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Interview with Norman Painting on 12/7/02
Interviewer Donald Steele?

D Norman Painting you've said that after 50 years in probably the world's best known radio programme you feel invisible.

N Its ironic isn't it as you say 50 years of trying to make an invisible character visible, I mean Philip Archer exists on paper and I've tried to make him a person and apparently more or less succeeded and the result is that I've disappeared. When we'd been going 25 years it was Norman Painting who went to the palace I who got the honorary degree and I was made the only honorary life governor of the royal agricultural society, now we've got through to 50 years what happened I was in Desert Island Discs I'd before that been in This Is Your Life and then we reached 50 and all that's happened since has been a memorable visit to St James's Palace as a guest of the Prince of Wales and then total silence, I'm convinced I am absolutely invisible.

D Do you see that as a success for you or its an interesting thing isn't it, its part of being on radio?

N Well yes, but when you're on radio on the sort of programme I've been in almost from the word go, within 12 months we were headline stuff and there we've remained, we've been more or less at the top for a long time, inevitably those of us who take part become known people, mini celebrities if you like, and it does seem very strange having done that for so long and having been treated in that way, giving interviews and things and now suddenly absolutely nothing it's a bit mystifying I think, I don't regard it as a success, but on the other hand I don't regard it as a failure because the less publicity stuff I do the happier I am I'm funny that way.

D Let's go back to the beginning because one of the other things you've said is that in many ways yours was a BBC childhood.

N Oh absolutely, to start with I was born on 23 April 1924 St George's Day, which happens to be the day that St George V did the first royal broadcast from the Wembley exhibition. The BBC, British Broadcasting Company had become the British Broadcasting Corporation a few months before in the course of that year before I was one, stations had opened all over the country so that people could receive the BBC programmes, and then in 1932 when I was what eight, I was given a jigsaw puzzle of this wonderful magical futuristic building called Broadcasting House. I mean Star Wars or Harry Potter or anybody couldn't have more glamour than that for me, the jigsaw puzzle I knew every little detail of it, never thinking sometimes hoping I might actually get inside the building but there was never a serious thought.

D The wireless was always a kind of feature of your life wasn't it but we are talking about the kind of pre-transistor days.

N Oh long long pre-transistor, we're only just past the cats whisker, each house had a pair of headphones on either side of the fireplace and there was a picture of me when I was only months old on a chair in the garden with cans on listening, presumably, but it only occurred to me quite recently I couldn't possibly have been listening because the cans didn't reach that far, they were only about 3 or 4 yards long, you sat either side of the fireplace but having got off that cats whisker thing the great day was when my father announced that we were going to have a wireless and it was called a Calster Brand Pop?? And it had two valves and it cost my father rather more than one week's wages it was two pounds 19 and 6 pence if I remember and it as they all did ran on a high tension battery which was a sort of square thing like a biscuit box which lasted if you were lucky for about 10, 11 or 12 weeks and you also had a wet accumulator which had to be charged up every week or every 5 days if you used it too much so it wasn't possible to have it as a transistor on the whole time we were supposed to choose our programmes but you know with a teenager in the house like me that wasn't always observed and then towards the end of the week you'd switch on your radio and you'd hear Stuart Hibbert say "this is the national programme" and fading away to nothing which would be very frustrating, it reminds me of one of these fictional stories which always amuses me of the Aberdonian who wrote to the BBC and said please tell them to speak up, my batteries are getting low.

D But I mean in a way, radio listening then for you was much more as you say a selective affair than just having it on as background. You very much sat down to sort of say we must listen to that.

N One certainly did for a long time and then when the radiogram came in which was you know an electric gramophone and a radio in this large sort of heavily polished veneered piece of furniture, then again it was something to sit around. A radio was a really name for selling things. Children were given a thing called cod liver oil and malt which was a rather curious way of getting cod liver oil but one enterprising firm called it radio malt and radio was the buzz word and it was used in all sorts of ways.

D How could they justify calling it radio malt?

N It was a name you see, it was a name, we didn't need to know more than the fact that it was radio, just as the three magic letters in our lives were BBC there's no doubt about that. And always have been.

D But presumably you were listening to programmes at that point that nowadays would be considered to be improving.

N Oh there was a certain amount of that yes, Sir Walford Davis's foundations of music and things like that, but also there was a lot of light entertainment which I remember particularly well there was a programme called Monday Night at Seven which then became Monday Night at Eight and I won't sing you the signature tune but it did say settle by your fireside pick up the Radio Times because Monday Night at Seven is on that gives you a picture of what you did you settled by the fire and picked up your Radio Times and it was a source of ragbag light variety items but there was always a little play for one series it was the Adventures of Mr Penny and I can remember one day sitting at school thinking oh good its Monday I can hear about Mr Penny tonight played by Richard Goulden who was very well known to a lot of children for many years for playing Mole in the Wind in the Willows both on the air and in the theatre and there was a programme called Inspector Hornley Investigates and you had to guess who the criminal was in 15 minutes and then there was a tramp type of figure called Fid ? Walker that was his actual name and the programme was called Mr Walker wants to know and "I was sitting there the other day round my fire" and he had a sort of brazier thing and some people wrote to Radio Times and said how do you sit round a brazier without burning yourself, but anyway "I was sitting round my brazier" and then you were into a story "and I didn't know what to do, what would you do chums" and we agonised for a week over what we should do, that was the variety side as far as I'm concerned I suppose although I didn't realise it the most valuable thing was things like brains trust sort of programmes where one heard civilised conversation from people who could complete a sentence and who could say more or less what they meant instead a lot of you knows, I mean to say and you know what I mean, which is what conversation is largely today it seems to me, I often need subtitles when I'm watching this pop stuff on telly I think "what did he say?" so one learnt how to speak nicely, if you go to elocution lessons then you sound like you've had elocution lessons but if you've heard people clearly of some substance talking not to forget the newsreaders, they were terribly rather BBC, they were setting a very high standard and there was an extraordinary book of pronunciations for announcers were pilots for example, aircraft pilots, had to be pronounced "pielits" and there was a whole list of words which later in life when I found it thought it was fascinating but one did learn the art of certain social graces.

D But when looking back do you see the BBC radio as having had an enormous influence on the direction which your life would take because it opened up a kind of different world.

N Well it did but you know when I've been writing CVs about myself and occasionally I put education University of Birmingham, Christchurch Oxford and the BBC and that isn't an empty phrase, it was very much a part of my general education, not the simple question of information but learning social skills and learning how the other half lived we lived very modestly and seeing another way of living another way of talking and of course my mother was very keen on bettering herself, education was a magic word, my father, he was a railway signalman he wanted to be much more important but after five years or war he came back and all he was offered was the job of a signalman along with all the other thousands of people who'd come back to Lloyd George's land fit for heroes to live in and he was pretty fed up and then he stuck at that job for a long long time and filled in his day with doing union work and all sorts of political work and he was an idealist, very quiet soft spoken man, my mother who wanted us to better ourselves, so we tried to learn and mimic all those lower middle class things which I spent the rest of my life trying to get out of because they no longer have any effect at all.

D It's this thing about how it affected the way you speak because presumably there were lots of people who listened to the radio and still kept a local accent.

