

## The Connected Histories of the BBC

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**File:** R143-34-1 – S J DE Lotbiniere\_1

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0:00:45

Interviewer: Mr Lotbiniere, you went up to Cambridge, read Law, you were called to the bar and then, in 1932, you came to the BBC. What made you take this decision?

Mr Lotbiniere: Well, it was really chance. I was at the Chancery Bar and I found it, perhaps, a bit too intellectual for me. It was certainly a slow start, and either it was a genuine feeling, or I kidded myself into the belief that I wanted to work with a group of people, and at the bar, the Chancery Bar in particular, you worked very much on your own. Without having any idea what I wanted to do, I applied to the Cambridge Appointments Board and two jobs were suggested. One was something to do with a publisher, and the other was a Talks job in the BBC. I hadn't dreamt of the BBC; I hardly listened to the BBC except for great occasions, however, I thought I'd have a go.

0:01:36

Interviewer: So, you joined the BBC as Talks Department, which was probably one of the most powerful departments in the BBC at that time. Who was in charge?

Mr Lotbiniere: Charles Siepmann, and under him he had two or three groups. There was a general talks department with Lionel Fielden and Joe Ackerley in, and that was the group that I joined. There was Mary Somerville running Schools Talks very ably. Then, there was an adult education group with Tony Rendall. The end of the corridor, believe it or not, was the news department, with JCS McGregor, really doing nothing, as far as I can remember, but edit Reuter and PA tapes as they came in, and nothing else was our news in those days.

0:02:22

Interviewer: What sort of a man was Charles Siepmann? What effect did he have on the workings of Talks Department?

Mr Lotbiniere: He certainly wanted things his own way. He was a very good talker. I found it rather difficult to know what he was getting at, he talked so volubly. He certainly knew what he wanted and, on the whole, I would have said he got his way. On the other hand he had under him Lionel Fielden, who was very keen to have his way. Between them, I think, they probably did more or less what they hoped to do. Though sitting overall was Reith, and Reith who was, in those days, tremendously Olympian, he had his ideas about the Talks Department. In fact, this was the day when you could say that the BBC was small enough, but certainly it was a day when Reith thought the Talks Department was important enough to interview me, as a humble recruit.

Before I was accepted by the Corporation I was summoned to Savoy Hill, where I joined, and interviewed by Reith who,

amongst other things, I remember asked me if I believed in a future life. I don't remember clearly what I said, but long after, when I asked him if I'd flatly said I didn't believe in a future life would I have got in, he said, "I think you would have got in, but I'd have kept a much closer eye on you." If he really meant that I think it does show that, at that time, he reckoned that the Talks Department was a very important one and that it was his job to keep an eye on them.

0:04:09

Interviewer: Would it be right to suggest that Reith, in point of fact, was the only Director-General, only one as far as I can see, until Sir William Hayley, who actually wanted to keep a finger on the day-to-day running of the Corporation?

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, I think that might be so. Yes, I think probably you're right and probably with Ogilvie who followed, he more or less picked things up as they went wrong, if somebody complained. There's no doubt that Reith had built the thing up, believed in it tremendously. Again, with Talks Department, I remember later on once being invited to dinner with him, and he had some press baron, I think, for dinner. It was a time when he was looking for a new Director of Talks, probably following Siepmann, it may have been. I remember him saying to this press baron, "Can you give me any advice? I've got the most important job in the country to fill."

The chap said, "What is it?" He said, "It's my Head of Talks," and the press baron seemed very sceptical. It really measured Reith's feeling about the output of a department, and I'm quite sure he watched very closely what that output was.

0:05:26

Interviewer: There was a story as late as the time that I joined the Corporation that if the telephone rang three times that was Sir John on the telephone.

Mr Lotbiniere: That's absolutely true, three times for him and two for Sir Charles Cappendale. Again, perhaps talking of his interest in the BBC, the department itself I would have said was run on rather highfalutin intellectual lines. I was not intellectual and I was handed over to sort of programmes that were rather pot-boilers. Things like the ordinary listener and his set, in those days people still had to be taught how to fiddle with a set and build a set. I remember one of the speakers on that was Sir Robert Watson-Watt, who later had so much to do with the coming of direction finding by electronics.

I had a careers series to do in the 1930s, it was the hard times when there was a great deal of unemployment, and I set about the careers series. One of the careers that was to be discussed, or was discussed was engineering. Again, I think, because the Talks Department felt that Reith wanted to keep in touch with things, they thought that he was an engineer and they'd send the script along to him. One day the three buzzers went and I was summoned to the presence. I walked into his, the Director-General's office. It's a long way from the door you come in to the chair in which the great man sat, in front of an enormous table.

I walked up and he had the script in front of him, and he threw it down on the table and he said, "Well, De Lotbiniere, somebody has sent me this but really it's of no interest to me." I picked it up and that seemed to be the end. I started to walk

out, back the long distance to the door out, and just as I got to the door Reith said, "Just a moment Lotbiniere, come back." I came back and he motioned me to a chair.

He said, "I'll tell you why I wasn't interested in this script," he said, "You know, as a young man I was a son of the manse, my father was a clergyman. One Sunday after morning service my father said to one of the choir men, or I think it may have been the choir man said to my father 'What are you going to do with Master John?' I suppose I was then about 16. My father said 'Well, I haven't really thought.' He said 'Well, why don't you apprentice him down at the engine works where I am?' My father thought that sounded a good idea. That," said Reith to me, "was how I started."

