, I am not sure if he was or not, Mr Iremonger anyway, about the question of his review of the life of Dick Sheppard.

Eric Fenn: That is right.

Frank Gillard: And you said at the end of the last tape that he wanted permission to print from the letters, the correspondence.

Eric Fenn: To quote from the...

Frank Gillard: To quote from it.

Eric Fenn: Yes. When this was refused, Iremonger said, "Well, there is then no further need of my presence here" and went out. There was a dead silence, and then Bishop Garbett moved on to the next issue.

Well, this was a very bad business, really, and I was, I think, on the verge of resignation because it seemed to me to be a quite monstrous situation to be landed in. I went down to Winchester to talk it over with Bishop Garbett, and he said, on the whole, that he was working away at it behind the scenes and, "For heaven's sake, don't resign at the moment", so I stayed where I was.

The issue was only resolved over Sir Hugh Robertson, because I think it was Vaughan Williams, who wrote a letter to 'The Times' protesting about this, saying that in view of the attitude of the BBC to Sir Hugh Robertson and the choir he now formally withdrew permission for the BBC to perform any of his works.

Well, this set the cat amongst the pigeons good and proper. A question was asked in the House. Churchill, who was by then in command, got up and said words to this effect:

"Reprehensible though the views of this gentleman may be, I do not see that they have any influence on the way he plays the fiddle." There was general laughter, and the matter was shelved from then on.

[Break in audio 0:35:32]

Frank Gillard: I am going to ask Mr Fenn if he will do that story for us-

[Break in audio]

Well, we were interrupted yet again. Mr Fenn is going to repeat the story about Sir Hugh Robertson, who was the conductor of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, who was a pacifist, and both Sir Hugh and the choir were, as a result, banned from broadcasting right through the duration of the war.

0:35:57

Now, tell us why, the story of Sir Hugh Robertson and Vaughan Williams.

[Break in audio]

After quite a long interval, we are going to start again, and it is the story of Sir Hugh Robertson and Vaughan Williams and so forth.

Eric Fenn:

The whole pacifist issue came to a head with the banning of Sir Hugh Robertson and the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, which was a scandalous thing, especially to the artists. I think it was Vaughan Williams who wrote a letter to 'The Times' protesting against this and saying that in view of the BBC's attitude he formally withdrew permission for them to perform any of his works, which of course set the cat amongst the pigeons.

Later on, because of this a question was asked in the House. Winston Churchill, who was then in command, got up and said words to this effect: "Reprehensible though this man's opinions may be, I do not see that they have anything to do with the way he plays the fiddle." There was general laughter, and that was that.

That meant that the BBC had to look at the situation again. They agreed in the end that pacifists could preach the Gospel but must not preach pacifism. On that basis, we managed to get by.

[Break in audio 0:37:45]

Frank Gillard:

Of course, in Bristol, there you were. As the department you needed broadcasting facilities.

0:37:50                   Where did you get them?

Eric Fenn:                At first, we were all crammed into one room, which meant about eight people on the staff in the one room trying to work, which was impossible.

After a very short time, we first of all got office accommodation in what was called Church House just...

[Break in audio 0:38:18]

Frank Gillard:          So there you were crammed into that one office, and that must have been very uncomfortable.

0:38:22                   What about broadcasting, where did all that happen?

Eric Fenn:               Well, talks, we continued to broadcast from whatever studio might be available, but the services...

[Break in audio 0:38:37]

Frank Gillard:          Well, we have been driven by the fire bell out of the house, (Laughter) after waiting half an hour, and we are now continuing sitting in my car outside.

Let's go back to this question of how you broadcast from Bristol because I know Broadcasting House itself was very small and very crowded.

Eric Fenn: Yes. We managed to do any kind of talks that we wanted from the existing studios, but for the rest, for the services, we used the Cathedral Lady Chapel, which we got wired for the purpose and which was very good, apart from the fact that at night it couldn't be blacked out.

I remember one famous occasion when Sir Walford Davies was conducting the singers, and he wanted to have the organ. He got the organist to come, and then the problem was how did the organist see his beat? He used a torch, and you had this extraordinary sight of a line of light waving all over the place (Laughter) as Sir Walford Davies conducted the singers, and [poor Miss Lehant 0:39:55] tried to follow his lead. But it was a very lovely place to perform from, and we were most grateful.

0:40:05

Frank Gillard: And tell us about the circumstances in Bristol and those first few days. They must have been very peculiar, indeed. I mean armies of people descending on the place from London.