N I suppose that's because on the one hand part of me is an actor and the other thing is I've always been very very keen on music and my musical education such as it is was largely due to the BBC although I did study it for a while as part of my degree under a man called Victor Hayley Hutchinson who left the university to become the music director of the BBC and I did one year under him but otherwise the rest of the time it was the BBC and I often find out I'm very bad at Opus numbers and keys and I see a Mozart quintet or something or other and I think oh I wonder what that is, give it a whirl, and I'm astonished to find that by some sort of osmosis in the past I know every note of it and it does that sort of thing creeps in, I suppose any background does, if I'd been content just to stay in our smallish house, it wasn't that small it was a regency terraced house which my father bought and my mother thought he had ideas above his station but nonetheless I'm very glad I was born and lived there.

D This was in Leamington?

N This was in Leamington Spa yes. And again you see it was poor proud and pretty, pretentious place but I do remember all the things we used to do, we used to have people round on Sunday evenings for songs around the piano or whatever and one family came and I remember now the mother of one of them saying to my mother "you're Norman doesn't speak like our Eric" so my mother said " we always try to speak nicely, clearly and distinctly" and that's what we did.

D But as time went on BBC Radio went on in a way, becoming central to people's lives during the Second World War.

N Even before the war can you believe there we were, what was our link with public affairs other than the BBC and the Daily Herald which was the sort of Labour Party newspaper but I hadn't realised until quite recently a great deal of the book reviews or many of the book reviews were written by John Betcheman and I must have read them all, and I got a dose of John Betcheman long before I even knew who he was and I remember one of the things that occupied us considerably was when John Reith, Sir John Reith by then announces his resignation, there we were in our small little house wondering who the new director would be, indeed who could it be and when we were told it was a man called Mr F W Ocalthie??? I think it was who's he which almost seemed like a let down and then of course the war started and I can remember the first few days of the war very clearly because the programmes were suddenly completely different, I think Radio Times issued at least two emergency editions, but they somehow, programmes went on quite early in the morning and latish at night which they hadn't been I don't think we started until the *Daily Service* I don't know if I'm wrong about that but that's sort of 10.15, 10.30 time and we would finish about, I say we, the radio would finish about 10.30 but suddenly the BBC managed to prove to the government that they were something for the good of the people and so we were kept abreast of everything that was going on, lots of news bulletins but they got to do something in between and Sandy McPherson was the official BBC theatre organist then, Reginald Fort had gone and if in doubt put Sandy on the air and one journalist I remember wrote and described it as not seated one day at the organ but seated all day at the organ which it seemed like, I think he did an extremely good job.

D It was Sandy McPherson's big moment.

N Well I suppose it must have been because he must have been on the air four or five times a day doing half hour programmes introducing them, he couldn't have done anything just to get the music and to, what am I going to say about this, sort of thing, and a very rough timing on it.

D But you made your first broadcast at the end of the war?

N Yes, it was just about at the end of the war, my first broadcast was unbelievable because I played the title role in *King Lear* but only a three minute excerpt from my own production at the university, but that somehow, and that was from Birmingham, and that somehow put up a signal because I then asked if I could go and do an audition and I went through the audition and passed it, it was for poetry reading and Edward Livesy who did it then said "well that's fine I can use you as a poetry reader, would you like to play small acting parts as well?" which I couldn't believe he was saying because I understood that because of Equity we weren't, only actors were allowed to be in radio drama but as he said we do documentaries and features they have dramatisations in them but they're not drama so, and that's how I began and did an enormous number of broadcasts one way and another and in fact by the time the *Archers* started I'd done about 500.

D But this business of going from a student production to being in the real BBC were you kind of consciously following a dream or did you kind of fall into it?

N I don't know about following a dream, it was something one was thrilled to be doing, thrilled to be asked to do and then next thing that happened was there was a programme for youth called "The future's here" I won't sing you the signature tune though I could and they wanted an item on how to run a dramatic society so they asked our dramatic society at university for someone to send a script, a four minute script on how to run a dramatic society so I sent a script in and mine was chosen and then I was invited with two or three of my student friends to come in and perform it, so I started then unknowingly the beginning of something which has become not unusual and that is to perform in something I'd written, I've always worn these two hats, the actor and writer and it started really fairly early on, almost before my first official broadcast in the sense of getting a contract and being asked to sign it and return one copy.

D So these were the days at Birmingham University?

N Yes towards the end of Birmingham actually because I remember there was a marvellous man called Reggie Smith who was a graduate of Birmingham and he came back from the Middle East where he'd been in charge of radio and somehow he got to know about me and I suppose they pass on names.

D He was by then at the BBC?

N Yes he joined Lawrence Gillian's wonderful sort of stable of extremely talented people including people like Louis MacNees for example, Terence Tiller another poet but several Cecil MacGivern a remarkable man who all wrote top line documentaries, features as they were called and it was a very very wide brief though and Lawrence was a wonderful inspirer, but was prepared to live dangerously and let get people their head and Reggie certainly took it, but I can remember doing a couple of programmes for him in early 1946 and I'd get there at 10 o'clock and we'd do the read through of the thing and then he'd say to me "I expect you're revising for your finals now aren't you? Yes well go and do that at 6 o'clock we're not on the air until 7.30 which was a very kind way to treat an undergraduate because I'd been living below the breadline, not having had a bean wasn't expecting, I wanted to be enrolled at university and called up four years later which was my headmaster's plan because I had left school at 15, and done no 6th form work, for which I'd failed the medical so there I was with egg on my face, a four year course and not a bean, I managed to get forty pounds from the local authority which was going to be enough to get me enrolled not to maintain me there for four years so I did all the jobs that came to hand but then once I started to broadcast it was a rather more pleasant way of earning one's living and doing the odd thing in a factory or getting in the coal for the students union and that sort of thing.

D But you were working for the BBC and really an undergraduate.

N I'm afraid that went on for my two years at Oxford and I realised my, it's so hard to explain to people that the BBC was something terribly important not just in my life, it was the BBC, which meant by implication whatever it was, high standards and I just joined my college at Oxford which was having its 400th celebration of its foundation by Henry VIII and so they did a production of Shakespeare's Henry VIII in which I was cast as 2nd gentleman, I mean hardly a starring role and I went to a couple of rehearsals and then had a contract with the BBC for six programmes and a series and after a certain amount of soul searching but not a lot I agreed to do the BBC thing and went to see the producer and I don't know if they ever held it against me but I've always been rather amused at the fact that the part of 2nd or 3rd gentleman was eventually played by a young man called Armstrong, who is now Lord Armstrong having been through the government and the cabinet.

D You were an undergraduate and you were working for the BBC did that make you something among the other undergraduates, were they sort of envious of you?

N Well no because, its very difficult to put this without sounding immodest but I was a bit of a star turn, I appeared to have an enormous social life, I was secretary of this and president of that, I never appeared to do any work and yet I got a first class degree, so I was, they'd just say oh well you know George, because my second name was George and that's the name I was known under at the university, so it wasn't , it sounds big headed, it was no great surprise it was almost what will he do next?

D But I mean presumably people were still listening to the wireless on accumulators and high tension batteries, were they at that point?

N No, I think…

D So your friends could hear you?