It always seemed to me such a chancy start, that when I looked at this script I was really thinking of young men who might be having the opportunity to go to a university, and this script, which was really for school leavers at 14, held no interest. This to me was two things, one, it was an example of the way he was concerned with what went out on the air. The other thing that struck me very much was this Olympian Director-General suddenly being able to come off his perch, completely, to a very junior new member of the staff and expose himself in that way. It was something that, as far as I'm concerned, endeared him to me for the rest of the time I knew him.

0:08:47

Interviewer: You use the words both 'Olympian' and 'endeared' which would suggest that he was a somewhat awe-inspiring figure, and yet at the same time he was almost a father-figure.

Mr Lotbiniere: Well, he was certainly awe-inspiring and he knew it and played on it. He'd had a cheek wound in the first war with a scar down the side of the cheek, and I think he liked to show this to draw himself up, not to conceal it but to show it. This was all part and parcel of his appearance. His height he felt was valuable. He was a strange mixture that he could suddenly come off his perch in this way. There were many instances I feel I've heard people say of this, he had this Olympian side and I think, probably, some people would say he could have a very petty side. I can't say that I ever saw it.

0:09:46

Interviewer: This, perhaps, showed up rather more later when he left the BBC and he was being pushed around to some extent by the Government from one job to another, never settling down and possibly yearning to get back to the BBC, which he'd created.

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, I think this could be so. He was certainly disappointed with what went on after he left the BBC, because there came a moment he'd been Minister of Information, had he, and then I think he was Minister of Works or something? Then, suddenly he was nothing and back in the reserve Navy. Somehow, and it seems an odd thing, but I remember meeting him somewhere and we had a talk. He said, "I'm just Commander," or something probably humbler still, "Reith. I'd like to have a talk." He came and had lunch with me in my little flat and was very much making out that he was the humble misused giant, and that something had come wrong, and maybe through no fault of his.

0:10:50

Interviewer: It seems to me, therefore, that Reith and his immediate senior staff did have a pretty fair influence on what was going on and what was put on the air.

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, because he had these strong views. After all, he'd had them in the building up of the BBC when, in the most fantastic way, he was able to [ \_\_\_ 0:11:10] government influence and commercial influence, and get an independent broadcasting organisation. With that in the past and behind him, he wasn't going to relinquish it when he'd achieved it all, and was clearly interested in programmes, though not, I think, gifted in the sense of knowing about music, or knowing about literature, or knowing about red nose comics. He certainly wanted to keep his influence going, and as a son of the manse, as everybody may remember, he wouldn't have dance music on a Sunday. This was his influence.

Another thing, I think, that was his influence, was this strange fact that in broadcasting the only organisation, call it what you will, the only interest that has a free hand in broadcasting, has a platform of its own is the Christian church. Sunday-by-Sunday and certain periods in the week, the church is allowed to speak as it will. There's no obligation an hour later to put on an equivalent period by an agnostic. I don't believe that anywhere else in broadcasting anything is allowed this platform for itself, with nobody to redress the balance, and that, I'm sure, was the influence of Reith and Reith, the son of the manse.

0:12:39

Interviewer: What sort of policy then was being applied in Talks Department?

Mr Lotbiniere: I think it was this policy of education and information. As far as I can remember our licence or Charter puts what we had to do in that order. I think entertainment comes third. Reith would have certainly thought that education information was the task of Talks Department. When Cecil Madden joined the Talks Department while I was there, who had a much freer and easier idea, he, I remember, starting one or two series, one called 'Anywhere for a News Story' with, I think, a signature tune. This was unthinkable to begin with in Talks. 'Anywhere for a News Story' was journalists talking about some great occasion in their lives, when they'd had some experience getting a news story.

This was beginning to edge onto the side of entertainment, but on the whole, Siepmann and Fielden and Ackerley would have been thinking of information education. There was an area Marjorie [ 0:13:45] in the department would be doing programmes about gardening and doctors, and all the things that were information. This, I suppose, was the policy that that department at that time was operating.

0:14:03

Interviewer: Did the government have any significant say in the running of things, especially in political matters? I mean, they had commentators, obviously, on such affairs.

Mr Lotbiniere: The government was always on the lookout for influence, particularly when it came to the various commissions that sat

on us at intervals, before we had a new Charter or a new licence. I operated at a pretty low level. The sort of thing that I remember while I was in the department was the time when Vernon Bartlett, who was our reporter, our expert on foreign affairs, was held by the government to being much too close to the German point of view. Certainly the Foreign Office interfered there and said that we were giving a false picture. Whether at the back of their minds they said to themselves, "Charles Siepmann is head of the department and he has a German name," I don't know. In the result Vernon Bartlett left.

0:15:01

Interviewer: There was some problem about Churchill and broadcasting in that period, wasn't there?

Mr Lotbiniere: The situation really was that Churchill had strong views about government policy. He was on the conservative side, obviously. When the BBC got around to some subject that needed discussion and wanted to ration the broadcasters, I suppose they had to between the different political parties, between the conservatives and the socialists, and the liberals, the conservatives would never give one of their slots to Churchill. This was a constant complaint by Churchill, and eventually, I remember, he managed to bulldoze his way through on some particular subject, I can't remember what it was.

Why it sticks in my mind was that as general Talks executive, I had the task of sending him his contract. When I offered him £25, which was the fee that everybody else was getting, to my surprise he said it was nothing like enough. I really felt at the time that, having struggled and struggled to get on the air, he

might have accepted the £25. I suppose we paid him more, I don't remember now.