Eric Fenn: Quite extraordinary, and it was, of course, very nice weather which was a great help. But when you got down to Broadcasting House in the morning, the low wall just outside was festooned with more delightful ladies from the Variety Department or people like that, and a large crowd opposite watching what was happening.

Inside, there were the administrative offices, so-called, of the Variety Department, the Music Department, ourselves as the RB Department, and then Schools and Music. Absolute chaos,

until each department managed to find its own accommodation elsewhere, and then we became more or less civilised again.

Frank Gillard: But then Bristol itself got bombed.

Eric Fenn: Yes. After the start of the real war, in the spring of 1940, it was very badly knocked about. We had to move, and we moved up to Bedford, and that was comparatively safe. The other departments scattered to various places elsewhere. From then on, we were more or less stable.

0:41:45

Frank Gillard: And where did you broadcast from in Bedford then?

Eric Fenn: The Lady Chapel, the side chapel, of the main Anglican church. I have forgotten what its name was. St Mary's, I think. There, again, was a very delightful place to work from. Then we had a converted hotel in another part of Bedford, which was turned into a series of studios for talks and that kind of thing. So we got by then very well.

0:42:25

Frank Gillard: To what extent did the war and the circumstances of war dominate religious broadcasting?

Eric Fenn: Oh, enormously. I often found myself wondering what would have happened if there hadn't been a war because I had no

idea how Welch's policies would have worked out then. The fact that the war broke out meant that the whole thing was quite suddenly simplified. There was only one network, afterwards two, and of course the TV affair had been closed down immediately, when war broke out, so they weren't a complicating factor. So it was, from a technical point of view, extremely simple.

0:43:21

Frank Gillard: But what about the message, the sermons, the policy?

Eric Fenn: Oh, that was a constant headache. We were seeking people with the right kind of voice and with something to say to a nation which was being heavily battered almost every night in the Blitz.

That wasn't easy to find, but we managed it very well, I think, on the whole. I don't know quite what more to say about that-

0:43:56

Frank Gillard: What about the special needs of the forces?

Eric Fenn: Well, that was interesting. I don't think we ever were very bright about that. What happened was that early in the war, say in about November '39, Welch went off to France to visit the forces there and find out what they and their leaders expected from the BBC. He came back with a number of ideas.

What we worked out in the end was the maximum use of army chaplains and air force chaplains and naval chaplains and so on was for short talks, of the kind of thing that men in considerable distress might be able to listen to. Then later, when we were in Bedford, Ronnie Selby Wright was- What do you call it?

Frank Gillard: Radio padre?

Eric Fenn: He was made radio padre. I can't remember the word I want. When you are transferred from one position to another.

Frank Gillard: Transferred or directed?

Eric Fenn: From the army to us, to act as radio padre. Now, his function was apparently very slender. All he had to do was one talk a week, but he took general part in our ordinary programme. He used to take the daily service occasionally and so on.

It was only much later in the war that I discovered the inwardness of this appointment. He came to me one day and said, "Look here, I have been asked by the War Office to convey messages in my talks." I said, "What kind of messages?" He said, "Well, they would be messages to POWs about the possibilities of their escape and so on. Do you think I ought to do it?"

Well, we discussed this for a bit, and quite obviously he did. He was right to do it, because he met, oh, several people after the war who said, "We did hear your message, sir, and it

meant all the difference. We got away." That was one of the interesting things.

It might seem to be a rather pedantic point, to think that there might be any question about this, but the principle involved, which we discussed at great length, was whether it was right to use a religious talk for even a crying out emergency, secular interest. On the whole we decided yes because of the emergency.

Now, what else can I...?

Frank Gillard: Well, men in the services, wrenched away from their homes and forced together. I mean the only place they could listen surely would be in canteens and places with no end of racket going on.

Eric Fenn: Yes, awful.

Frank Gillard: I mean there could be no serious address made to them, surely. Hymn-singing, yes.

Eric Fenn: Hymn-singing was important, yes. On the whole, hymns stay with people longer than sermons, and so that was quite possible. But you could get certain groups who would be able to listen, in the education services and so on of the army. We tried to exploit that as far as possible.

[Break in audio 0:47:56]

Male: Since reel four does seem all right, we will do reels four and five.

[Break in audio 0:48:22]

Frank Gillard: ... religious broadcasting story. This is Eric Fenn's take four. Now, although, of course, you were Assistant Head, you were responsible right across the board under James Welch, so that you took part in everything practically that the department did, but your special responsibility was to be talks and discussions and to develop what you might call the non-religious service side of religious broadcasting.