N Oh no, where would the set be, they might, there was in the students union where I was a steward, a few pound a week which meant I had a bed, where there was a kind of radiogram but that was in a big public sitting room as it were, but I was very glad of that because I was the steward of the club and all my mates would go off across the road to the town hall to the City of Birmingham Orchestra as it then was and listen to a concert which I couldn't afford to go to but the BBC nearly always broadcast the second half so I could hear that and then they'd come in and we could discuss it and there was never, the thing that I find more difficult to believe than almost anything else, although I was clearly the most hard up of the lot there, it was never referred to I never felt that in any sense I was disadvantaged and indeed I was doing tutorials once with a young man who was the son of a parson, he was the most endearing character who was drinking in a week more than I was living on and yet every Thursday I could always lend him half a dollar, 2 and 6, and I did it once to see and the next morning and we went on doing it for the rest of our time together, every morning he'd be there and paid back his debt and I learnt a lot about life then because I thought well this is very strange, I'm supposed to be the poor one and I'm lending the money, I couldn't quite understand how this worked. But that's when this silly thing which has dug me since I began to grow and that was that I was, a word I hate, polymath because I did tend to be a bit of a turn my hand to anything and I think its not the way to be a success and how I come back to being invisible again.

D But in those early days this was the dilemma that faced you because you were good at a lot of things and there was a kind of clear choice to be made it seems, academic life or broadcasting.

N Absolutely and when I was in Oxford I was allegedly doing some research that rather got lost I was definitely being a tutor and I have to say with all due modesty that all my chaps did well I was teaching Anglo Saxon, my own thesis and the degree I should have got rather got lost in the folds because I was very much involved with the archaeological society and quickly became president of it, I was involved in the experimental theatre club and I was involved with the ?? so one had a rich full life and never really stopped to think and it wasn't until I was coming back from a three month tour into Europe which started off with a three week tour of a play what we called the Comedians at Oxford with the French, we went into France and we played in four places Tour, Poitier, Avignon and Paris, I then went on to Switzerland for a month all just doing exchanges and things and went then into Italy and came back again all on fifty pounds can you believe and I was sitting in a café, sidewalk café as they say in Paris, and I made a sort of decision then, I thought, I was very disappointed with the structure of the academic life at Oxford, I wouldn't want that to be held against me because anybody would tell you I was absolutely besotted with the place, and thrilled to be back as a member of the high table of my college, but I decided there and then that I would go back and finish my thesis however unprepared for it and think about broadcasting and then at that same moment the BBC first of all made me an offer to be, a six month contract, to alternate with one of their main feature producers who wanted to write but he'd got a wife and children so he wanted six months of guaranteed work at the BBC and I was going to be his other half, that fell through because nobody could work out the insurance as it were the national insurance thing can you believe, so I got on with my business and then I was headhunted by the Director of Programmes who came down to Oxford and gave me dinner at the Mitre which was a lovely pub, hotel in those days and more or less offered me a job.

D This was Director of Programmes at Birmingham?

N At Birmingham, yes. And again by this time I had been broadcasting quite a lot from London because I'd passed a kind of double audition from features, Reggie of course had used me in London, Reggie Smith and so I'd done really quite a lot of, I'd got the cache of being something of a London artiste as well as just being the regional thing, they'd always hotly deny there was any sort of…

D It was a kind of snobbery?

N There was a snobbery…

D How did that work?

N It didn't work against me at all, personally, I'm jumping ahead, I think when we started a certain programme which became very successful we felt for some years that we were being sniped at from London and criticised perhaps a little more severely than a lot of other programmes because we hadn't come from London we'd come from the provinces as they used to say.

D Regional artistes.

N Regional artistes.

D Just go back to getting into the BBC because here you are at Oxford you're doing broadcasting but you're still pursuing an academic career so how does the moment come that you're suddenly a broadcaster full time?

N Well I suppose it started with my deciding that the academic world wasn't after all for me which I wanted it to be.

D You were good at it?

N My students all did extremely well, my own research rather slipped through the grating because I was having such a social life and having had those four years at Birmingham which were enormously enjoyable but I was always a poor relation, I hadn't any money, but having got a good degree and a scholarship to Oxford then I had enough to live on and of course broadcasting gave me an extra income so I didn't feel in any sense that I couldn't enjoy Oxford as I always wanted to do if I'd chosen my parents more cleverly I would have gone there when I was 18 you know instead of which I went the pretty way and was 21 before I got there I think, 21, 22, so that the two in a way marched along together I very often used to keep the broadcasting very quiet from the people at Oxford, it was immediately after the war so the restrictions weren't so great, I mean before the war you had to sort of sign in every morning and that sort of thing and that had rather gone, so I was able to sneak away and I was never aware that anybody had ever heard me on the air.

D This feeling of having to sneak away, was that because people would feel that you weren't devoted to…

N I wasn't giving it full whack but don't forget most of the time I was playing really quite small parts, there were a couple of occasions where I didn't which was sprung on me which was rather alarming, but again I think it was a kind of rites of passage thing, it was realised that I was capable of playing a lead even at five hours notice which was all I got, I had a contract to appear for Reggie Smith in London in a series called *first hearing* I think it was called, the usual contract, and then I had a telegram saying "imperative make early start" and when I got there he said "well as you will see from the script" and then we saw the script for the first time "this was written for two narrators and a boy actor and on reflection and the fact that we couldn't find a good enough boy actor we've decided to blend it all into one, so the two narrators will become one narrator and that narrator will become the leading character Jean-Jacques Rousseau the French writer and philosopher so I barely had time to breathe and it was live and for the only time in my life I got a double fee for that because even the BBC had to admit that that was (couldn't hear next few words) which of course in that confident big headed way you have when you are young, I took it in my stride and thoroughly enjoyed it.

D Can you remember the first time you went through the doors of Broadcasting House, you'd been doing a jigsaw of it when you were a child and all of a sudden you are walking through this pretty impressive building?

N Well now, I'm not ducking the question but we didn't do much from Broadcasting House when I first started we were still working from places like the Palace Cinema and 200 Oxford Street and that little cinema up on towards the tube station who's name escapes me at the moment, so I can remember suddenly being asked to be in a documentary I think again produced by Reggie Smith and that was in BH and the thrill there was that I recognised it immediately from the photograph in my *Children's Hour* Annual that this was the original *Children's Hour* studio because the listening room as it was called where the production panel was, was on the next floor with just a sort of window looking down so one talked but the person I was speaking to was up there, that was an enormous thrill because *Children's Hour* had been not only part of my life as a child but I wrote well into the 50s and beyond I wrote an awful lot of plays and things for *Children's Hour* , mainly plays, 50 minute plays. So that the, I think the thrill had been working for the BBC in any form. I went first of all to the studios in Broad Street Birmingham which were as it were alongside a motor car showroom one walked along a sort of long entrance and I gave my name to the commissionaire who must have pressed a button or something because a debutante came down the steps and said Mr Painter and was conveyed you know.

D And it was all frightfully posh?

