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BBC'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

PART 1, 2 & 3 JOY WHITBY

Q: Tell us about your family background; you were born in Helsinki to what sort of parents, what was their background?

00:00:20 **A:** My mother came from Russia, (er), from St. Petersburg, my father was from Glasgow but because of family background he had been adopted by cousins, and my mother had been emigrating from Russia in the revolution. So that's why her family went to Finland, my father came to Finland to look for work with, her father as it turned out, she opened the door, and later they got married. And I was three before I came to England, but I had two older brothers.

Q: When did you start to get a sense of what you wanted to do when you were grown up?

00:01:08 **A:** Well, I was writing stories and giving my mother great birthday presents of things that she, I don't think really, appreciated; I remember taking one back. And then, as a lot of arts students do, I thought vaguely about social work, I thought hard about publishing and, well, getting into the BBC was an absolute accident.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your education. Were there requirements from your parents?

00:01:43 **A:** My parents were very encouraging. I had two older

brothers who went to Oxford and did very well. One went to Bletchley, one became a scientist, cancer research and so I grew up in an atmosphere where being a girl, really, matter of course, I did what my brothers did. They went to Oxford, I went to Oxford. I wasn't a particularly good academic scholar but I enjoyed Oxford, and afterwards I thought, possibly social work, and came to London with job offers recommended by the Oxford appointments board, which a lot of us went to automatically. And this was as a classifier in a picture post library where I was supposed to be for a year. And I supplied pictures for writers who would want, you know, to illustrate a book about Bernard Shaw, and I had to sift through all these terribly sad pictures of him on his death bed, Trotsky on his death bed, and a lot of foreign royalty and so on. But the point about classifying was that it was a very useful way of understanding visual material and selecting.

Q: And yet you were also thinking about social work.

00:03:24 **A:** Well, I went back to Oxford because my next job was at Nuffield College where I worked on the Nuffield biography. I worked for an economist called Phillip

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Andrews, I was his researcher come secretary. I used to go round factories with him, and all sorts of things, to try and get information about Lord Nuffield. And I met my husband there, who was doing a thesis, and he got into the civil service and he went back to London, and having said he would never marry anyone, we did get married, and went to London, and I had to find another job. So, again, I think it was the Oxford appointments people gave me the address of the Mayfair Delinquency Clinic, which was an odd assortment of very eccentric psychiatrists. And I was working there as a secretary, and I was very aware of the children in the waiting room being left by these sad parents having their problems fixed, and nothing happened with the

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children. So I started telling them stories and this rather irritated other secretaries who thought I was being uppity, and one day one of them came over with *The Times*. And there were two adverts in *The Times*, one for studio managers and one for a producer on *Listen With Mother*. So I applied for both, I didn't get the *Listen With Mother* job, but I did get one of the studio manager jobs, and went to Broadcasting House and started there.

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Q: Did you think then you could do something with broadcasting for children?

00:05:27 **A:** Yes, I think that's what they thought, 'If you're telling stories to children, why don't you apply for *Listen With Mother?'* And I did, in fact, fill out a test which was very interesting, in relation to what's happened to children's literature since, and that was a test made by the, then, creator of *Listen With Mother*, who was a wonderful, elderly woman near retirement, was called Jean Sutcliffe. And she had devised this so, people like me, we had to fill out a recommendation of a story for a 3 – 5 year old age range, 5 - 7, 7 - 9, very distinct. And you chose things like *The Three Bears* for the youngest, and then you moved on to *Snow White*, with a more romantic feel, and then you ended up with things like the *Arthurian Legends*, you see. So there was a very distinct difference between these age range demands, and it made me think quite hard, and afterwards these barriers got eroded and people would make *Three Little Pigs* into an animation for everybody, and so on. And

00:06:43 people didn't have any, sort of, regard and respect, in the way that Jean Sutcliffe was very, very confident about. And she also created a whole literature for

under-fives which had never existed before. She found very good story writers who had never worked, Diana Ross, Leila Berg, Dorothy Edwards, famous names in that area who got their chances through her.

Q: So did this form part of your application process to the BBC, presumably not to the studio manager role, but for applying to *Listen With Mother*?

00:07:23 **A:** Well, I didn't know at the time that I was runner up. And so, after a year, apparently the person they appointed didn't work out. So they asked me to apply again, and that's how I got the job, after a year. But, meanwhile, I'd had a wonderful time being a studio manager, mainly for drama, which was quite a revelation because as you will know, all the sound effects were made by hand those days. I've got two very vivid memories really, one was being involved in a drama about a love scene, and my job was to stand with a little tiny switch in my hand and go click on and off, on and off, according to whether she wanted dark or he wanted light. That was one embarrassment, much worse was being involved in a huge drama about a prison camp, and it was a very, very big class, and my job was to stand in the middle with a whip, and I

00:08:25 had to whip it, and I just couldn't, and some male studio manager came and did that job. But more often I was opening and shutting doors for *Mrs Dale's Diary*, and that kind of thing. And it was all extremely useful later because I think I used sound effects in television more than had been done before, because I thought they were so important. As were the comedy programmes, obviously, made a huge emphasis on funny sound effects.

Q: This was 1956, what was it like entering the BBC workforce as a woman at the time? Was there still a kind of post-war old guard in place?

00:09:11 **A:** I don't think I'm representative, because I've never suffered from being a woman in my career, not really, there was a bit of bottom pinching at Yorkshire Television, that kind of thing. But in the BBC it was all very proper, I always worked for women, really admirable women, not always, but they were the key people in my career, whom I respected, they were very good bosses. And I also had lots of women working for me, and in my own home my husband was very supportive of women generally; as you probably know he died when he was Controller of Radio 4, very young,

and he had been instrumental in helping a lot of very high achieving women get their jobs. So, really, it never worried me.

Q: What were your first impressions on joining the BBC?

00:10:09 **A:** Well, I can remember being amazed because we had to go up to Television Centre and sign a form saying we would agree not to leave before, I think it was about five years. And it seemed to me totally unnecessary, who would ever want to leave the BBC having come into it. And then I worked in an office just opposite Broadcasting House in Langham Place, in a small unit with two other women doing *Listen With Mother*, this was after being the studio manager. And because in Broadcasting House the whole atmosphere was really very correct and leisurely and respectful, it was a very nice environment to learn in. As a studio manager I was so caught up in what we did, terrible early moments when, with very little training, having to open the studio in the morning, and it was the news, you know, and which buttons did you press, and I remember putting a record on, a ’78 disk, at the wrong

00:11:25 speed, which went out live. Nobody reprimanded me.

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Q: You mentioned training, was it all on the job?

00:11:37 **A:** A lot on the job, I think we did have, my memory is of a fairly short training as a studio manager; I was on the producer's course when I went to television, with about twelve other people from all over the BBC. That was excellent, we really did get helped a great deal.

Q: So within one or two years, you were producing *Listen With Mother* and schools radio programmes. Schools radio, once again a very targeted audience. Were there people, externally, who were setting a kind of radio curriculum; how did the relationship work?