Interviewer: Churchill, of course, has always been somewhat of a problem as far as broadcasting is concerned, even to this present day.

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, I dare say, but what he did for broadcasting and for the nation during the war you might forgive him all.

Interviewer: Indeed yes.

0:16:23

Regional development of course, in those days, had just begun. Do you think that the outcome of this was to help the regions to project their personality?

Mr Lotbiniere: Well, it must have been. It depended a bit on what opportunities they got to provide programmes, but with OBs becoming fairly prevalent all around the country, of a necessity the OB coming from Scotland, coming from Wales, coming from the north had a strong local flavour. I think, gradually, they were able to build up an entity in this way. It depended, and I don't remember clearly, away back then, the extent to which they had freedom to produce the programmes they wanted, how much they had to produce the programmes that that London wanted. Certainly, this was the beginning of regional, not autonomy, but regional influence and a regional audience of their own.

0:17:25

Interviewer: I suppose regional directors such as, well, shall we say Percy Edgar in Birmingham, did have a fair measure of autonomy. That's something which, probably, was comparable at a later stage.

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, what really happened all along, I think, was this question of not so much who called the tune, but who had the money. If a region was able to get finance to promote its own programmes, and was in a position as I think happened on the regional programme as it developed, to be able to opt out, it meant that providing they got the money they could put their programme on. Their next ambition, of course, was to get that programme accepted by the network so that it was heard all over the place, to the honour of the region.

This was a constant preoccupation later on when I was a regional controller. The constant preoccupation to produce a really homespun local programme in a way, and with an attraction, that led to the network taking it. It not only meant that you got your local material onto the network, but at that stage the network paid for it, and any money that you'd got to promote other regional programmes of your own was released for that purpose.

0:18:44

Interviewer: It was somewhere around that period that you became the first Secretary of the Advisory Council. That must have been quite a job in a way.

Mr Lotbiniere: It was a very interesting job for me. It was the BBC's first attempt to show that it was concerned with views all over the country, regionally and also views of different sections of society, theatre, literature and so on. It was a group of, I suppose, about 30, maybe even 40. It had some very high-powered people, Shaw, Lloyd-George, people of that sort of stature. I, in the Talks Department, was asked by Reith to be its first secretary. Archbishop Temple, Archbishop of York was in the chair, who was really a great figure.

I found it fascinating as a fairly young man, to sit at the foot of these important people and hear them talking, not always sense but at least talking. I don't know that I can remember now a great deal of the talk that went on. One thing I do remember as a secretary, I was very green and didn't really know how to prepare papers. I remember Sir Walter Citrine, who was the Secretary of the TUC at the time and was a member, coming after the first meeting and taking me aside and saying, "You dished out a lot of papers for us. They're very interesting papers and we have an interesting agenda, but you didn't key your papers so that it was easier to know which paper to pick up when we came to a particular item in the agenda."

This was not only a very valuable bit of advice to me, but a thing that didn't strike me at the time, but has struck me a great deal since when I've thought about it, at so many meetings somebody is anxious to show his wisdom and shine a bit. It would have been terribly easy for Citrine, as the meeting drew to an end to say, "Oh, Mr Chairman, there is one thing. I wonder if the Secretary could, in future, do so-and-so," and I'd have hung my head. I thought it was very humane of him to do it in the way he did.

0:20:58

Interviewer: Do you think that the Advisory Council did, and indeed does, have a great deal of influence on the day-to-day work of broadcasting?

Mr Lotbiniere: I think it has some influence, but I fear that to some extent it's not a smokescreen, but it is an effort to say to the public, "Look, we are getting in some wise people in these different spheres of influence, and they are hearing our problems and we are," and this of course we don't say so much to the public, "We are trying to persuade them what we want to do is the right thing to do." This was certainly the way the Council started.

At the same time we were just coming up to a new Charter and licence, a new licence I suppose it was. I remember that Reith got a small group from this Council, Lloyd George was one of them. He set up a small committee so that the Council itself could give evidence to the Oswald Committee, which was the one that was going to decide on the next five years, it may have been in those days, or the next ten years for the BBC. Whatever the Council had done, whatever the BBC had done by having the Council, here was a body of very eminent people and it was able, I expect, to persuade it to give evidence in a way which was for the good of the BBC, and the way that Reith thought things ought to go.

0:22:25

Interviewer: What was the position of outside broadcast at that time in 1935?

Mr Lotbiniere: I became, most luckily, Director of Outside Broadcasts, it was in those days in 1935. I think I said that when I was in the Talks Department I was rather given the humdrum things. There was a famous broadcast on the Saturday called 'The Saturday Sports Talk'. It wasn't the sort of thing that Lionel Fielden or Joe Ackerley had the slightest interest in. When I ceased being the programme side of the department and went onto the administrative side, the 'Sports Talk' was left with me. I really believe the chance of having run this talk every Saturday had some influence on the BBC suddenly, and really out of the blue, suggesting that I should become Director of Outside Broadcasts following Gerald Cock who had gone up to Alexandra Palace for television.

Anyhow, that was 1935 and I moved rather anxiously into outside broadcasts. It was a department which I think, I don't say had a lot of influence, but commanded a lot of attention. It went to events that people wanted, so to speak, to go through the eyes of a commentator. It covered quite a lot of outside broadcast entertainment, going to music halls and so on. It had influence and I think I was very lucky to get there. As far as the commentary side of it went, I came to the conclusion rather soon that there was some work to be done on the technique of what was then called 'the running commentator', perhaps it still is.