N Frightfully posh and up to this designed studio there well that's enough for me, that's enough magic for Heaven's sake, the BBC, it may have been in Birmingham but it was the BBC. So to a certain extent it rather stole the thunder of when I went into Broadcasting House the strange things that happened, some years later they'd got an awful lot of it boarded up you know, sort of rejigged, I remember seeing tucked into a corner a feature which I recognised from ancient BBC annuals, I mean I was an anorak as far as the BBC was concerned and I recognised the sort of centrepiece of the religious broadcasting studio and that was tucked behind a sort of plywood tunnelling and then local radio took over, had a headquarters there and took over the space, so I hadn't been in Broadcasting House for some years, well 7 or 8 years I suppose but I was delighted to go in and do *Desert Island Discs* and to see that it's coming to life again which is wonderful as far as I am concerned because it should never have been allowed to die, but it was the place where the steam radio came from you see we've got to build our magnificent new television places and one wasn't always perfectly clear that one was second class citizen working in radio which is why eventually in self defence and wanting to diversify I got into television.

D We've talked a little bit about you feeling invisible after 50 years but there's in a way has been this kind of feeling somehow that radio was very quickly in a way became the junior partner once television got its…

N Yes I think poorer relation rather than junior partner, I think junior partner sets it too high which is again another reason for us all to be so glad that Radio 4 has this status which it undoubtedly has in the country now because we battle through, we are taken seriously we're not that poor old thing down there you know with the ever so classical music station or the ever so pop music thing, I mean Radio 4 has now become in its own right an institution which people are very proud to work in and very keen to listen to in spite of television.

D You got this temporary contract with Edward Livesy in Birmingham…

N It wasn't actually with Edward Livesy it was in recorded programmes in Birmingham, they, why do you call it programmes, well the idea was that for 3 months I would learn the job which I did and then they renewed it for another 3 months and all this time although I was on a contract I was still doing the odd documentary and so on, and so I was doing interviews, I was writing, I was a researcher for example, there was a programme called *down your way* in which Richard Dimbleby used to go into a town and people would choose records and he would have a four minute interview with them, it was just four minutes because that was the size of the disc it was cut on and I was sent around Banbury for example to do the research, to find the people and to brief them and it was years before I met Richard Dimbleby, and the whole thing would be done within an hour, within a day and that was another of the strings to my bow as it were, so

they then gave me a third contract as a general programmes assistant, which was another word for dogsbody and again I did anything that I was asked to do in that way and then that wasn't renewed and I was offered a job on staff and I blush to say that I wrote back to the Head of Programmes, I hope I was sufficiently sort of grateful but I went on to say, "but I do feel that I am at the moment young enough and no doubt you would think foolish enough not to feel the need of security, so I must decline your offer". How dare I after no doubt they'd been pushing things in my way, thinking you know we've got a staff member here, but I'm glad I didn't do it because that was early in 1950 and of course there was another programme coming along which I didn't know anything about, but very quickly I did and very glad I hadn't saddled myself with the staff job.

D But you kind of felt in a way that you'd been a utility person?

N Never felt it you see, I was working for the BBC, what could anybody else ask out of life and furthermore when I had such a variety of jobs to do, if it was an archaeological story send Norman sometimes in the news, or if it were a literary story send Norman you know and I would go along and do an interview, and it if were an academic story you know I could go along and do that, so I didn't feel, I probably was being used, but as far as I was concerned, I was doing a job, I was working for the BBC and I was being paid enough to live on and the theory throughout all this was that any spare time I had I was writing my masterpiece you know, and all this that we are talking about is a terrible mistake, my ambition was to publish a volume of poems and to see my name in lights in the West End over my latest play and none of that happened, I mean the poems are there incomplete, a file that thick and I used to say when I get old I will go through them and edit them down and I am old and they're still not edited down but that's what I wanted to do and everything else was rather fun in the meantime so I had no feelings of being, anymore than I had feelings of being a poor student I had no feelings of being used although I clearly was.

D At that time radio was very much a live medium.

N Oh yes very much so and there's nothing quite like live radio, it has this terrible risk thing you know if you make a mistake that's it, its been heard my X million people but there's an awful lot to be said for it whereas to get onto a recording well there's a big safety net, and with directors getting more and more fussy, "although its quite good I would like to do it again" actors twig onto that pretty quickly and think well she won't take it the first time, so I will save my performance until the second take or the third take and I think that's counterproductive but when we first went from, or when I first went from live broadcasting to mainly recording, you see recording quality wasn't good enough, occasionally I would be in a feature and it would say SB London, which meant simultaneous broadcast London so it wasn't just midlands it was heard all over the network and occasionally you'd do a programme, I remember we did one about D H Lawrence, and shortly afterwards we got a contract to do another programme about D H Lawrence and when I got there the director said "we are now going to listen to that last performance which we did have recorded not for broadcasting as it happens, we couldn't possibly broadcast it and if you listen you will see why" which was a way of saying you all gave dreadful performances so then he got a cracking performance after that but it was still live.

D They even kind of scripted interviews did they, they were terrified of the wrong thing being said or they wanted to keep it tight?

N Yes indeed, there was a programme which was enormously successful called *Country Magazine* in which Ralph Whiteman who was a sort of farming journalist, he was a farmer originally used to interview in the studio four or five genuine agricultural people and none of them could read a script and I remember Ted Livesy leaping up and down saying "marvellous isn't you can see the difference between them and a professional" well I didn't really go along with that but it was an enormously popular programme and then I was asked if I would find the characters and write for it, write for such a programme which should never have been written in the first place. And then I hit on a formula which worked like a charm because I'd listened to so many of these people saying "and..then…when…I …got…to…see…my…wife" all this I realised they could see short sentences so that was a clever way of doing it and also they all knew, this is showing how the time has gone by, they'd all been brought up on the authorised version of the Bible and if ever I wanted a word I think they won't know that word and I could think of the Bible no hesitation and I then got more brownie points for the fact that when you script it they seem to be better but that's as simple as that.

D So then basically you were to go along and sort of find out what they wanted to say, and write it for them, get them into the studio and read it live.

N Even a small a small portable recorder let alone a midget, even a small portable recorder was a very rare thing so you couldn't actually record on this not as we do now, you can record it direct into the thing, so I used to try to remember and if possible I'd like to sort of see them twice but wasn't always possible so I could quickly write down my recollection of their way of putting things and of course you had to clean it up because they would suddenly say "by the way that reminds me of another…blaa blah blah" and you'd got to sort of tidy it up but it was a programme that was

highly regarded and ran for many years, it was Sunday lunchtime that may have helped it was a curious time but it had an enormous following.

D Now one of those things in those early days it was a kind of a, radio was an established medium but not a mature one would you say?

N Well yes because there were still things to learn, there were still technical things to happen I mentioned a portable recorder and eventually we had the midget recorder which meant that we were much more flexible because otherwise it was the recording van recording in four minute pieces, I remember my first minute job was to do an interview, a piece for a programme called *In Britain Now* which was a documentary done by all the regions of the BBC it was on once a week and each contributed an item and I went to East Anglia because Birmingham region was given East Anglia so it could have a coastline so it was a very curious thing, so we spent all our time falling over our feet trying to get to East Anglia and there was a man there who was an itinerant leadcaster who used to go round the churches stripping the lead off melt it down, recast it and then put it back again, so there I was busily being a BBC interviewer and the senior person who was with me came up to me and he said "how many discs have you cut?" and I said "oh I don't know, I suppose about six" he says "that's 24 minutes you haven't finished yet, how long is the item?" and I said "oh five and a half minutes". But that was a lesson that had to be learnt, simple things which now are commonplace but if you went to do a thing out on location the recording engineer would get out his little four minute discs you see and when you'd finished say if it was done in a church or a field somewhere, he would then sort of say, "quiet please, I am going to record some atmos" and he would do one disc with nothing on it, which was then used when they were editing because if you did a jump cut from one disc to another suddenly the background disappeared, you put on your one disc of nothing and it was magic, that was discovered, I can remember it happening, so we were still building the technique and this, what's the phrase disc continuous recording is now the norm for documentaries and features whereby you get a cast together, they may be all together sometimes you can do it in bits anyway, but if you do get the whole cast together, you then have a schedule of when you are going to record each bit and then you rehearse and record, rehearse and record, so each scene can be done as we do in the *Archers* we rehearse it and if that's acceptable that's fine if not you do another take and you day patches you put little bits in, and then you get onto the next scene. Well all that had to be learnt when we started the Archers we were doing 15 minutes at a throw you see, if anybody made a serious mistake we had to do the whole episode again which was not amusing.