00:12:25 **A:** I really worked on two programmes, most of my time in schools radio, and they were *Listen With Mother* and *Let's Join In*. And really my mentor was this lady Jean Sutcliffe, I told you about, and I learnt most of what I knew, and afterwards used, from her. And I wasn't aware of advisory panels at all, they may have been at a higher level, but at my new producer level, no, I didn't ever become conscious of that. Although we were conscious of our colleagues and of departmental program reviews, although that happened much more in television.

Q: Tell me a bit about that early production process.

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Were you commissioned to do a certain number of editions, or were you given slots to fill?

00:13:22 **Q:** Well, entering the *Listen With Mother* unit, which was part of schools broadcasting, I worked on programmes where the format was very familiar and not to be changed. *Listen With Mother* started with two nursery rhymes every day, two nursery rhymes, a story, the famous, 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin', which Jean Sutcliffe invented. The *Dolly Suite* music as an opener, and there wasn't really much scope for change, all the nursery rhymes were recorded. Later on I was asked to rerecord them, and I wanted to introduce another nursery rhyme, *Higgledy Piggledy*, and this was not acceptable to the second colleague I had who was a very narrow-minded little woman, with the wonderful name Elizabeth Taylor, and she was the dead opposite. And she really got very upset, children of a young age couldn't absorb more than forty nursery rhymes, so *Higgledy Piggledy* was,

00:14:39 no, it came in because I was quite tough too. But it taught me valuable things about the constraints which are helpful in devising programmes, you know, not to be too, without formats, formats were very important,

and this was a very successful format. I had more scope in *Let's Join In*, as far as I remember, which was more emphasis on music, and I worked with wonderful composers, like Roger Fisk himself, John Hosier who was a colleague, he was head of music. And Joe Horrovitz who did an Oscar Wilde story with me about fireworks. It was the beginning of working with very distinguished people, one could almost say, 'I would like to work with so and so', and the scope was immense for a young producer, incredible really.

Q: Just explain the concept of that series for us.

00:15:45 **A:** Well, *Let's Join In*, was a slightly older target, I suppose, instead of 3 to 5 it might have been 5 to 7, really, in these very defined barriers. And I think what we did, I wrote them, and I've got no memory having written them all at all, but it was introducing music with background information, or stories, vaguely, it's extraordinary how I can't really remember what I wrote.

Q: But it was an introduction to music.

00:16:27 **A:** No, it used music as illustrative, or a song to go with what one had written before. There were much more authoritative music programmes, there was a music programme called *Music and Movement* at the time,

but this was a cross between literature and music. And it actually, again, was very helpful in the future, where I used music and words very much.

Q: Where you responding to the current pedagogical thinking of that period/

00:17:04 **A:** I remember doing some reading, but I may not have been representative, because I think I was rather careless about all that, I was just much more interested in working. And we worked so hard, in the end two daily programmes on television, and in the beginning learning how to do broadcasting at all, was so absorbing so I didn't really… Reading was for pleasure.

Q: Was schools radio and *Listen With Mother* considered important to the BBC? Did you get an awareness that it was well received?

00:17:47 **A:** I think we felt that we were in an elite unit, I really do think we felt that what we did was very important, with reason.

Q: Did you get positive reports back from senior people telling you this?

00:18:03 **A:** I don't remember that, but they may have gone to Jean Sutcliffe, because I was working under her we might have seen certain things, but they don't stick in

my memory. Whereas in television it was different.

Q: What was the working atmosphere like? Was it collegiate or competitive; you said you had to fight your corner over that nursery rhyme. Was that a regular feature of your working?

00:18:29 **A:** No, it was a very encouraging environment, very supportive, and colleagues were very distinguished, you know, there was Philippa Pearce who was a very famous children's writer, she wrote the wonderful *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and there was Robert Gittings, a poet, and John Hosier who ended up as Principle of The Guild Hall, and then setting up the Early Music Centre in London and he was the director there. They were very, very stimulating people to work with, and none of them felt that radio was inferior to television. In fact Jean Sutcliffe, there was a vague thinking that television was vulgar, and Jean Sutcliffe, in particular, was quite distressed that I might ever want to go to television, and only became converted when, at some friend's house, she saw a production with Edith Evans, and she came back starry eyed, and she said to me, 'I

00:19:31 know what it's about now because Edith Evans had a twitch in her neck when she was really, really

emotional, and I could see that the vision of that was very effective, as opposed to just sound.'

Q: You were working with all these distinguished people, why did you want to work in television?

00:20:03 **A:** Most people felt, not all, there were people committed to radio, understandably, and have always been, but, for a young person, after a few years, there were attachments on the noticeboard and it would have been a bit perverse not to follow those opportunities for growing, and developing and, perhaps, finding out that television wasn't so dreadful after all.

Q: Did you have your eye on any particular area of television?

00:20:36 **A:** Well, obviously, in my own field, I've always been a specialist, really, of children's programmes; I have done older children's and adolescent television, but not wanting, particularly, to move out of television, children's television. I think there's a divide, always has been, between a lot of very talented people, including Huw Wheldon, curiously enough, who start out in children's television as a stepping stone to better things for them. But I'm one of those who saw it as a career in itself.

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Q: Did you know what television production involved?

00:21:15 **A:** No, but, you know, we went on a training course, no, I didn't actually, I went on an attachment to *Blue Peter*, in its first year, when it was created by a man called John Hunter Blair, who was an incredible eccentric. And it was still very experimental, it hadn't lain down all its formal methods, it had the same signature tune, and he was a kind of elderly scoutmaster, really, in his approach. So a lot of the thinking was there, the two presenters, but it was more experimental, and I was allowed to do two little dramas for it, which was, again, terrifically helpful later.

And you were producing, researching, these dramas?

00:22:22 **A:** Well, they were based on stories that I'd used before, and had wonderful people acting in them. I'd got Eric Thompson, who was later, who remained a great friend and who did *Play School* but also *Magic Roundabout*, and went on to great things, and people like Patricia Hayes and so on, who, also, I worked with later. It was a start, really, of a lot of excitement.

Q: Now, that would have been around 1958, *Blue Peter*.

00:22:59 **A:** Did it start in '58? Well then I was in the first years,

but certainly, before Biddy Baxter who, actually, had been a studio manager for me in *Listen With Mother* and who, when I went on my attachment, kind of took my place in *Listen With Mother* and we were great friends.

Q: How long did you stay with *Blue Peter*?

00:23:23 **A:** Oh, only six months.

Q: And then into family programmes?

00:23:27 **A:** No, then I went back to radio, I think I even had my second child then, the BBC was really marvellous about maternity leave, you were given, I think it was about three months. And I had three sons during this period and I don't really remember any problems with going in and out and resuming where I'd left off.

Q: So the BBC was fairly child friendly in terms of employment?

00:23:55 **A:** Very, didn't have creches yet or things like that but, I think they had them afterwards, but just understood that it was possible to have a career and a family.