You'd find that 'Punch' would be full of jokes about the commentator who said, "It's a wonderfully sunny day here and there's an enormous crowd. I can't quite tell you how many there are, but there must be several thousand. Yes, it's a lovely day," without really getting down to what was going on and what people wanted to hear about, which was the football in front of his eyes. I went to various events to learn my way

about and sat next to the commentators, and they were all household names at the time, George Allison of Arsenal, RC Lyle was the racing correspondent at 'The Times'.

Interviewer: He was colour-blind, of course.

Mr Lotbiniere: Well, you say that. We used to say it, but whether this is true it would have been, I think, actionable if we'd have said it while he was alive. Anyhow, we used to have a feeling that it was easier to adjust things in your writing for 'The Times' after all the horses were home and dry. On the air you had to be accurate long before they were past the post, and this could have been a problem. At any rate, here were a group of household names, a group of opportunities of great value to the BBC. I must admit that I had a feeling that there was room for improvement, really, in the technique of broadcasting.

It's a very simple one, but because of some past arrangement with the press, who had always resisted the BBC doing its own news, when we started doing outside broadcasts we had, when you got over to the place where the event was taking place, to get the commentator to do a great spiel about what followed was copyright, Reuters, PA and various agencies. This seemed to me, if we were going over to Lords to hear what had happened in the test match, a disastrous beginning for the poor commentator.

I sent a memo to somebody, or I made some enquiry, a very innocent one. I said, "Well, surely the thing is to get the announcer to do this before we go over, so the moment we get to Lords or Wembley, the commentator can go into the first thing that the listener wants to know." To my surprise I found there had long been no need to produce this copyright PA and

Reuter. It was symptomatic of, in a sense, what was happening. It couldn't have been the first thing that a listener wanted to hear.

I began trying to study commentary a bit, and I hope, not necessarily very wisely, evolved a certain technique which commentators, on the whole, seem very willing if they were able to, to try to adopt.

0:27:07

Interviewer: You had something to do with the square one technique, I think.

Mr Lotbiniere: Well, this was another thing that I felt was wrong. We would go over to Wembley for the Cup Final and, having got rid of the acknowledgements to Reuters, we would then go on to say, "Now, have you got your 'Radio Times' in your hand? If you look at page so-and-so you will find the plan of the ground, and the square numbers." This seemed to me, really, a very antiquated way. The commentator really had to describe the football so that you could tell where the ball had got to. This was something that 'Radio Times' didn't like it very much, because it was a good advertisement for 'Radio Times' but had to be got rid of.

There were things like the grumbling commentator, the commentator would spend a lot of time saying, "I'm afraid I can't quite see." All that meant to the listener was, "BBC, why on earth didn't you put the commentator where he could see?" There were problems of filling time, there were delays and the commentator had to have an enormous tour of reserve

material. He had not only to describe what was going on, but he had to interpret it, what we call 'associative material'.

It seemed to me that one of the essences of the outside broadcast, if the thing was happening at the moment, was to exploit the suspense interest of the thing that was happening at the moment. When I started we never did any commentary. It seems incredible, but I think this is so, we never did any commentary on cricket. We used to go over at the tea interval and at the end of play. This was important, maybe in a test match people wanted to know what had happened at the tea interval. It seemed that you lost the chance of the suspense interest of somebody nearing his 100 or a hat trick, the suspense interest of the fact that every ball that is bowled at a cricket match, will it be a six, will it be a wicket.

Howard Marshall used to do these summaries when we came over. We talked it over and decided that we'd say to the BBC, "Let's try and maybe come over at a tea interval and then carry on." Howard did this, and it rapidly became apparent that this was very acceptable to the public. I remember that on the very next series of Australian test matches it must have been, I can't remember, in the middle 30s, I remember my delight when, somewhere I met some postman who said to me, "I've been able to follow the test match all through. Every house that I go in to deliver a letter, I hear a bit of the test match."

There were these things that seemed it was time that they were studied, and I must say I found a great deal of interest in trying to work them out. There were even small things like repeating the score, realising that between 6:00pm and 6:30pm in a cricket match, again going back to cricket, people are coming in from their offices. This is a time to repeat the score and the situation a lot more, perhaps, than at 12:00pm in the morning.

0:30:28

Interviewer: You said that there was an art associated with perfect commentary. It also rested on a subtle mixture, as you say, of description and interpretation. With hindsight, would you say that that's still a valid description?

Mr Lotbiniere: It must be still valid. Long after I left OBs I remember Leonard Mile who was going out to Washington as our correspondent, and knew that he was going to be faced with describing the second inauguration of Truman. He asked me whether I had any thoughts I could give him about his commentary. I laboured, perhaps, a bit, this problem of the unexpected and having to fill, the need to have the interpretive material, background material, and the need, where possible, to be able to link it to something visual, so that if you see somebody is wearing the Star of India, you can then talk about his service to the Indian Empire.

When the time came I remember listening to Leonard's description of the Truman inauguration, and Truman was late and on big occasions this invariably happens, and he had described, Leonard, the preparations, and a bible that would lay on the table in front of him was lying in front of everybody. On this bible Truman was going to take his oath. This was the bible, said Leonard, on which he had taken his oath for his first term of office. He then went on to say, "And I wonder, as Mr Truman comes in, when he sees this, whether his mind will go through some of the great events of his presidency."