0:48:49 Now, how did that go?

Eric Fenn: Well, we had a certain element of it already in the talks that took place on Sunday afternoon. What we wanted to do was to get something into the week, into weekdays, which was not clearly and obviously labelled as a service so that people wouldn't be put off by that, as we knew some people were.

In particular, we wanted to get some kind of discussion going about Christianity. Of course, we knew perfectly well, as anybody must do, that the war was already creating enormous problems that people weren't getting answered and, therefore, we ought to do something about it.

We made one bosh shot. We tried a thing called 'Three Men and a Parson', which was a scripted discussion group because it was that, it was a failure. Then we tried agitating for an open discussion, which could be vetted before it was transmitted,

you see, because that was the problem. We invented a thing which we called 'The Anvil', which was a four-man discussion of issues which were sent in by listeners. We employed an extra person in London, A.C.F. Beales, who was a Roman Catholic layman, to handle this, as far as the correspondence was concerned.

He received all the postcards with the questions, and he and I sorted these out each week. Then we sat down with the four people concerned and, after deciding the batting order, we went ahead and discussed.

This was enormously important and, indeed, in a sense popular, especially as the war got worse and worse and people were really raising fundamental issues of belief and of morals and everything else. We did our best to at least indicate that there was an answer somewhere, if you looked for it.

F.A. Cockin, who was then Canon of St Paul's, chaired this thing, and the other members of the group normally were Agnellus Andrew, who was a Roman Catholic friar. Somebody like Nat Micklem, who was a Congregationalist, and a woman, a kind of statutory woman, who was, as a rule, Mary Trevelyan.

That went on and was a very great help to a great many people, I think.

0:52:08

Frank Gillard: You recorded it, I suppose, did you?

Eric Fenn: We recorded it, and then it was played back to the high-ups to be vetted, and, if there was any need to, we would bring in somebody from CRAC to hear it, too.

0:52:22

Frank Gillard: And did you often have to make cuts in it?

Eric Fenn: No. They were very good to us. Sir Richard Maconachie was extremely sceptical about it, but he had got with him by then a man who had been sent from the Foreign Office to help him with his work of censor, and that was Guy Burgess, of all people.

He came down to Bristol first of all and then again to Bedford to help us produce this thing. Guy Burgess was not at all interested in religion, but he was a very fair-minded person when it came to the job, and we got on fairly well.

He was, as we now know, a convinced communist in every way, and, therefore, he had no use for what we were doing, but he had to look after it, so he did. (Laughter)

0:53:26

Frank Gillard: And this was a kind of religious brains trust then?

Eric Fenn: Yes. The old 'Brains Trust', which was still going on, it was forbidden to discuss either political or religious issues, much to C.E.M. Joad's anger. So we thought we would have to have something specifically religious, and then we could get something going, and it was a very important help.

0:53:58

Frank Gillard: And you had Christian news and comment?

Eric Fenn: Well, I was wrong about this now, because I realised to run a Christian news and comment properly would have needed much more staff than we were going to get. This was just a thing that Beales and I cooked up between us, and we got Nat Micklem from Mansfield College, Oxford, to broadcast.

He wasn't really any good. Sorry. We ought to have had somebody getting about amongst the chaplaincies and so on and to really bring in first-class news, and we hadn't got the resources so that was that.

The other thing I was interested in, as also was Welch, was the use of drama. I experimented with one series of four Sunday services in which the sermon was replaced by a dramatic interlude. This, I think, was successful, but I don't think it was something I would want to go on with.

But the important dramatic thing, of course, was 'The Man Born to be King', the series of plays based on the fourth Gospel by Dorothy Sayers, and that was a very important thing from every point of view.

0:55:29

Frank Gillard: Did you have much of a hand in that?

Eric Fenn: Well, in its inception, yes, because I happened to be staying at the House of the Sacred Mission in Kelham, near Newark, for

a weekend, and old Father Kelly, who was an old friend of mine, asked me if I knew anything about this girl, he called her a girl, Sayers. I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, because she has just written a very interesting play called 'The Zeal of thy House' for the Canterbury Festival. I think you had better watch her. She is worth looking at." (Laughter)

So when I came back, I talked to Welch about this. He was interested, and we got hold of the play, 'The Zeal of thy House', and looked at it. He took it up with her in terms of a suggestion that she might do a series of plays based on the fourth Gospel, really presenting the life of Christ in understandable dramatic form. This, of course, was very revolutionary because it might collide with the edict that no dramatic impersonation of the Deity could be made on the stage.