Q: So you briefly returned to radio, but you still had your eyes on television.

00:24:14 **A:** I wanted to go back. And then there was another job in schools television and I got that job and was

permanent.

Q: What was that role?

00:24:28 **A:** I worked for a wonderful man called Ron Smedley, as a production assistant, and then I worked for Michael Gill, and these were both very effective producers. Michael Gill went on to do *Civilisation* and Alistair Cooke's *America,* and was one of the greats.

Q: And you would have been operating in Television Centre?

00:24:55 **A:** Yes, I had an office in Television Centre, and it was a very interesting time and I would have been quite happy staying there. But while I was doing my attachment to *Blue Peter*, the head of children's then was a lovely man called Owen Reed, who was subsequently got rid of by Donald Baverstock for being too middle class. But he gave a sort of old-fashioned feel, so under him it felt really much like radio. There were more abrasive people from the world of theatre, but my debt to Owen Reed was that he asked me to do a report on *Watch With Mother*, which was the only provision for young children at that time. And I wrote a report which I saw again recently, and I was pretty on the ball actually, and I think that helped me get the job

at *Play School.*

Q: Why did they want to review *Watch With Mother* at that time?

00:26:05 **A:** Well, it had been running for years and years and it was, largely, canned programmes, there were four animated, fairly primitively animated programmes, *Andy Pandy*, *The Woodentops*, something called *Ragtag and Bobtail*, and what was the other one? The fifth one was *Picture Book*.

Q: *Captain Pugwash*?

A: *Flowerpot Men*.

Q: *Flowerpot Men*, *Bill and Ben*?

00:26:34 **A:** No, *Captain Pugwash* was quite different. There were these five, one for each day of the week and, although in that time they'd been wonderful and people are very nostalgic about them even now, but they were very primitive and they were of the school of, what someone once told me was called the 'kindergarten smile', when you talk down to little children, you know, and you talked about puppy dogs and things like that, you see. So there was scope for being much more robust and live.

Q: So there was some criticism of that kind of approach

toward children generally.

00:27:23 **A:** I think there was a general trend, after years, to review what's there, and Owen Reed clearly felt that this was, whether there was any lingering, not animosity, but the point is that these programmes had been created by his predecessor, who was a very strong lady called Freda Lingstrom. And she had used her partner in life, Ann Driver she was called, and she did all the music and a lot of the talking. And it was very, very gentle and old fashioned in its approach, and I'm sure that Owen Reed felt there was more to be done, and this was an opportunity.

Q: What did you recommend in this report, a sweeping away of these old favourites?

00:28:16 **A:** Most of them. I think I had good things to say about a couple, you know, and I would support one or two. They had a rather dreadful girl in *Picture Book*, a perfectly nice actress called Patricia Driscoll, but she was part of this whole theory that small children should only have pretty young women to talk to them, which I didn't agree with at all. And particularly her because she's simpering, and there was no charm about the approach at all. And I think I asked for that to be gone.

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Q: So even in these early years the concept for something different, in the form of *Play School*, was that forming in your mind?

00:29:08 **A:** Not at all, because I did that *Watch With Mother* report as part of my attachment; I never thought I would have anything to do with it afterwards, I never thought of it as an instrument of destruction really. And Owen Reed was replaced shortly afterwards by my new boss, who was Doreen Stevens. And I remember her, perhaps I'm jumping the gun now.

Q: Tell us a bit about the programmes you were working on?

00:29:47 **A:** *Blue Peter* and the *Watch With Mother* report, and then I went back to radio, then I went to schools broadcasting in television.

Q: Again, learning on the job for television?

00:29:59 **A:** Very much, and learning under very good people, you see. And being given specific jobs; I did devise a series called *Merry go Round*, under Michael Gill. But then, because I think it was because I was pregnant, and I left to have a baby, all my ideas were actually given to somebody else, and I felt very bad about it at the time.

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Q: But coming back after your various children, what did you get your teeth into on your return?

00:30:33 **A:** Well, the *Play School* job was advertised and I applied, it was obvious, I had actually not applied for the *Blue Peter* job which came up before the *Play School* job. And Biddy Baxter did apply, from radio, and got it, and so it was my first experience of hierarchy and the fact that in radio I'd been her boss, and now she was a producer and I was still a production assistant. But I didn't mind because I was so happy where I was working, and obviously there were going to be promotions eventually, but I didn't reckon with the arrival of *Play School* as an opportunity.

Q: This was when BBC 2 had come on air, a lot of recruitment to BBC 2, very different people coming in to the channel. Was there a sense of a different sort of BBC emerging as a result of BBC 2?

00:31:31 **A:** Well any new institution challenges, particularly, the head of that channel to produce new ideas. And Michael Peacock, whom I only met for the first time at the Board, when I was Boarded for the *Play School* job, as part of his new thinking. And because, I think, of the *Watch With Mother* report and possibly other

recommendations, I got the job. And there was nothing there at all, and Michael simply said he wanted to supplement the dearth of nursery school provision right across England. And left it to me with five half-hours, it might have only run a week, I had no idea it would run about 24 years. But it was very heady because my new boss was Dorien Stevens, who was head of family programmes, which was not only supplying BBC 2, but BBC 1 as well. And when I first met her I had heard she was a dragon; she was a formidable woman, but she was charming, she was very attractive, in an Anna

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Neagle sort of way, and she said to me, 'Well we didn't choose each other but we better rub along together'. And we became friends for life actually, and when we both left London Weekend, which is jumping ahead, I made a film called *Grasshopper Island*, and we were in Corsica working on it, and she was our cook and bottle washer, as well as our accountant. And she had no side to her, she was just a remarkable women, very, very, she liked to think of herself as an enabler, because she wasn't creative herself. And I was very lucky to work in that environment because she was very supportive, and a very good scheduler; it was she

who recommended that *Blue Peter* should run twice a week, much against Biddy Baxter's early opposition, but it really put it on the map. And she didn't interfere,

00:34:09 she would have if I'd have gone wrong, but I was lucky enough to get it right.

Q: So you were effectively given a blank sheet of paper.

00:34:17 **A:** Absolutely, and no staff, nothing. I imported every single member who joined from all sorts of places in the BBC. Studio managers, floor managers, all sorts of people, there was nobody there.

Q: And you'd had relatively little experience in television by then. How did you know who to recruit?

00:34:40 **A:** Well there were Boards, of course, well I'd been in units and I knew that I needed researchers and I needed… We built up a graphics unit from nothing, I saw a wonderful illustration by Hilary Hayton who was a graphics designer generally, and I said 'I'd love that person to work on *Play School*', and she, in fact, designed the *Play School* logo and many, many other things she went on to do. But she built up the graphics side from her knowledge, and very distinguished artists joined that unit. I think in the end we were about sixty

strong and you know, some of them very talented.

Q: How did you work out this completely unique programme?