He then proceeded to whether he'll remember, and proceeded to look at it through Truman's eyes. This seemed, to me, a way of keeping me, at any rate, on the spot. I was still with the

crowd, looking at this bible. He could, alternatively, have said, "Well Truman is late, so let me fill in time by telling you something about the things he did while he was president." The two things would have added up to the same result, but I think the one method was part of the art, technique, skill of commentary and the other would have been clumsy.

0:32:35

Interviewer: Would you think that Roger Eckersley's view that what was needed was a journalistic instinct, a decent voice, sound commercial knowledge of the subject and a power to make the listener feel present at the event, is reconcilable with that view?

Mr Lotbiniere: I think it's reconcilable because, in a way I think Roger Eckersley, who was incidentally my boss, was really saying, "We want people to feel they're there." I would say the same thing. What he didn't go on to say was the techniques and skills that were necessary in order to achieve this.

0:33:10

Interviewer: It was in your time that, for the first time, an afternoon of mixed sport appeared in the schedules. Would you think that that was a good recipe and that it got a good reception both inside and outside the BBC?

Mr Lotbiniere: I believe it was a good recipe. It was something that, probably, was only made possible by the invention by one of our skilled engineers of what we call 'the lip mike'. It meant that a

commentator could sit in the crowd, he could sit at the ringside of a boxing match, and though there was noise all round him he could be heard. This did away with the clumsy arrangements that obtained when I first went to the department, which was a soundproof box that would get in the way of spectators and so on.

So, we were able to cover a number of events on an afternoon, and it seemed sensible to give people different sports, because some people might be interested in football and some people might be interested in fencing, let's say. So, you combined the two. Where I think I certainly made two mistakes, one that I didn't realise enough that when you leave one sport how irritated the people are who are keen on that sport, and how they say, "Why on earth did you take us from Henley to go to lawn tennis at Wimbledon?"

If I'd had the sense to realise that we needed a studio link, somebody who could move the listener over simply from one to the other and say, "But I'll let you know at any moment when the match resumes, or when it gets to a critical stage." Of course, it happens now. At the time I used to go to some poor announcer and say to him, "Now can you make an announcement that will somehow reconcile the listener?"

The other thing that I think I made a mistake over, whether it would have been possible, was not from the outset to have said, "New Department, let's do this together. You can have tapes, you can be slipping in other bits of information that come in," so that the sport-loving public, as a whole, could watch the thing and rest pretty certain that, throughout the two or three hours that it ran, they'd be getting all the interesting sporting information that was needed.

You see it now in television where, in the studio, they had their own tapes, the whole set-up as though they were News

Department. I failed on those two things, and I think if I'd thought of them, probably the formula would have been more acceptable both within the BBC and without. As it was, I think it was quite a step forward.

0:35:46

Interviewer: Do you think, perhaps, sometimes you over-saturated some particular sport? For instance, let's take rugger. If you put out the whole of a rugger match in an afternoon, wasn't it, perhaps, too much?

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, it was, undoubtedly. This, in fact, could bring me on to the question of audience research. Certainly, I supposed, and a lot of my colleagues supposed that when you came to a rugby international, the Home Service could take the whole thing. This meant an hour-and-a-half solid of rugby football. When, later on, we had our audience research, it became apparent, as one should have realised in any case, that as far as England was concerned, and to some extent Scotland, not Wales, rugby football was very much of a minority sport. Once we'd realised this, the international was reduced certainly to half the international, and I daresay nowadays sometimes only half an hour of it is done, while other sports are dovetailed in with it.

0:36:51

Interviewer: By the late 1930s, the output in OBs had increased quite considerably. Was there any reason for that?

Mr Lotbiniere: I think it was, again, this question of perhaps a lip microphone. It was so much easier to offer to the planners a broadcast for all sorts of sport, at all sorts of places, on all sorts of occasions, because our engineers had made it simpler to get there. I suppose they were judging, as best they could, before we had audience research, as to what pleased the public. In consequence, and I think rightly, we were able to do more.

0:37:33

Interviewer: You had a pretty limited staff to do all this with. Surely this, in itself, presented a problem?

Mr Lotbiniere: I don't remember this. I certainly remember a staff that never seemed to balk at working seven days a week and 24 hours a day. I don't remember ever going to anybody, I don't think, and saying, "We must have more staff." I suppose, up to a point, our offers were linked to the staff we got to carry them out. The thing, from my recollection, seemed more or less to fit.

0:38:07

Interviewer: As far as the engineering side is concerned, and I think this goes for engineers almost all over the world, they regard themselves, perhaps, as pariahs, perhaps as a race apart, perhaps as superior beings, I don't know which. What were the BBC relations between the engineers and the programme staff?

Mr Lotbiniere: I had a great bit of luck. When I went to OBs I found there was a new head of engineering on the OB side. His predecessor

HH Thompson had been moved up to concern himself with OB sources and so on, it was a part of the development of the regions, throughout the regions. He was succeeded by RH Wood. For some reason, I can't tell you why, RH Wood, as far as I was concerned, was the ideal colleague. He always seemed to me to try and do anything he could for the programme side. He never seemed to be feeling that they were neglected or they were superior.

Very early on, I remember, I hadn't been in the department long when there was a fire down in the docks at Wapping. A warehouse full of rubber caught fire and this thing burnt strenuously and you could see the light almost all over London. I think, probably, RH Wood might have said to me, do you think we can get the boat race transmitter out and a boat to take in and cover this? It could have come from the programme side, but it could have come from Wood. We did this and John Snagge did a commentary. I think, probably, in the course of the day we fixed it all up and Snagge broadcast a bit, as far as I can remember, in the 9 o'clock news.