How far was the radio equivalent to a stage production? This had to be discussed and fought out, but in the end she did this. She drafted a couple of scripts, and we got those recorded and played back to the people in CRAC and also the BBC staff. They, I think with some reluctance, agreed to the project going on, and so she finished it off. It was a very remarkable series of plays, and still is.

Frank Gillard: And was repeated over and over again, of course.

Eric Fenn: Yes. It began life in 'The Children's Hour' because that was the only place where it was known that religious drama had been successful. Then it was moved to the ordinary Home Service and so on, and it was very, very moving indeed. It was extremely good.

Frank Gillard: Now, she turned out to be a very formidable lady, and she gave 'The Children's Hour' people a hell of a time, if I may say so. (Laughter) In fact, she insisted that they pulled out altogether in the end. The Head of Drama, Val Gielgud, produced it, didn't he?

Eric Fenn: Oh, yes.

0:58:25

Frank Gillard: But when you have a great personality like Dorothy Sayers and you have another great personality like James Welch- I mean did they pull together well?

Eric Fenn: I think they did, yes. I think she had a great respect for James, and he, of course, was entirely behind her in wanting Val Gielgud as her producer. Oddly enough, when we asked her whom she wanted to produce, she just said, "Well, first of all, no Christian." We looked a bit surprised. She said, "You see, if you have a Christian producer, he will sentimentalise it, and this is drama, it is not sentiment, and I want Val Gielgud."

Well, Val Gielgud was an agnostic, but he read the plays and was much impressed with them, and he produced them quite magnificently. It was very interesting. They had an enormous effect, not only on the audience but on the actors. After several of them, the actors, well, just stayed quite quiet, sitting there in their places, almost shattered by it.

Frank Gillard: It is a pity, really, that the department couldn't follow up this. I mean nothing has really succeeded as 'The Man Born to be King' did.

Eric Fenn: No, no. Of course, I don't know, I have often had some hesitations about it. You see, having done it and done it superbly, we had opened the door to all kinds of other interpretations, and were we right to do this? I just don't know. In itself, it was a superb piece of work, very well done, and had an enormous effect.

Frank Gillard: I want to ask just briefly about drama for schools. Indeed, RB for schools generally.

Eric Fenn: Well, the Schools Department was an extremely efficient department and not at all kindly disposed towards- I assume they regarded [us as 1:00:30] complete amateurs.

We had John Williams, who was a vicar in one of the London parishes, who joined us. His main responsibility was to do a weekly programme for schools' assemblies for Mary Somerville, who was the Director of Schools, to do something of the same kind now for 'The Children's Hour'.

He was very good and very patient. He had a very tough time, but I think in the end the Schools Department accepted him and accepted the policy. That was carried on after we had all gone.

1:01:25

Frank Gillard: What about church leaders and broadcasting [in your 1:01:28] time? What about Temple, for example, and other church leaders?

Eric Fenn: Well, Temple, of course, was entirely sui generis. He was a most remarkable person. I knew him very well and had enormous respect for him. He was an admirable broadcaster. There was no kind of trouble about producing him. He knew precisely what he was up to and how to do it.

One of the other great broadcasters in my view was Dom Bernard Clements of All Saints, Margaret Street, an Anglican monk. He did a lot of 'Lift Up Your Hearts!' programmes, just five minutes before the eight o'clock news, admirably. It sounded entirely spontaneous, but I knew that he had written and rewritten and rehearsed until he had got it pretty well perfect.

1:02:34

Frank Gillard: What about the leaders of the free churches, for example, and the Roman Church?

Eric Fenn: Rome was in a very difficult situation because, apart from talks, they couldn't do anything. They couldn't do any of these occasional services that we really lived on.

They wanted to broadcast the Mass. It was only much later, after the war, that it was formally agreed that we should broadcast the Communion service, the Mass, and, therefore, the Roman Catholics could come in properly.

It was a very interesting issue, that, because it divided so that the Anglo-Catholics, the Romans, and some Methodists were in favour of broadcasting the Mass because John Wesley had regarded the Communion service as a converting agency, but the rest of them, especially the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists and the Baptists, would have none of it. They thought it was impious to broadcast this very sacred event to the general public, which might be in a pub or a racing stable or what have you.

But Father D'Arcy, of Campion Hall, Oxford, broadcast quite a lot for us, and the free churches, [Weatherhead 1:04:18]-

END AUDIO

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