00:35:37 **A:** Well, I think you always react against what's there, and what's there was canned filmed, only puppetry except for this simpering lady. And I was married to Tony Whitby who was a very effective current affairs producer, and also, in his spare time, his main hobby was writing plays. And so we had a very rich variety of friends. He came into the BBC after me, he was in the civil service and he was headhunted by Grace Wyndham Goldie, and so my terms of reference were a bit unusual compared to most children's producers, because I knew people who were in the civil service who later went right to the top, and I knew people in theatre, very useful. And of course I knew current affairs people who also were pretty starry at that time. So I knew about things beyond my own little world and how did I think of *Play School*? I had three little boys, I had a very imaginative, old fashioned, Peggotty of a nanny to replace me when my oldest son was three days old, till she died about forty years later. And she was a real source of inspiration, in that she was always

00:37:20 talking to them as if they were grown up, and I learnt that you don't say 'Puppy' and 'Bye bye', you say 'Goodbye' and you say 'Dog', and 'Train', not 'Puffpuff'. And she grew carrot tops and all sorts of things and my oldest son, all my sons went into the BBC in one way or another, but my oldest son was very scientific and loved if a clock was broken, he'd look inside it, or our nanny made what was called Bubble Pie, and that was soap soaked in water and you could blow bubbles through a straw. And those sort of practical things were very useful as ideas for *Play School*.

Q: But this was at a time when people were really thinking about how to bring up children. This must have been very important in those early ideas.

00:38:16 **A:** Well of course, I went and asked for advice from very informed, authoritative people, entirely on my own, I mean when I look back and think about the restrictions today and awful, awful, I'm really very critical of the current philosophy of children, which seems to be violently over-protective and narrow, very, very bad regression back to older thoughts. And at that time I went to people, there was a woman in charge of education at the LCC, as it was, London County

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Council, I went and talked to her. And she was admirable, a very brisk woman, and she put me on to an extraordinary old ex-teacher and nanny, called Nancy Quayle, who features a lot in the *Play School* history, who was our permanent consultant on children. And very practical, believed, for instance, that you should allow mistakes. I remember, this was in

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Jackanory, Margaret Rutherford, the great actress reading Beatrix Potter stories, and she was sitting there with these little books and she was reading from the book and she said, ‘Oh dear, I’ve turned over two pages’. And my, actually I think it was Anna who said, ‘Cut’, and I said, ‘No’, being the producer, ‘let it go’. And, of course, this is what Nancy Quayle did really believe in with authority, that everybody wants to make mistakes and not be perfect. So that was one of her legacies, on the other hand she could be very dogmatic. And you have to take dogmatism with a pinch of salt. She thought all puppetry was bad, how could children distinguish between puppets and reality? So her form of puppets was to take a duster and she’d tie a knot in each corner, and then she put the duster round her hand and used the corners as ears and do

all that. But having played with this doll duster, she would then undo it, shake it and say, ‘See, it’s only a

00:40:51 duster’. That was a very limiting dogma which, we learned not to obey everything she said. There were also very distinguished book consultants, the first one was a woman called Marjory Fisher, who was very eminent in the book world, and the next one was when she died, I think, Judy Taylor, as she then was, became our consultant. She was editor of Bodley Head children’s books, and had discovered Sendak, *Where The Wild Things Are*, and all those wonderful children’s books. And I also had a store of memories from Russian children’s books that were in my nursery and Finnish books, and so I was very aware of literature from other countries, that was when my background came in useful.

Q: *Play School* ran Monday to Friday, was that part of a wider requirement of the channel?

00:42:11 **A:** No, I think Michael Peacock did have, at one stage anyway, an idea of the different days having different flavours. But my driving thought was, based on having worked on other daily programmes, like *Listen With Mother* was that you would go absolutely mad if you

had to think up, with no structure, day after day, for possibly years, it had to be structured. And then you could have a lot of initiative and change, variety within a recognisable form. And so the first thinking, and I have to say that it was really my thinking, all this, I didn't get much contribution other than, afterwards, implementing these ideas very imaginatively. But basically, I decided each day had to be different in its emphasis, so there was, what we called, the useful box day, which was creative. There was dressing up day, and there were pegs on which different clothes hung, there was a chair for storytelling every day, sorry, I'm now mixing up because the five days were, pets day, useful box day, dressing up day, science day, I think and what was the fifth?

Q: Ideas day; that was a Thursday.

00:43:46 **A:** Well, it just shows the past goes further and further away. Anyway, I did think up those things, and within those days there were, across the week, recognisable landmarks, so there was the clock, which was a device for helping children to understand the way one told time. But it was amusing because under the clock, which revolved, there would be, every day, a change of

dressing, so that the dressing reflected the story. So if it was a story about *The Little Red Hen*, then there would probably be chickens' eggs or something, that was left to the graphics designer, the design department, to come up with ideas, and of course it challenged them very much, and they loved doing that. The story chair was filled with a different story teller each week, and we started with a wonderful old actress called Athene Seyler and she was talking about

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memories from her own childhood. And then there was Ted Moult, who was an active farmer, and he was able to talk from his adult television talking, about farming, for children, and so on. People started to queue up wanting to be in that story chair. One of them, early on, was George Melly, who gave a wonderful, short, five minute description of jazz, and played his saxophone. And so on, artists, all sorts of people of interest from the wider world than *Play School*. And there was the pets corner, so there were animals every day that one visited. The other big innovation, I think, was to have a huge team of presenters. The theory was that children couldn't really cope with more than one or two, but I was aware of current affairs in *Tonight*, where they had

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a whole lot of different presenters with different skills and expertise to offer. And I thought that this was a better pattern for lots of reasons, one is the variety that it enabled you to have. I could have, as we did, the

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earliest black presenters, the one we started with didn't work out, but the principle was there and led to the wonderful Derek Griffiths who was probably one of the best presenters we ever had, after my time. An Italian presenter to suggest that people didn't all speak the King's English. And it was normal to have men and women, but the introduction of a lot of men, of very different kinds of men, in this nursery world, was huge, and of course one of the most successful was the lovely Brian Cant, who remained one of the most long-standing and loved, and creative people, right through the history of *Play School*, long after my time. And because they changed partners, again, they were able to go off and have other lives outside *Play School* which seemed to me terribly important. I wanted them to be people that I'd like to have at dinner, interesting in themselves, not just because they were the presenters of *Play School*. And there were different ages, they tended to be young. Looking for presenters was very

interesting, where I found some, I went to see a women at The Lyric, Hammersmith, who had been

00:48:15 recommended, it was a play with a guitarist on each side of the stage doing introductions. And she was not particularly interesting, but the man on the other side was a man called Rick Jones, a Canadian, and he had the audience in the palm of his hand, he was just magic. And I went backstage and said, 'You wouldn't do *Play School* would you?' and he said, 'Yes'. And once you get one good person agreeing, and people see it's not a babies' programme, although they were paid very little, which was totally out of my hands, but they began to grumble behind the scenes, as far as I know, later, and it was better paid. But on the other hand that never even entered my thinking because people looking after the finance were quite separate from the creative people, unlike now.