D Let's go back a bit to some of the earlier days when you were involved in radio drama and features and they were pretty heady days I mean there were some big names there then and now including yourself.

N It wasn't only the big names they were heady days anyway, here I was at last you know, broadcasting for the BBC and the fact that you encountered really special people like Reggie Smith who was one of the stars of the features department then R D Smith he always appeared as and thanks to him I worked with an awful lot of the big names but the one I remember the most was, a number of times I worked with him Dylan Thomas because Dylan was at the time the lion of Mrs H A P Taylor's drawing room at Oxford and was rather well in with Damian Sittwell and so on and was rather revelling in it you know and he wrote a programme once and I went to London and saw Reggie, it was just after Christmas and I found Reggie in his office with his head in his hands, and I said "everything alright?" "no bloody cast, no bloody script, no bloody Dylan" and I said "when do we start?" "tomorrow" he said. So he then held up four little pages of an exercise book he said "that's what we've got" and it was Dylan's handwriting, it was curious, it was very neat, almost ladylike and then Reggie said "oh you can type can't you? Put five flimsies in and a lot of carbon, hit it hard" so I there and then typed these things. By the time I got to St Hindler's Convent the next day which was where we were doing the thing for the overseas service it was quite a large cast actually, still no Dylan and we rehearsed that first six pages which ran for about just under 4 minutes and Reggie was there to do a half hour feature on Oxford by Dylan Thomas with an orchestra and specially composed music sitting there waiting and no Dylan. And suddenly he arrived, 12 o'clock, perfectly happy having come in a car from Oxford kindly paid for by Reggie and he was thrilled because the taxi driver had referred to him as an ordinary bloke like you and me sir and that really thrilled him because he did want to be thought of as an ordinary bloke and not as a sort of slightly middle class person and he was completely sort of happy about the fact that we were all sitting round with nothing to do. At one point Reggie had said to me "this music by Elizabeth Lutchence is background music to Oxford, will you conduct the orchestra?" I said "no I will not, I said "I have played the odd piece of music but I'm not that musical" and in fact her partner actually conducted this music which was very Elizabeth Lutchence, that is to say avant garde and we'd got an orchestra and we'd got no script and he sort of rerouted, Dylan did and he said "well you play the music and I'll talk over it" and he did and got away with it up to a point, but shortly afterwards I had a letter from Reggie or a telegram even can you be in BH tomorrow at 10 for remake of the Dylan Thomas Oxford programme and only very little of that survived.

I had another wonderful, unforgettable day with Dylan thanks to John Arlott who before he became famous as a cricket commentator was a producer of literature and poetry programmes with the general overseas service aimed largely I think at India, and I went to do an audition for him and he was very kind, and I got to know him very well afterwards and did an awful lot of work for him but at the time he said "yes that's alright, I could use you, you know you've got a

speech defect don't you?" and I said "no" and he said "well you put a t into else, you say elts" "do I?" "yes and you say don't say France you say Frants". Well I was absolutely horrified but then listened and realised you know that I'd got a thing I'd got to put right, but nonetheless he invited me very quickly to spend a day in I think it was at 200 Oxford Street to do a half hour programme for India on the poetry of Alan Lewis and Sidney Key. The two readers were going to be Dylan Thomas and Norman Painting and we shared a half hour programme which was quite an experience and one was sitting on the other side of the microphone from Dylan the man who'd written the programme I think he was called R M Curry, sat at another microphone and narrated the thing but we had the bulk of it to do and it was extraordinary to sit opposite Dylan with his totally clean fingernails and his cigarette conducting himself and this unbelievable organ tone coming because he was a superb poetry reader and not only his own poetry, he was a very sympathetic, well he was a poet and like so many actors today who act it all and get it wrong and destroy the rhythm. But John had just come back from a week in Paris, now in 1940 something that was quite an event, you had to get a visa and all sorts of things, and he'd eaten, not wisely but much too well and drunk too the food of France, and he'd come back with a tummy upset which got worse and worse so he sent out for some Kaolin and Morphin which he proceeded to mix in a studio glass and drank watched very closely by Dylan but then noticed that the Kaolin was encrusting like plaster on the end of the studio pencil which had been used so he said "oh, does it do that to your innards? Well I must have some" and he made himself a glass of Kaolin and Morphin which he didn't need but it reminded me of a story I only half remember of John Keats who peppered his tongue in order to taste the claret more particularly but he was stimulating because you never knew what he was going to do next.

D But you and he would have been about the same age?

N More or less yes but I hadn't the same capacity for drinking large pints as he had, he was drinking an enormous amount of beer then it was later when he got onto the spirits that things got wrong but he was certainly, he was a kind of unexploded bomb with you, you know, I don't mean he was bad tempered or anything but you never knew what sort of academic or brilliant or poetic or fantastic ideas he would suddenly throw up, or on occasions he would be perfectly quiet, perfectly normal just like everyone else. But he did a great deal of work but because of this drama thing you see, he was paid a features fee and not a dramas fee so there Auntie was at it again with her abacus working out how can we get…

D In a way it's kind of interesting to see how the BBC seemed to be a bit relaxed about this great talent coming and turning up at the last minute because I think now people like that almost wouldn't be, I mean you couldn't have someone coming in not turning up on time and so on, they would be labelled sort of unreliable.

N Well I think, actually the answer to that is I think an economic one, I remember talking about an actor I knew very well who had appeared with another distinguished actor in the pilot of what was going to be a long series, and it was written by somebody like Johnny Spate this was for television, it was going to be something really very good but the man I knew had turned up absolutely drunk and had stumbled through the whole thing and I remember telling this story to a young television producer who didn't find it at all amusing, and he said "that was alright when you just busked your way through it, but now we have all these people, all these technicians all the rest of the supporting cast all on tight contracts and we just can't afford to carry a lush in that way". I wasn't given the impression that Dylan wasn't capable of working, he was certainly not in those days drunk, but he liked to drink, but it never impeded his flow, he was a remarkable person.

D You weren't attracted by that kind of bohemian lifestyle?

N No I don't know why, I do tend to like things neat and tidy, not to a point but I mean not past a point anyway but I was amazed that he could get away with it and it never occurred to me at the time that he was being a stimulus to us, I mean I loved having him because of what he was but similar people who hadn't got the talent. I mean I can forgive anybody anything so long as they've got talent, but if they do all the sort of bohemian things but haven't any talent I find that extremely tiresome. But we all knew that he had this enormous talent and we should have had more of it but that's when the demon drink took over.