I remember afterwards, a member of the department who had been in it a long time said to me, "You know, six months ago when Tommy Thompson was here this would never have been allowed." With RH Wood he made it easy. I do remember, at the end of it all, which rather chagrined RH Wood, we thought it had been a great effort. As the broadcast was over we drifted down the Thames opposite the pickup point at Wapping pier. RH hailed across, "How did the broadcast go? What did control room say?" A sad voice came back over the waters, "Control room said 'lacked top'," which was simply a technical observation about the quality of the sound. Nothing about the broadcast and we felt very deflated.

0:40:36

Interviewer: Of course, RH was, in the male term, somewhat of a Mrs Malaprop, I think.

Mr Lotbiniere: Well, he had a strange... He was a most enigmatical person with a splash in the bucket. He was always producing funny little phrases. One almost thought he must have been doing them to amuse us, but he wasn't. He was always thinking about broadcast. He was always thinking of some new microphone that might be useful to us. He was very anxious that we used to have a directional microphone so that we could pick up the click of wickets when the stumps were hit, and that sort of thing.

His greatest difficulty was really inside the Corporation and higher up, and I think the higher engineers felt, I don't know whether they really rationalised it this way, but that he was almost making things too easy for the programme people. Occasionally, I remember I was taken aside by his boss and told that I ought not to be encouraging him to experiment with a microphone. Somewhere in the division there were people who did these sorts of experiments, but Wood knew what we needed and he wanted to try and help us. He was also, in fact, invaluable with outside contacts. Again, with all his malapropisms and strange ways deans ate out of his hand.

There came a time when George VI with his difficulty, his impediment and so on, took to RH Wood in an extraordinary way. RH Wood was a tremendous help to him. This was typical of this strange, enigmatic man that one side he was being assailed by his own engineering division, admittedly being, in a sense, laughed at by all of us with his

malapropisms, but doing a tremendous job for the department, for which I shall always be grateful to him.

0:42:40

Interviewer: Of course, you talk about his relationship with the royal family, and I believe there was one particular occasion at the funeral of King George VI.

Mr Lotbiniere: This is going on a bit really to television days. RH had been so much in on George VI's broadcasts and he would ask for him specially to help him with rehearsals and so on. When the King died, within a couple of days, I seem to remember either a telephone call from some equerry from the palace, or might have even come to the office, and his message was that Queen Elizabeth was most anxious that Mr Wood should have a seat and be in the choir of St George's Chapel for the funeral.

So, I said to the equerry, "Well, this is marvellous, it's a most kindly thought but RH Wood will be tremendously occupied on his technical job. Nevertheless, he will certainly be told this."

The equerry said, "Well, Her Majesty wishes him to know that if he can slip away for a moment his seat is there." Two or three days after the funeral and things had died down a bit, I remember RH bringing me a letter written in the Queen's own hand, I'm almost certain. There really seemed to be three or four pages of it saying to RH what a tremendous help he'd been over the years to her husband, to the King, and how much she valued all he'd done. This was very remarkable when you think of what the Queen had on her mind at that time, but this is part of Wood.

0:44:42

Interviewer: Of course, religious broadcasts had a lot to do with broadcasting at that time. It has been suggested that OB services helped to increase the size of congregations. I mean, do you think this was so, like such people as Dick Sheppard at St Martin-in-the-Fields, Mayo in Limehouse and so on, were in themselves a draw? I'm told that, for instance, services broadcast at 9:30am could be held up for engineering tests.

Mr Lotbiniere: I certainly think that the churches themselves would have help up a service in order to get a broadcast. As far as finding, from a network point of view, that the service wasn't to come on the air at the time it was scheduled, I don't really remember. I think that, probably, there had been some rehearsal time that might have got cut because of problems over lines, because of engineers wanting special tests

. As far as generally goes, away from that, the question of the effect of these broadcasts on religious observance, I would have certainly supposed that Dick Sheppard and Mayo you mention, and Elliot at Chester Square, I would have supposed that they increased their congregations enormously because of the broadcasts, and made their name over it. I'd be very sceptical if, because of those church broadcasts, congregations elsewhere were on the increase, but I don't know.

0:46:04

Interviewer: Lindsay Wellington and Val Gielgud were both important figures of the time. Now, Lindsay believed in OBs whilst, I'm

told, Gielgud rated the eye-witness account as of greater value. Of course, Gielgud carried on this feud, I think, into the features drama struggle at a later time. Did this, in point of fact, represent the views of two men or two factions?

Mr Lotbiniere: I would have said, almost certainly, two men rather than two factions. Gielgud could be pretty persistent. I think he genuinely felt, as he listened to an OB, as he listened to a commentator improvising, that the language he used was not the sort of language that would have been carefully tailored for an eye-witness account. He would always say, "Oh, your commentators are full of clichés." I think, in a way, he was hoping that he could get more influence.

I remember, certainly, some occasion, I don't know quite how it came about, but when King George V died and we did the funeral broadcast, and the procession leaving London, we had, obviously, stuff coming in from many sources. Gielgud, I think, somehow persuaded Wellington that all these sources should come through the new drama control panel, and that he, who had been sat at these control panels for reasons of drama productions, should somehow be in charge. Sure enough, when the time came, we were in the drama control panel and in walked Gielgud clad in, as far as I can remember a black cloak lined with scarlet satin, and a tall and elegant stick.