Q: You mentioned the first black presenter, what was the reaction from the public?

00:49:20 **A:** I don't think there was any reaction, it was extremely positive, any reaction we got came in the form of unsolicited pictures, masses of pictures from children, it started that vogue, really, of saying, 'Will you send in

pictures', but most of them came in unsolicited in those days. Obviously there were times when one said, 'Would you like to draw a picture of yourself'. Parents were very appreciative, no, there wasn't a reaction to that, as far as I remember no reaction whatsoever to Marla Landi's broken English, or anything like that.

Q: Did you deliberately seek a black presenter?

A: Yes.

Q: Because you were aware that there was a black audience?

00:50:09 **A:** Yes, and because the racial mix was beginning to move away from a totally white population; I think it's amazing now, but then, I can remember when I was at Oxford, there, watching in amazement, two black students who were quite, quite exceptional. And having my continental background, I think I was more open than some to the existence of other people than white English.

Q: What about the reaction from BBC management?

00:50:54 **A:** No comment, no comment. There was so little interference I can't believe it now, in fact I don't remember any interference. We had heads of department meetings when programmes were

reviewed, I don't remember any problems at all.

Q: One part of the concept we've not mentioned is the windows. Why?

00:51:19 **A:** Well, again, I was reacting against, I think, *Blue Peter's* rather dogmatic approach, which tended to say, 'This is the way you do things, you take a piece of lavatory roll and then take something and you make something. And this is the way you do it'. Which is perfectly acceptable, but I have always been fascinated, that's the Oxford education, helps you to understand that dialectic is interesting. And there are more than one good ways of doing things. And therefore, for me, the three windows were three choices, and the skill was not to suggest that you really were guessing which you'd go through, because you knew perfectly well what you'd go through. But they were saying, we were always having to make sure they said, 'Which window shall I choose today? I think I'll chose that one'. Forms of words which showed that it was in control. And, again, the fact they were different shapes, it may have come in here from my wonderful

00:52:35 graphics, but it enabled, it may have been my idea. Because I thought, if when you go through the window

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you're going to do a programme about balloons, it would be a round window. So you were beginning to use shapes which were very much part of child education.

BBC'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

PART 2 JOY WHITBY

Q: Looking at that very first edition of *Play School*, it's a very slow programme. Was that deliberate?

00:00:46 **A:** No, I think it was of its time. I haven't looked at other programmes of a similar nature, of course for small children you do repeat things, you do speak more clearly, perhaps. But it was part of the system at the time.

Q: What was the process? This was a programme done in one go, but recorded. So everything had to be meticulously rehearsed?

00:01:15 **A:** They did rehearse, that was done without me later on; I don't remember rehearsing them very much. I was very keen on spontaneity, and although they were given clear lines of what they had to say, and some of them were very worried about remembering it, which may have accounted for some of the slowness of our thinking. But really they, I've lost my train of thought.

Q: How was one of the early *Play School* programmes put together?

00:01:55 **A:** I wrote the first six weeks, as I remember, and the very first programme actually was in doggerel a lot, and I soon dropped that, 24 years of doggerel would have been terrifying. Having put it together, there probably,

there was, minimum rehearsal actually, some of the presenters complained about that later and the pressures they were under. But it didn't really matter if they got a little bit fumbly here and there, it was part of the style. And they were very, very good actually.

Q: They had to record in one go, so no retakes?

00:02:43 **A:** I don't remember many retakes, I think if something disastrous happened, we once had an eagle which flew up into the rafters, well clearly we had to stop. That kind of thing. Much more important was the way they spoke to each other, the reality of it, so that it didn't appear rehearsed and they didn't go into artificial mode of pretending they didn't know something they clearly knew. Honesty was very much the philosophy, and also talking to one child, that was innovatory really, because people used to say, 'Are you all listening, are you all watching, will you all raise your hands', and really, if you think about it, when you watch even the news, you feel that he or she is talking directly to you. And that became much more of the norm than it had been when we started. And I was proud of that really.

Q: This was recorded in one go, so might as well have been live.

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00:03:55 **A:** Yes, they were under pressure, we didn't have much studio time. We had no film other than, no, we did have film actually, we had a film allocation, because we created our own library of films for seeing beyond the windows and going outside *Play School* into the real world. And there were some very imaginative films, for instance we used to, this is where music came in useful, for instance you'd get a piece of music and you'd cut chimney pots of different kinds so it encouraged looking up and seeing different forms of chimneys, or cheese, or whatever. And we had people who had been seconded from the old children's department who were really over-qualified for the job, but then I used them. There was one wonderful drama producer called Dorothy Brooking, and she did films about the first time a child would go on a bus, from the angle of a child. Or the first time a child went to the sea and may have never seen the sea. So those were innovatory film library.

Q: You were operating in the early years of video tape, you were fairly limited in special effects. Did you feel the limitations, did you want to do more?

00:05:34 **A:** Not at the time, we all wanted, I think, people at

ground level, really, wanted to have the chance of going out and filming, or doing OBs, outside broadcasts. And when I looked at future *Play Schools* they often did have much more ambitious setups. But I'm a great believer in simplicity, I don't think children, necessarily, mind nearly as much as the producers who want more challenges. So within limitations, you can actually make a virtue, we used to use back-projection and I can remember a song that Rick Jones sang, *Shake That Tree, Shake Those Branches* and behind him were the silhouettes of white trees, which was very effective. I think what was lacking was very good effects, I mean they were rather simple, they weren't as bright, they weren't as effective and, of course, they were all in black and white at the beginning.

Q: Do you think a child watching one of those very early editions today, would fully grasp it, or are children much more sophisticated?

00:06:58 **A:** They are, in a way, it's only my opinion, but I think children don't fundamentally change. I've come up against this because, much, much more recently, although now, perhaps twenty, ten years ago, I made a series called *Mouse and Mole*, an animated series, with

one of our best animators at the time. And Alan Bennett and Richard Briers were the voiceovers. And it was a great success and has continued to be with children who watch it now; I know because people tell me and people write letters, and so on. And my own grandchildren have watched. But, the current BBC policy is, 'Oh no, this is old-fashioned, children wouldn't like it', and I know they're wrong, absolutely wrong. And what they're seeing is often meretricious, compared to the quality that there was then, and in many other people's output. In fact we're quite interested in talking about a strand of new, a sort of library of the old successes, finding an outlet somewhere, because they're blocked.

Q: But you feel that children, fundamentally, have not changed in such a radical way.

00:08:24 **A:** No, I don't' think so. Obviously they do have enormous rival media, iPads and whatnot, and they're very adept at this, much more than adults actually, finding what they need and working new equipment. Oddly enough I was asked to write about children in this way, in *Play School*, in the days of early *Play School*, and I was then talking about children being able to

press buttons in a way that we wouldn't have thought possible. But that's different from emotional growth, and I think emotionally children are still feeling love, hate, neglect, rivalry, all the things that human beings feel.