D The Archers began in Birmingham. How did you first hear about it being on the way?

N Well Godfrey Baseley who was a very interesting character did tend to talk an awful lot. A couple of drinks and the secrets of his soul were being announced to the world and he had got this programme and we all knew that he'd been to a meeting I think in the Birmingham Town Hall the advisory council were talking about the farming programmes, were they any good and everybody said they are very good programmes but the farmers don't listen to them then a Lincolnshire farmer called Henry Birt got up and said "what we want is a farming Dick Barton" and everybody roared with laughter and the remark was lost. But Godfrey thought about it and when years later I came to write the history about the programme I dedicated my book to the one who didn't laugh and Godfrey didn't realise for a long time that it was him I was talking about because he went away and thought a farming Dick Barton sort of 15 minutes every night

on agriculture would it work, could it work, I'll make it work, would be I am sure his thought processes and then he had to sell the idea, but long before he got anywhere near selling the idea we all heard about. I say we, I mean I was on a sort of loose association, I'd been offered a staff contract but I wasn't on any particular contract being employed either by the newsroom or *Children's Hour* or features department and by then drama, and so I was around, I was current, I didn't spend a lot of time in the bar but that's another story, and then one day he said to me "you've got an academic background I'm going to do this farming programme, we want somebody to read all the farming facts and throw them to the writers, would you be interested?" and I said "yes" and a bit later he said "we can't find a writer for this programme you know, its very difficult we've got a choice either get a farmer and teach him to write, or get a writer and teach him about farming. Would you be interested?" so I said "yes" and then he said "because you have written some radio". Next time he came in he said "of course you've also directed some radio haven't you?" I said "yes". "Well we haven't got a producer for the Archers yet," I don't think he called it the *Archers*, this new programme I think it was called and "would you consider producing?" and I said "yes" and he didn't make me any more offers but one day in the post came a contract in the post to appear in five episodes of a programme then *called The Archers of Wimberton Farm* I remember thank God they changed that, Wimberton is not the easiest word to say and for a trial run in May 1950 in which I was to play the part of Phil which turned out to be a good part and Godfrey's job then was to persuade to start with the BBC and then people in the agricultural world that this was a good idea and the Director General said "oh no we don't want anymore family programmes unless there's a war". Well that was the time of the Berlin airlift so there was very nearly a war. I don't know how Godfrey got this programme around he talked about it very graphically but I think he must have had an opportunity to get people from the ministry and people from the NFU National Farmers' Union and other interested parties to come in and listen to the programme and they all said "this is a dream come true, this is just what we want" so whether pressure was put upon the Director General I don't know but the fact is we went out in the light programme for 3 months on the 1 January 1951 and at the end of the three months we all wondered whether we should go on for another three months Harry who was playing Dan said "well after all, twelve pounds a week is not to be sneezed at" and there was a sudden silence round the table because we were not all getting twelve pounds a week even though I'd been told categorically by Godfrey that we want a family feeling so we're going to pay you all the same money. But then he'd tend to forget what he said you know and so I then resigned three times in one week in writing, and he finally came over and we had a shouting match up in the music studio, the only place available so he banged the Bechstein and I banged the Bossendorfer. What was I thinking of myself, a being a rather frightened person, except that "I know I'm in the right" which I knew I was then, so we ended up with me going down the stairs and him calling after me "You've got a job for 10 years here you silly young fool if you want it" and then I really thought that he was a megalomaniac and a fantasist but the contract was renewed for another three months and the rest we know, 50 years later.

D Was there really a feeling at that time at Broad Street in Birmingham that this was a runner, I mean Godfrey clearly believed in the programme.

N Well I think the Head of Programmes and very much the Assistant Head both had this excellent quality in the BBC of allowing people to live dangerously, who gave them a certain amount of rope, and of course there wasn't that much rope to give, they had a very very small budget but Godfrey had a good record, he'd thought up and had brought to the air half a dozen very good programmes from the end of the war through to 1950, I appeared in one or two of them for him, I appeared in a series called *Midland Roads and Rivers* which we used to live from a pub somewhere in the Midlands and great fun for me because John Moore the novelist used to write the scripts and interview the people and I was the illustrations which I suspect Godfrey knew about my abilities such as they were at first hand because he was an astonishing man. On one of these occasions Bidford on Avon we all sat there in this room in the pub ready to do our broadcast and he said "I want you to be quiet a minute I've got to do five minutes into the news and I've only got three minutes done, see if you can spot the join", I think it was four minutes actually. Then he said "shut up, I'm going on the air now" on went his cans and he started with his script held the script in front of him and he spoke without repetition or hesitation as they say and he said "this is Godfrey Baseley returning you to the studio". "Anybody see the join?" "no" "well I did three minutes there and I've got four" I mean he had enormous flair, tremendous confidence and it was good stuff I mean he knew the medium inside out, he was also a performer, he was a very sensitive man which many people find hard to believe because he could be so utterly ruthless but he had a quality which was bordering on genius but was always spoiled by the thing we were talking about Dylan Thomas you know lack of discipline as it were.

D Those early months of *The Archers*, did it cause much of an impact on the audience because often programmes you have to stick with them to get the public consciousness was there a sense of being instantly successful?

N One of the two scriptwriters called Geoffrey Webb had written a great deal for commercial radio and a number of serials including one called, well two I can remember, one was called *Daring Dexters* which was a circus story and the other was *The Glendale Star* I don't quite remember what that was about, not that I heard them but he used to talk about them and he said "we all say six months" and he said this loud and clear and he somehow persuaded the BBC, remember it was being broadcast in the light programme from London, it had been taken out from the region, they still produced it in the region but it was heard on the light programme which was the huge audience popular programme.

And we just went straight up the ratings and that Christmas on Boxing Day we weren't scheduled to do a programme and at the last minute we were asked to go in and do a half hour live edition, the only time in *The Archers* the whole episode has been live which I always remember was one of the features at the time was Dan and Doris Archer would sing round the piano which at the time was done by a lot of people and Phil used to play the piano, but the piano and its microphone were at one end of the studio and the talk microphone was at the other and Dan would say "what about Down The Vale Phil why don't you play that for us?" "Yes righto dad" run down live, hoping you didn't trip over anything to the far end of the studio, play it, let the chord die away then shoot back again, pick up the script and on you went and we sang two or three songs I remember and this was live and I mention because it showed we had suddenly become a programme they wanted half an hour of at a peak time.

D But Philip Archer, Godfrey liked you very much as Philip Archer but he didn't think you looked like him.

N Oh yes, there was a photocall for the front of the Radio Times and other things and Godfrey explicitly said "but not to include Norman" and somewhere in the files in the Radio Times you'll see a picture of the Archers, Dan, Doris and their daughter Christine. Not a sign of Phil.

D Were you put out by that at the time?

N I knew Godfrey very well by then so I mean I had no illusions about my own looks, one of the reasons why I hadn't seriously considered a career in the theatre because I'm not tall enough and if you were young in those days you've got to be good looking and I knew I had no illusions about that, and I had this curious bouncy confidence but I don't know how long I had that, one rather allowed it to slide off which is strange because I am by nature a worrier and yet I've had 60 years nearly as a freelance so something doesn't quite add up there.