He stood around during the proceedings but made no contribution. We never saw him again. This was, I think, a genuine feeling and it certainly set me wondering as to whether we should be using a more erudite type of commentator who, perhaps, could avoid the cliché which is bound to come when you're improvising from time-to-time. I went the length of seeing whether we couldn't get some

people who, professionally, were bound to, in a way, be good at description and good at picture-building.

We did a test on an artist, a well known painter to see what he could do, and it didn't really amount to much. I even seem to remember having the temerity of writing to Winston Churchill to see if, and heaven knows it was a rash thing to do, whether he was prepared to do a test. Needless to say he wasn't. Here was somebody who could have used language in a way that, I suppose, Gielgud would have approved. I doubt very much and he must have known it himself, that he wouldn't have used it with the thing going on before his very eyes, and having to keep pace with it all the time, and coin phrases constantly minute after minute.

0:48:59

Interviewer: In July 1935, I think it was the 'Daily Sketch' said the BBC needed a consumers' council so to speak, to guide BBC policy. Reith, I think, didn't agree. Sir Steven Tallents, with AP Ryan, consulted the heads of departments as to whether a listener research unit should be set up. Not all heads of department were able or willing to give him advice as to whether this would be of value. What lay behind the phrase 'able or willing'?

Mr Lotbiniere: I don't remember really any great struggle against it beforehand. If I was consulted I hope to goodness I had the wisdom to say, "Well, of course we ought to have some yardstick of what the listener likes." I can imagine, again if you like, to go back to Val Gielgud, I can imagine he would have a feeling that the bulk of listeners wouldn't go for the rather exquisite production that he would go for. Therefore, he might

find when the big battalions showed their hand, that the sort of thing that he wanted wasn't the sort of thing that the public wanted.

I don't believe that the BBC was ever suggesting that this should happen so that we should simply follow public demand. What I think, if any of us stopped to think properly, that we ought to have said, and I'd have liked to feel that I said, we should at least know what the public likes, know whether they want full length rugby football match on a Saturday. Anyhow, one way or another, Silvey and his listener research came along. It certainly, to me, opened my eyes in several ways.

He started off, incidentally, by coming to a Programme Board, I remember now, and saying, "What do you want me to do first?" We said, "Well, we would like to get some idea of the comparative popularity of programmes." He said, "Right, well name me the categories and I will set about it." I seem to remember we named him some 35 categories. He then got the Post Office to give him, I think it was every 1000th licence holder, and he had a panel of 2000. He sent them this list and said to them, "Put a tick against the programmes that you enjoy." He didn't attempt to put them in any sort of order, which would have been crazy.

After about three or four weeks he came back to us, the Programme Board. He said, "Look, I had a sample of 2000, 1500 responded and we've analysed the first 1000 of them. I've got the results here. Would you like to see them and hear them?" I probably said, or somebody certainly said, "Well, why trouble us with the first 1000? Let's wait until you've got the 1500." Silvey looked rather pityingly at us and said, "But you know, it can't make a difference of more than 1 or 2%, this is statistics, this is audience research."

I remember saying, "Well, I wonder if this can be so?" I kept the two lists, that particular lot of 1000 and compared it when he gave us the final list of 1500. Of course he was right. A sample even of 1000 is pretty good. You produce 1500 and it's not much better. Silvey, in fact, would say, "I would only give you a perfect answer if I can ask everybody." This, certainly, was a beginning and we learnt, and I learnt on that occasion, if you like, the fact that rugby football wasn't as important in this country as I thought it was. I believe it was a step forward.

I suppose that, sooner or later, there might have been people who were saying, "If this is going on to television ballet for beginners in the middle of the evening, this isn't a good inducer of wide audience viewing." You've only got to look at the figures and you would probably be wiser, if it's for a small audience, to put it in at the end of the evening. It's commonsense when one thinks about it.

0:52:59

Interviewer: I think there's a risk, possibly, that audience research figures become the god and the yardstick by which all programmes are built. Surely this is a bit dangerous?

Mr Lotbiniere: Of course it's a risk and it's a great temptation if you believe in a particular type of programme that has good audience figures. You say, "Well, why shouldn't we do more of them?" This still brings you back to the ultimate editorial judgement that the BBC has to exercise. All it does is to equip you with more knowledge of your audience who you're trying to serve. That's the way I think you should look at it.

0:53:34

Interviewer: Tell me about Sir Stephen Tallents. He had come, I think, from the Post Office.

Mr Lotbiniere: Yes, he'd had, I would have thought, a very considerable influence and career with the Post Office, because he instituted the big Empire Marketing Board campaign which, I should think, was probably almost the first time that a government department had ever advertised on a big scale. He'd produced John Grierson and the whole succession of skilled feature documentary producers. With this reputation behind him he came to the BBC. He was a slightly enigmatic person. I don't know that you, necessarily, warmed to him. He had a rather sort of cold personality. I'm sure he brought experience to us. He'd have certainly favoured the Silvey approach. One way and another I expect he did us more good than harm.

0:54:30

Interviewer: Did you, personally, ever have any clashes with him?