Q: Did the BBC like it initially?

00:09:21 **A:** I was very lucky because Michael Peacock obviously had a personal interest in the programme, and we went on air as the first programme on BBC 2 because of a blackout the night before. And so it got publicity it would never have got otherwise in the newspapers. But, on the morning it was first transmitted, we were in studio recording the next lot, and a letter, a memo, came down from Michael Peacock congratulating us. And this was passed round, and this sense of being cared for from above, was very helpful in one's moral.

Q: 1964 was a year of upheaval for children's television, can you explain what happened in that time and did that effect what you were doing?

00:10:16 **A:** Well, I didn't know about it of course, I was back in radio at that time. But Doreen Stevens was brought in after Owen Reed, and although there is a perception that there were cuts made, which was true in that drama, for example, was no longer part of the children's

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remit, it was taken by the adult drama department. And that was a grave loss which I personally felt very deeply, *Jackanory* was the nearest I got to being able to mini-drama within a documentary environment. But otherwise it was refreshing, because for myself I was given this new brief of *Play School*, followed by *Jackanory*. Biddy Baxter's *Blue Peter* was doubled, there was a whole department for animated films that were growing. There was a strand created by Doreen which was led by *The Magic Roundabout* and because of her scheduling nous, and she had an influence on scheduling which no longer exists, schedulers are gods

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which you don't challenge. But in those days she did, and she realised that by putting this extraordinarily unusual little programme, which Eric Thompson narrated, by putting it before the news in the early evening, the audience would be far bigger than children. And it was so successful that it was a leader of merchandising, which hadn't happened before, and it was followed, obviously, by another very successful five minute series, which ran for years. And ITV also had five minute series running across the board. So this was an innovatory time when there was a lot of fresh

thinking. I think *John Craven's Newsround* was created, and Johnny Morris and his animal programmes. There was a lot of innovation and it was a pioneering time really.

Q: There was quite a bit of merchandise which came off the back of *Play School*, records of the music, etc. Was there a notion of the kind of conflict between using the television programme to sell stuff to children becoming a concern?

00:13:04 **A:** It was a big concern; when *Play School* started there was no such thing. Nobody thought about it. I went to Heals, or Harrods, no Heals I think it was, and I happened to see this wonderful Humpty Dumpty in the shop and I thought, 'That would be wonderful', and I bought it. Nobody asked for copyright I don't think, nobody thought that it could be marketed, they could have made a great deal of money out of selling Humpty Dumpties. But I think, in fact I think Humpty Dumpty from that period was sold recently for something unbelievable, I can't remember now, you know, thousands of pounds. And it just was something we were warned against. In fact I know that Anne Wood, who produced *Teletubbies* afterwards and trained under

me, she, in her early days, worked on a programme for the new morning programme *TV AM*. And she introduced, because she got money injected into the programme from Kelloggs, she produced a subliminal K in one of her programmes and it was stopped, it was

00:14:36 not allowed, there was a very, very strong feeling that this should not be commercialised. And ITV, of course, was the first to really break, and then competition meant that the BBC would have been crass not to have followed suit.

Q: But even in 1964 they were starting to sell LPs of some of the music from *Play School*. Was there concern from some parts that you shouldn't be marketing anything to children?

00:15:05 **A:** No, we produced two books in my time which were very imaginative books actually, and afterwards *Jackanory* produced Jackanory books and so on, I don't know what happened elsewhere, probably a batch more. But we just felt that this was allowing children to go into another, reading was a good thing, books were a good thing and it wasn't really sold very effectively. I think there was a lot of criticism earlier on about the whole of the merchandising arm of the BBC.

WHITBY CONT – OH COLLECTION

Q: Where you anxious to exploit colour when it came in?

00:16:00 **A:** When colour first came in there were courses offered to producers, and I suggested that Cynthia Felgate who was working on *Play School* represented us and went on this colour course. And she was very reluctant, a lot of people thought it was a silly idea because the camera wouldn't be able to cope with colour beyond six feet or something, it would only have a little… I suppose they were affected by early Technicolour, which was pretty primitive and I think people thought, 'Oh, this won't catch on'. But Cynthia went and came back fairly brainwashed and thought it was good. And so when I came in, of course the graphics unit were delighted and, you know, it didn't look back, it just moved forward smoothly into colour.

Q: When colour was first used people were told to be very restrained in their use of colour because most people didn't have colour. Were you under similar constraints?

00:17:11 **A:** No, I don't remember that. I do remember being told not to wear stripes, and obviously there was a problem with back projection, which we used to use, the

technique was to have a blue screen and if you wore blue you'd disappear, or just the learning curve.

Q: But not a lot of constraint?

00:17:39 **A:** No, I don't remember that, we adopted it happily after the initial doubts.

Q: In *Jackanory,* where did that idea come from?

00:17:52 **A:** Well, it was Michael Peacock again, because having the success of *Play School* as a daily programme, whether he just had time to fill, he decided that teatime would be a good quarter of an hour a week, and obviously we were the team to do it. So we expanded and I was asked 'What sort of programme?' and we all talked about it and I was pretty convinced it should be stories.

Q: Any particular stories?

00:18:22 **A:** I was very conscious of the fact that quite a lot of the animated programmes that were being done, were being done by animators who were not really the best writers, and often the stories would all end with the characters going to sleep, that kind of thing. It wasn't a vital creative storytelling, and there was a whole treasury of stories from all over the world that were being neglected for children. And lots and lots of

children who didn't read, hadn't any access to storytelling and lots of children hadn't got parents who told them, or read to them. So this was an opportunity for plundering that wonderful treasure house. And so it was a question of how, you again, provided a format that would enable you week after week to continue to be imaginative. And it seemed to me that where were different kinds of stories, there were the little Beatrix Potter books, and if you had a different book every day,

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spread across a week, that gave you one kind of story which would be followed the next week by something quite different. Which might be a much more imaginative kind of story told, to camera, but with back projection to illustrate, I'd been terribly impressed by Compton MacKenzie on the adult television screens doing a programme called *The Glory That Was Greece*, and being very surprised to learn, I don't think he ever went to Greece, but behind him were these wonderful back projections. So I went up to Edinburgh and persuaded him to come down, which was quite an interesting experience, sitting on his four-poster bed; he was an ancient roué but a wonderful man.

Q: Tell me more, why was it so interesting?

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00:20:30 **A:** Well, I'd never been to Edinburgh, and he lived in this grand old house, and he had a housekeeper who he married, and I had never wooed anyone in their bed before. And I didn't know whether he would do it, and when he said 'yes' it was very exciting and it was arranged he'd come down to London, but could he have an aircushion because he suffered from problems sitting. And so he came and I met him at The Washington Hotel, and I couldn't believe it was all happening, this really rather remarkable old man. You know he did *Whisky Galore* and all sorts of things. And he came to the studio and sat and started just to tell these Greek legends, and when he came to the story of Medusa he talked about the hair being snakes. And it really sent a shiver down your back, and it proved that, straight to camera, was possible without really any embroidery or special effects and things. But of course you needed a genius to do it, and there aren't so many. And so a week where the graphics unit provided

00:21:56 specially-drawn pictures for stories, was much easier for people to cope with, and the graphics unit became a kind of sausage machine of illustrations over the years. But people like Compton Mackenzie were very special

in those early days, and later Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* completely proved how effective it could be with the right person.