D There's a kind of feeling that *The Archers* has become racey of late but Philip was a bit of a ram wasn't he?

N Oh, nothing in a skirt was safe. One of the great attractions of the part was that he was the sort of patron saint of testosterone you know just chased anything he could see, but on the one hand he'd been to the Farm Institute Technical College and had done well so he knew his farming and also he was extremely good natured, he had a heart as big as a bucket as they used to say, so the fact that he was a bit of a philanderer as well always double dating people and having to get out of it somehow but the idea of *The Archers* becoming racy is absolutely absurd it started racy. The very first scene I did was after a New Years Eve party sitting in the back of a car with Grace who was the bosses daughter, Grace Fairbrother who Phil was later to marry and its quite clear that at the very least he'd got his hand down her blouse and the chances are he was busily undoing her bra and it was made perfectly clear but because it was radio those that didn't want to think such things didn't, it was just an affectionate scene, but it was unmistakeable and we had some very intimate love scenes. The understanding then being of course as Barbara Cartland said it was as far as the bedroom door, no further but those who wanted it to go further and clearly a lot of people assumed it was, I mean I was sent contraceptives through the post you know, packets of Durex arrived and do be careful Phil and I remember on one occasion I was with Ysanne Churchman who played Grace in Ripley in Derbyshire and there was a little trotting wagon on which she was able to sit, I had to stand on the axle behind and we were taken round the streets and all the on the pavements and balconies and things and one woman yelled out to me "You naughty boy" and whether I looked the part or not they seemed to believe it.

D But this love affair between Phil and Grace began to sort of capture certainly the press's attention and the public imagination.

N Well it got to the point of, when are they going to get married? Because that was the natural thing, whatever else they'd been doing or not nobody was happy until there was a marriage, now the writers and the editor said "yes but that will be death won't it, the moment we marry them off we've lost the interest, we've got to keep this going somehow" and then Grace announced that she had been invited to Ireland to help a friend run a stable so she couldn't possibly marry Phil, and he said look I've just found a wonderful new way of breeding pigs and if its successful I shall be able to keep you in the style to which you are accustomed because she said she thought he couldn't so off she went and there was Phil with his minimal disease pigs which he was busily breeding and the whole nation was on the edge of its chair hoping that this pig breeding thing was going to be a success because if it was, Phil would marry Grace. So they were able to spin the story from 1 January 1951 right through until early 1955 when in fact they did marry and it was recorded in a village church which was packed one had never seen so many, the parson had never seen the church so full, Walter Gabriel had difficulty getting there the man playing the part because the policeman wouldn't let him past and he said "but I play Walter Gabriel" and he said "yes they all say that" so he took his teeth out and convinced him that he really was Walter Gabriel. Before that he'd been driven by the man who played the parson in the programme and they were lost so they saw a man and they said "can you tell us please where the church is?" and he said "I could but I'm not going to" "Well that's not very friendly" "maybe or maybe not but every church around here has had the lead stripped from its roof and I'm not going to help you strip ours" so they said "thank you very much for nothing"

and off they went, they finally got there but by that time they were late so they had to get past the police and there are photographs of that still in existence you know, and I was wearing a new suit and all the rest of it, she was looking as glamorous as it was possible to be then.

D This business of the pig breeding was that one of the early kind of education type…

N Oh no no, the educational thing stayed with us for many years, it still does in a more sophisticated form but there were some people, I think Eleanor Brown for example who would say what I love about *The Archers* are these bits when you get the pamphlets out of the ministry of agriculture and when they were badly done and they were not as well done as they might have been they did stick out rather because here was a piece of propaganda from the ministry but we got good credentials I mean the ministry and the National Farmers' Union were very much on our side, one minister of agriculture actually said very early on in the run of *The Archers, "The Archers* have done more for British farming in one year than the ministry has done in ten".

D But how did that work in terms of, the programme did have a brief in a way, it had to entertain people to get some of this information over but the BBC had also wanted to keep at arms length from the government.

N Not as much then as they've since done, I mean it was not necessarily a bad thing to be working, if it were in the interests of the people this is where they get this same attitude, but the educational thing was there really from the beginning it just depended on how it was done. What was the other thing you asked me?

D Well in terms of how did it work, how did you know, did you have the Ministry of Agriculture saying we'd like something done on pig breeding or was it…"

N They were thoroughly encouraged to make suggestions and we used to work with government departments, we did do a thing with the Ministry of Agriculture I remember by this time I was writing the script then and I remember saying to the minister "you see what our listeners want, they don't want information they want Brookfield Farm with roses round the door" and his number one jumped down my throat and said "there are no roses round the door, it's not a pretty pretty thing, this is one of the country's greatest industries and we're most successful" which was true but the factory story isn't so interesting as the agricultural story and I'd realised we had a problem there, so the point I was going to pick you up on was the brief. The brief has always been quite simply to reflect the life of the countryside for the benefit of people who didn't know it, especially the towns people and if there was an education element in that well so be it but the main thing was to reflect a way of life which I think we by and largely succeeded in over the years, just occasionally errant scriptwriters have gone off the rails a bit. I remember one scriptwriter had a bomb going off in the high street and a Hungarian lady who had come to stay in the village was being involved and I remember after the take and these explosions I think it was Harry Oakes as Dan Archer turned round and said "an everyday story of country folk?" but that was rare they didn't go off the rails very much.

D But when the programme was very first recorded in 1950 really the country was still trying to recover from the second world war, food production was a big issue.

N Yes, we'd done very well during the war thanks to a thing called the War Agriculture Committee but now we'd got a whole industry virtually to create because of world conditions and so on, so that efficiency came in, for example we originally started with a small cast, Dan and Doris, their son Jack who had become a publican, their son Phil who was obviously going to carry on the farm and their daughter Christine who liked horses, they had a neighbour called Walter Gabriel who was a bad farmer and a comic character, and Simon the farmhand I think and there was Peggy, Jack's wife and that was it. It soon became perfectly clear that Dan's farming wasn't really good enough and Walter Gabriel's was absolutely impossible. Dan was farming with two horses Blossom and Boxer and when Phil tried to persuade him to have one of these new fangled tractors, I mean the heavens fell and it was an event as it was for many farmers around the country and this is the thing that I really want to stress, we didn't lead we followed until enough farmers were driving tractors, we couldn't get rid of Blossom and Boxer it was occasionally we'd made the mistake of trying to lead but that again was I think towards the end of Godfrey's stint, it was wishful thinking, I remember him saying "chicken is going to be cheaper than beef" and we all thought well that's nonsense and within twelve months it was because of the broiler house and the battery hen and he made these "there'll be no milk in a few years time, no bottles of milk, no deliveries, it'll all be dried, perfectly good dried milk, all these people they'll be carrying gallons of water about with a drop of milk in it" and he occasionally got carried away, with his own sort of megalomania but you know thank goodness for it, he was as I say I wouldn't want to give the impression at he was an easy man, he wasn't but then people who get things done tend not to be.

D Phil and Grace was an enormous story but the biggest story was yet to come which was definitely one of Britain's biggest soap moments in history when Grace was killed but there is a kind of story of how that kind of came about.