Mr Lotbiniere: No, I didn't have clashes with him. I got to know him for various reasons fairly well. I certainly remember some occasion when it struck me as a very kindly thing. Somebody had apparently quoted me at a programme board, or a board of management it must have been when, I think, the quotation was rather suspected as to whether I'd really said what I was quoted as said. He took the trouble to ring me up, not to say, "Did you say it or didn't you?" but simply to say, "Lotbiniere, I think you'd probably like to know that this was said as a

quotation from you. You ought to know this is what has reached Board of Management.” This seemed, to me, a kindly and not a mischievous thing at all.

0:55:19

Interviewer: We come now to that remarkable broadcast which you did which was pretty unique, at the time that the Crystal Palace caught fire.

Mr Lotbiniere: In our parlance, in a sense it was unique because we were still unaccustomed in OBs to doing things at great speed. There was the problem of lines and equalising of lines and Post Office rules and so on. The way it happened I would have said that, not very early in the evening Ralph Murray, one of the news assistants got onto me and said, “The Crystal Palace is on fire. Can you get us a line there?” I think he wanted to broadcast something in the midnight news. I got onto the invaluable RH Wood and said, “The Crystal Palace is on fire.” “I don’t believe it,” he said. I said, “Well it is.” He said, “I tell you what, there’s a window at the back of my house that looks over in that direction. I’ll go and see.”

He came back in about 30 seconds and he said, “By God, the place is burning.” I said, “Well, the question is can we get an OB unit so as to do a broadcast from there tonight?” He said, “Well, we’ll try. I know there’s a unit coming out of Covent Garden in a taxi. I will divert it up to Crystal Palace.” I said, “Well, I’ll go up there and try and handle things. Where shall we meet?” He said, “I’ll tell them to meet you outside Sir Henry Buckland’s office where we’ve got a permanent line to the palace.” He was the Secretary of the Crystal Palace, right in the heart of the building.

I don't know why we didn't realise that, of course, the thing had disappeared in flame long since. Anyhow, he diverted the taxi. I set off; I live north of the river. I don't think I knew, readily, how to get to the Crystal Palace, but I realised in a moment that I'd only got to drive towards the glow in the sky, which I did. Eventually I got close up to the palace. It was an amazing sight, this tremendous blaze. In front of it there were people grouped like starlings in trees overlooking it, and a great crowd to get through. I put aside my car, had a pass and worked my way through the crowd and thought, "When am I ever going to find the OB unit, because Sir Henry Buckland's office, line and everything has disappeared."

However, I did find it. It was on the north terrace. I said to him, "Now, what can we do? We've no line." Well-trained engineers by RH Wood said- I'm not sure if RH Wood didn't come himself. At any rate they said, "Well, there's a kiosk here that has a telephone and we'll see if we can use his line."

Somebody went in and I remember the chap saying, "Well, you can do what you like, it looks as though I shall never need this line again." They ripped the telephone off the wall and they attached our equipment and got through to Broadcasting House.

It was by then, I suppose, about 10:30pm. There was dance music on and I thought, "Well, don't let's wait until midnight." By then Ralph Murray had disappeared into the flames as far as I knew. I never met up with him at all. "We'll try and get in and interrupt the dance music." We got the line through to Broadcasting House and it went through the ordinary telephone exchange. That was the only way to get it in at that stage. When I suggested to control room that we should break into the dance music they said, "Oh no, you can't do that. The line hasn't been equalised. There's a rule that you can't use an outside line like that."

Eventually I got them to ring up some important engineer who said, "Okay," and we broke in. I suppose it was almost the first time I'd used a microphone, but I tried to do some description of the scene which was startling and amazing. There was quite a wind, I remember, because the flames were creating such an updraft. Of course, wind was coming in. I was using an old rice mike on this terrace and I was very much very doubtful, particularly as the engineers had thrown doubt on the excellence on the line, as to whether anybody was hearing anything.

However, I seem to remember that Compton MacKenzie, of all people, from the Isle of Man wrote to the Director-General or somebody afterwards, and said how clear the broadcast had been. So, it worked. I think, later, and I don't know what happened, as I said, to Ralph Murray, but I believe Richard Dimpleby, who was very much on the ball, went up with a recording car. I think he hitched some recordings onto this line of ours and they went out on the midnight news.

0:59:57

Interviewer: Were there any outstanding personalities in OBs at that time?

Mr Lotbiniere: I hope there were. There had been this development from the original subject tapes into the expert commentator, and Tommy Woodruff, I would have said, was a tremendous personality at the time. Bob Bowman, who had been in News Department and, for various reasons, was drafted into OBs, brought into the department this quick-fire transatlantic-type of commentary. Barrington Dalby, not as a commentator, perhaps, but he became a household name as somebody who had been provided by the British Boxing Board of Control to

act as the subject expert with the expert commentator. Wynford was coming along from Wales, a brilliant sound commentator. Glendenning from Northern Ireland, and then, fairly soon in succession to Bowman came Stewart MacPherson, who became a household name. Meantime Howard Marshall, who had been a great name in the early '30s, was still a great name and doing a great deal of ceremonial and cricket.

01:01:02

Interviewer: Do you think the techniques had changed somewhat?

Mr Lotbiniere: I don't think so. I think that because commentators were getting a greater chance of trying all sorts of things and becoming more expert at the job, I would like to think that they were more skilled, better able to paint their pictures, better able to deal with crisis and so on. Richard Dumbleby who, I think, by then was divorcing himself from News Department, was obviously acquiring a great skill himself. To tell you the truth, I think he was probably still, on the whole, doing live recordings which were then used as recordings in news, but still like an OB rather than an eye-witness account.

END AUDIO

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