Q: On paper, reading a story for television is not immediately appealing. Did you find it difficult to convince the powers that be that it would work for children?

00:22:34 **A:** No I didn't find any criticisms or anything from above, but they were a very imaginative lot in those early days. For instance we had Harry Corbett from *Steptoe and Son*. Again there was a lot of development from *Play School*. For instance *Play School* had a rather ordinary high-backed chair. For the Jackanory chair, I had a white wrought iron bench and the bench remained permanent but different people came and went on the bench. And when Harry Corbett arrived he arrived by parachute, and dropped onto the bench, because he was actually talking about flying stories, like the story of Pegasus and so on.

Q: You were head of the department at this time, what was the internal atmosphere at the time?

00:23:50 **A:** Can I add one thing? Another very key thought behind *Jackanory* was to bring in mainstream

performers, not just children's presenters. And so the range was enormous and after various glamorous people, who weren't necessarily actors, began to appear, there was a real queue. I used to get people asking to be in *Jackanory* and it became one of the things, actors in particular, wanted to be on. And it was a very challenging thing to do a talking head, although many times it was reading or pictures covering you, or whatever.

Q: Who took to it and who didn't, did some really love it?

00:24:57 **A:** Yes, over the years, I remember seeing some statistics, Bernard Cribbins was the longest, the presenter who appeared most often, some only appeared once, a lot of people appeared three or four times. But the idea was not to have one person, so, over the years, Bernard Cribbins was, perhaps once a year or whatever, but some people just were stiff. I remember, in fact, that Cynthia Felgate, who took over *Play School* and who had been the colour taster, and she had come from the theatre world. And she had a very revered boss there, a man called Brian Way who was a leader of Theatre In Education. And he seemed

to be the ideal person, but he was no good talking straight to camera, very special art it is to relax and talk as if to one person.

Q: You haven't mentioned Prince Charles.

00:26:17 **A:** Yes, that was after my time, I don't know whether they asked him or he asked, there had been a royal visit to *Play School* earlier on, so there was a connection. But he had written a story, *The Old Man of Lochnagar*, I think it was called and he appeared, but that I had nothing to do with. Yes, there were lots of very eminent and very successful people.

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WHITBY CONT – OH COLLECTION

Q: Why did you want to leave the BBC?

00:40:10 **A:** It was absolutely fascinating because Michael Peacock who was my, by then, a family friend, asked me, it was very cloak and dagger. He and David Frost had conceived the new franchise of London Weekend Television and he was inviting people from the BBC to join him. And the people he invited were very eminent, they were lovely, Humphrey Burton from arts, Frank Muir from comedy and it was such an honour to asked as well, with Doreen Stephens my boss. So there was that, there was also the fact that he did say to me I could have quite a lot of money to do drama, and this had been a pent-up frustration, so that was a big incentive and led to *Catweazle* and things.

Q: Was it awkward leaving the BBC?

00:41:39 **A:** I was called in by Huw Wheldon in Television Centre, in his office, and he said to me, because he'd known me over work, and I think people like myself, and subsequently Biddy Baxter, If you are a BBC employee and you do well, you are tremendously bolstered up and put forward, supported by the institution. And Huw Wheldon said to me, 'Joy, if you leave, the BBC's an ivory tower and you won't come back, you know', which

was very chilling. But I weighed things up and decided that the challenge was worth it, I never thought I wouldn't come back, eventually perhaps. But I didn't, Anna Hume managed it.

Q: Did you sense that the all-powerful BBC was being challenged and that gave you confidence in the brave new world?

00:42:56 **A:** No, I didn't really think in those terms, I probably should have, but I'm not a very political animal. I think one just felt the BBC would go on forever and would always be. In fact, when I first went to the studio in Wembley, as a London Weekend employee, I truly was amazed, I didn't think such studios existed. And the difficulties were so considerable in those early years, which led to the palace revolution there, after about three years I think. And the challenges were so immediate that I looked on the BBC as the golden days.

Q: We need to say that at London Weekend it was set up with a radical vision, which presumably gave you a lot of scope. That gave you the opportunity to create *Catweazle*, how did that come about?

00:44:16 **A:** It wasn't the first thing actually, the first thing was a terrible flop and a terrible warning about the difference

between being at the BBC and being in commercial television. It was a grandiose idea called *Tickertape* and it had wonderful people working on it like Gillian Lynne, a choreographer; Bernard Bresslaw was one of the presenters. And one of the strangest things was that we were looking for a signature tune, and two people came with an offering, they were two young students called Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, and they very much wanted to do the signature tune of *Tickertape*. And I had brought over, quite mistakenly, one producer from the BBC, and he said we can do better, and that was it. And it was a sort of indication of how dreadfully wrong *Tickertape* would be. And there's nothing more appalling, as a producer, than being on air and knowing

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you're still having to produce three or four more episodes, and what do you do? It was a terrible, terrible, my first real big flop. And it was almost the same time that a letter arrived from an unknown young actor called Richard Carpenter, saying 'I've had an idea for a programme and here it is'. And it was one page of A4, and it said it's about an old wizard called *Catweazle* who comes back from Anglo Saxon times into the modern day, and sees everything with ancient eyes so

that the sun, in a bottle, is how he interprets a light bulb. And I said, 'You're on', and we worked it out together, and it was his first huge writing exploit, and he went on to do many other things. But Catweazle, in its first series, was tremendously successful and was part of something else, which is family programmes, which we might talk about later.

Q: You mentioned the production offering you were give, it was a new company so anything was possible and no set way of doing anything.

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A: No, but that's true of any new programme, you know, you start with the knowledge that you bring to anything from the past. Michael Peacock was my boss, Doreen Stevens was my boss, I was under her again. So, apart from the fact that we had rather smart premises, and open plan offices, and things that were new to me and we had to accommodate a great many people who had lost their jobs when Media Fusion and ATV were closed. And so it was an unhappy kind of mix of people to cope with, some of whom were lovely and some of whom were really not up it. And it was difficult for a young producer.

Q: Did you, at all, look back to the BBC and want to

produce for them?

00:48:18 **A:** I found the changeover within London Weekend Television, when it became London Weekend International difficult, Doreen was no longer my boss, my boss was quite a different kind of person, Stella Richmond, and we worked from Soho, grand offices. And she was an unusual person and the whole atmosphere was showbiz and glitz and impressions; she owned the White Elephant restaurant, and her second, or third, husband owned property in Covent Garden, so flowers were coming in and out. And it was quite different, it was like living in a grand hotel and there was a lot of very nasty undercurrents there. A lot of ambition and it wasn't easy, in fact she asked me to stay on and do a second series of *Catweazle* and I couldn't face it, and I resigned. It coincided with the ousting of Michael Peacock and several of us resigned, so that was a traumatic time. I suppose I hoped that I could get back to the BBC, but all the doors were shut, I didn't even try. And when the job of head of children's came up, after Monica Sims who replaced Doreen Stevens, when she retired the post, I wasn't even asked to come to a board. It was really quite hard.