N Well, they had been fully aware of the fact that the marriage could really end the story line or put the kiss of death on it you know, no pun intended, but they decided, they had discovered by now, we're about four years in you see, the listening figures, the audience research as it was called then, listener research showed that we lost a lot of the audience through the summer months and we began to pick them up again as the nights got darker about September and so we used to have amusing lightish stories and then the big stuff used to come from September to April, that is the fact, that is the way that it was done. The situation though, once you'd got Grace and Phil married, the next thing people wanted was the patter of tiny feet and then you were faced with the problem of, which you always have whilst they can be a voice on a gramophone record they are alright but there's a long gap before the little darlings can read lines and once they've started to put sentences together they've got to do that, we've been very lucky in recent years because of the improvement in recording quality but before it was just recorded onto a disc and if you sort of said you know, eat your cornflakes darling and there would be *sniff* yes mummy which was no good and one couldn't do it, so what did you do after Phil and Grace were married and what do you do about your September story? Then they came up with this idea, well we've got to hit the headlines, lets kill off one of our favourite characters and again one of the reasons *The Archers* has lasted so long is it's never been afraid to cut out dead wood, its been cruel at time and I've been very lucky to have survived but I very nearly didn't because for a time they were going to lose Phil and then Grace announced that she was pregnant or hinted that she was pregnant and so they decided that it would be Grace who would die in September, now I'm in a minority of one that says that's the way it was and the idea of sitting thinking up a sensational story in order to spite the guns of the ITV I don't think holds water. For one thing they said who's the ITV it was merely ITV in London and we were heard all over the British Isles as we knew from our fan mail and anyway we knew again from listeners that if we had any worrying story for the Friday tag, because it always had to be a big story to carry people over to the Monday so that we wouldn't lose them on Saturday and Sunday so they found that anything that was likely to worry some of the listeners because we had miscarriages and goodness knows what people took it so seriously, a really sensational story would take place on the Thursday and be resolved one way or the other on the Friday. And that's exactly what happened according to the book and then with hindsight you see at least three members of the writing team I shall not say who they were because I can't remember but assured me in confidence that it was their idea and their idea alone, once that happens you begin to be suspicious.

D But the selection of Grace, Ysanne Churchman rather than you, you felt at the time might have had something to do with the fact that she had queried the money, and fallen out with Godfrey.

N She felt that and I'm sure it was the case. She was a very well established London artiste, really specialising in radio, her husband had recently been appointed to be the chief engineer at Birmingham and so they'd moved up and she'd begun to do a certain amount of work because she was a first rate artist I don't think anybody's ever denied that, that's always been said and it remains the truth today, I mean she doesn't do very much work now but towards the end of her career she was as clever as she always was and I wrote a great deal for her, not only in *The Archers* but a great deal of other programmes because she was such a dream to write for, you knew you'd get what you'd written and a bit extra which is what a writer always looks for. But she came to me one day and said "would you mind telling me how much you're getting" so I did and she said "yes well you see I am getting much less than that" and I said "oh well that's not fair" and so she said "well when I mentioned it I was told you're jolly lucky to be working at all with a husband up her as well" so she went to the union and the union tried to make a case and that was not the thing that was required, it was seen as not being a team player this being a team player thing for the BBC, I've done it all my life which is why I am so invisible you see you don't think the, how much am I going to get for this, in those days hand on heart it didn't occur to you, the BBC have asked me to do so and so and I shall do it.

D But clearly Godfrey was severely rattled at this woman daring to question…

N I suppose it was as simple as that, there's no doubt that they'd decided that quite academically that one of these two characters had got to go and for some months I was assured by the people concerned afterwards that it was going to be me because they knew I wasn't entirely happy being with all my other possibilities being tied to a soap opera as I wanted to write my plays and my poems and all the rest of it and do some stage work, because I was now resigned to being funny old men and village idiots you know so and they said it had got to be a popular character, it wouldn't do for it to be not one of the top line characters it wouldn't have the impact and that's what they were after. And it may well be that Godfrey was offended by this girl daring to query these things but equally he hadn't got the money, the budget was always very very tight.

D It's astonishing given the success of the programme.

N Well eventually and grudgingly I have to say we were slowly given more and more, its only in the last oh I suppose ten years that we've had anything like a realistic wage to be perfectly honest, but we got there in the end, just as, I don't know how many scriptwriters conferences I've been to one indeed here at my house here for nothing because it was part of the job, now scriptwriters are paid to attend a day's conference, overtime if we go overtime we get an enormous sum of money like £6 or something but it's better than what we didn't get for all those 40 odd years before when it was

the programme we did it for the programme for the BBC you know, this is a very hard idea to sell to people at the moment you know because they don't believe its true in today's atmosphere but we were much more biddable in those days and not quite so likely to go off like a rocket if we were crossed.

D How did Ysanne Churchman find out that she was going to be killed off?

N That's very interesting, I don't know, I think it can only have been a leak. Mind you Godfrey was very good at leaking when he didn't want to. I'll come back to Grace but I'll give you an example. When I was part of the writing team we were stuck, we couldn't see the future and suddenly we had this brilliant idea and I forget what it is but we had a script conference in the morning and at lunchtime we were meeting a lot of farmers and farmers representatives and we'd had this idea and Godfrey said "This has got be kept absolutely secret because its got to have a big impact" and as I was saying goodbye to the various people one of them said "very exciting things coming up" I said "what do you mean?" "in the programme" I said "oh really?" "yes, Godfrey's been telling us over lunch". So he could leak even without realising it. I'm pretty sure that he made it quite clear that that's what he decided, that Grace would have to go because I think she went on protesting and then on the day when we recorded it, it was a week of so called topical recordings we recorded each day starting at 2 o'clock so that the scriptwriters could read the papers and so on and write in a topical script but also so that nobody could have a sight of the script before we'd recorded it.

D Of course you knew that something big was on the go?

N We suspected it, we didn't really know and then on the day we were in those studios diagonally opposite the Langham and up we went at the time stated and on Thursday 22 September 1955 Ysanne came up to me white and with a quivering lip and she said "they've killed me, they've done it" and that was the first time she was sure it wasn't just a bluff, because it might well have been a Godfrey bluff, he was quite capable of teaching people a lesson so she didn't know up until three hours beforehand that this was going to be it and then we rehearsed it and the rest is history.

D Can you remember what your reaction was, I mean you'd obviously seen the script as well?

N No I hadn't she met me as I was going in, I said "oh I haven't read it yet" and but this was the BBC this was ordained, ours is not to reason why, what good could we do by complaining, tut tutting a bit but of course I also I suppose with the callousness of youth could see it was a wonderful acting opportunity for me to the extent for the first time ever I plucked up my courage and suggested another alternative to the line I'd been given, the line, which was originally "she died in my arms on the way to hospital" which I felt was a bit prosaic and I said "couldn't I say in my arms on the way to the hospital, she's dead" and they thought for a moment and I thought they were going to say "don't be so stupid" but they all agreed that that would be stronger and indeed that's what I did and we didn't have any signature tune after that, one of the few occasions when there's been nothing, just I suppose 45 seconds of dead silence whilst everybody sort of, I suppose we waited for the pips if the truth were known and then we had radio newsroom presumably at 7 o'clock on the light programme and then life went on except that it didn't and not to anybody's surprise the nation was brought to a standstill.