WHITBY CONT – OH COLLECTION

Q: And yet you'd gone to Yorkshire Television under Paul Fox who was from the BBC, so there was a bit of the BBC there supporting you, and you became head of children's at Yorkshire.

00:50:31 **A:** It was a very funny time, I think it was about eight years out in the cold doing my own things. And one of the things we did, in 1970, Doreen and I had just OI think, actually, London Weekend, and we thought it was simple to do a film of our own, as independents, long before the independent sector became a reality. And my secretary from London Weekend sat next to a man at dinner, and she was quite pretty, and he said to her, 'If only people in television knew that we're just like the patrons for Mozart and Beethoven, we're prepared to spend money on the arts', and she said, 'Well actually I've got a boss…', and so the next thing I knew I was invited to this charming man, my husband came along because we were so suspicious, what was this all about? And he actually raised money, which at that time was a conglomerate of rich young men, you know it was business, and they provided, I think it was £40,000, which in those days seemed a lot, but was obviously nothing. But we were enabled to make this series of

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Grasshopper Island with the most wonderful people, in Corsica. And it was really rather special as a film, it had Tony Lego, a wonderful cameraman, including Tim Brooke-Taylor, you know, *The Goodies*, wonderful people, Frank Muir was in it, Julian Orchard who was a very funny comedian. And we all went there and it was a 13 parter, and we sent it to the BBC because it was such an obvious BBC vehicle and it was turned down by the children's department as being too middle-class. It was about three little boys running away to a desert island to escape all the middleclass things. There was a fashion against middle-class, which was very foolish because good stories are good stories. So it went on ITV instead, and all around the world and people are

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still writing fan letters, almost fifty years later people are asking for the DVD. I was so shocked, Doreen and I were so shocked at the rejection that I think Doreen wrote to them, or I may have written to Paul Fox, who I only knew as my husband's boss, Tony sadly, wasn't well, And Paul endorsed the rejection, as you have to, it was my first experience of the army supports below, and so he said he couldn't have it. Well then, years later, he replaced, I think it was Donald Bavistock at

WHITBY CONT – OH COLLECTION

YTV, and the man looking after children's programmes was a character called Jess Yates, Paula Yates' father. And he was quite incredibly bad as a children's producer. He interviewed me for a programme I was asked by Donald Bavistock to make, a drama, and it was carefully researched in the 19th Century, and I went to see him at The Cumberland Hotel, and Paula Yates

00:54:29 was spread across the bed, goodness knows, fast asleep at 10 or something. And Jess said, 'Well girly, you can do it, and I've got twenty nuns costumes from *Stars on Sunday* that you can use'. It was really a frightening insight into what was going on, and Paul obviously needed somebody to replace that philosophy, and we never ever mentioned his turn down of *Grasshopper Island*, but he had been my husband's boss and he has a very soft core to him, although outwardly so strong. And I think he felt some concern, perhaps, because I was a widow then.

Q: Did you ever come back as an independent and pitch to the BBC?

00:55:28 **A:** No, never. I was ten years at Yorkshire and Paul wouldn't let me do any drama, he was brought up in the school of no drama for the children's department. And

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he had a very tough drama director anyway, who wouldn't have had it. But he let me do two independent productions because I was a freelancer, as head of children's. And he let me gradually do two productions, which I did, and that gave me confidence so that I could see the end of Yorkshire and new changes coming. So I resigned and in time, before I was kicked out I suppose. And set up as an independent, which was in keeping with the new independent sector. I'd been appointed to the first board of Channel 4, which was unusual and extraordinary, and I knew about things.

BBC'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

PART 3 JOY WHITBY

Q: How did you make the international connections for the international versions of *Play School* and how were they of any interest to the BBC?

00:00:32 **A:** I think the actual sale of the programmes and so on, was right out of our hands, it was done by another department, and so on, but because we were innovatory we won awards. After the first year we won what was the equivalent of a BAFTA award, we also used to go to the Prix Jeunesse which was then a bi-annual awards ceremony held in Munich with money, conscience money from the war, and the Prix Jeunesse is a prestigious organisation which developed very much beyond. It became a place where we viewed lots and lots of programmes, delegates came from all over the world and I made a lot of contacts there. And of course *Play School* was shown, I think it won an award in later years certainly. But in my time they were very aware of it because of its innovatory feel, and so a lot of countries bought it, as a format as you say. It's still running in Australia, extraordinary isn't it? With Humpty Dumpty and two presenters and so on. I was most conscious of being of interest when people came from

00:02:08 New York who were about to set up *Sesame Street*,

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and they studied *Play School* and went back. And there was a funny rider to that because I thought that *The Muppets* who were used originally in their *Sesame Street* were absolutely fantastic/ I was in New York for something and I wanted to buy the muppetry for *Play School* and, understandably, they refused to sell off segments, later they did but at that time it was the whole programme or nothing. And after I left I read about this, that there was quite a lot of indignation because they offered *Sesame Street* and Monica Sims said, 'We've got *Play School*, this is a programme for English children, *Sesame Street* is very much based on New York streetwise children. We won't take it'. And then of course ITV bought it and it was a great success

00:03:18

and so on. And I always remember in *Play School*, amongst the innovatory things, particularly in the graphics section, we used to run, Hilary Hayton made advertisement strips which were about how you should clean your teeth, or how you should eat an apple a day, or whatever. And these little advertisement strips were very much in the thinking of *Sesame Street* afterwards, and I always felt that, I knew the woman, Clooney I think she was called actually, I met her in New York,

and there was quite a flow of ideas.

Q: How did it work for the non-English versions of *Play School*?

00:04:04 **A:** I really don't know, it's extraordinary. We weren't expected to have any interest in anything except making the programme, or maybe it was my lack of interest in this, I don't know. I mean I love meeting my opposite numbers and still have friendships with people abroad from those days. But, no, I didn't ever really see what they did.

Q: High points, low points in your BBC career?

00:04:48 **A:** Obviously getting an award for *Play School* was a highlight. I remember going to the ceremony and it was a very interesting year because it was early on and the ceremony was held at The Dorchester, and we actually knew we'd won and we were put into a separate room beforehand, it wasn't a question of envelopes opening, and I was in the company of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore for *Not Only But Also*, and the wonderful Peter Watkins who made *Culloden*. And these were really innovatory people in television and to be amongst them was a great honour. I didn't really appreciate it and I went to the ceremony and at the table, when they call

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for the very first time to accept an award, my husband said, ‘You may not think anything of it now, but one day you will be pleased’. And he was right, you know.