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	<u>Page</u>
His entry, 1950, as Studio Manager	1
* Early wildlife and country programmes: Desmond Hawkins	1
* Attaching himself to this side of the Radio output	2, 3
* Style of the programmes: scripted, stilted	2
* Introduction of recorded wildlife sounds; an innovation	2
* Recording the illustrative material: Ludwig Koch, Eric Simms	2
* The Koch story; BBC purchases his recorded birdsong library	3
* Moves towards wildlife programmes on TV; Bristol the centre	3
* Zero technical resources for Television in Bristol	3, 4
* Resourcefulness to overcome this deficiency	4
* Searching for wildlife film made by amateurs for lecture purposes	5
* Clandestine acquisition of a Bolex camera in Bristol	5
* The first BBC-made wildlife film: Fulmars.	5
* Discovery of Heinz Sielmann: his Woodpecker film	6
* Pioneering expedition with Peter Scott to Galapagos	6 - 8
* The regular "Look" series for BBC Television	8
Necessity of using London's technical facilities	9
* Reluctance to bring live animals into studio; anecdote	10
* The struggle for programme recognition and airspace	10
* Aims and policies of the output	10
* The competition mounted by BBC for wildlife film	11
The sad story of the dolphin	11, 12
* Programmes on seals. Underwater filming	12,13
* Armand and Michaela Denis; Hans and Lotte Haas	13,14
* Wildlife programmes for children; Animal Magic	14
* Problems over Johnny Morris in these programmes	15
* The "scientific approach" and the "faking" approach	15
* "Birdwatch" and further "Watch" projects	15
Failures with Badgers; more predictable successes	16
Enduring confidence in wildlife as major TV subject	16
* Why the well will never run dry	17

BBC History Archive

Transcript of Interview with Tony Soper

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BBC History Archive

Transcript of Interview with Tony Soper

FG = Frank Gillard

TS = Tony Soper

..... = Interview hesitation

It's the 6th December 1995 and in Bristol for the BBC History Archive this is Frank Gillard talking to Mr Tony Soper about, particularly about the earlier years of the Natural History Unit which has become such an institution in BBC programming nowadays.

FG: You came in actually in the forties, didn't you, soon after the end of the war into this outfit?

TS: No, it was the early fifties when I joined. I joined straight from school at seventeen, as a sort of Trainee Studio Manager and spent a few days in Plymouth, which is my home and then got shuffled on to first of all a Training School at Evesham and then was very lucky really to end up in Bristol - as a Studio Manager and it was in Bristol of course that **Desmond Hawkins** was making programmes about wildlife. And until that time it had never occurred to me that you could actually be involved in wildlife professionally - that one could make a living talking about animals.

FG: And these programmes were of course in Radio

TS: Yes, this was West Region of course in those days. Desmond was making Radio programmes about wildlife and the country generally - Country Questions, Country Magazine, programmes like that, where he would bring country men to speak about country matters but also wildlife programmes as well. A lot of country type programmes and folksong. We actually made programmes about country songs. So it was a 'Features' department, it wasn't a natural history department. Desmond was a one man outfit but specialising in wildlife programmes. So I simply made myself useful to him.

FG: Sounds as if it was a cunning manoeuvre?

TS: It was a conscious manoeuvre on my part because I could see he was doing the sort of programmes I was interested in. He was overwhelmed with work effectively and at the start I used to reply to letters. We got a lot of letters from people talking about the Blue Tits in their back gardens and so on and I sort of took on the job, voluntarily of

replying to these sort of listeners' questions. I made myself useful - and the indispensable of course.

FG: Well it certainly was a very wise and clever thing to do and very useful to the BBC I may say. Of course these were the days of programmes like The Naturalist and Birds in Britain and all that sort of thing, all those programmes.

TS: Yes. There were two areas of programming in Desmond's time really. Desmond was obsessed with words. He liked to script his programmes very carefully and the country men, he would go and interview at great length and he would then write material for them to perform in the studio. So that the programmes, if you look back on them, I think, were rather stilted but the material was good, the words were good but the presentation was ..well rather stilted, I think. On the other hand he would also specialise in straight forward science really with people like **James Fisher**, **Peter Scott** and so on, talking about the wildlife problems of the day.

FG: And these nevertheless were just sort of lecture type broadcasts, were they not - they were talks, they were not simple documentaries in that form.

TS: On Radio they were really a Radio version of what these people did in lectures. They regarded themselves, these people, as writers and lecturers. In fact I think they tended to call themselves on their calling cards as writer/lecturer/broadcaster, you know - these were things which went together. So that when they were working with Radio they were effectively recycling their lecture material. Now what was really missing quite often was the illustrative material so that from the library, which was already a good sound library in those days, we would play-in bird song or whatever might be relevant to the chat. And the programmes were pretty straight forward really -they would be talk a bit and then you would have an illustrative sound recording - a bird would sing for you or a badger would snuffle or whatever it might be.

FG: So we come to the question of how did these recordings get made?

TS: Well of course **Ludwig Koch** is the name that springs to mind because Ludwig spawned the whole business of wildlife recording and in those days Ludwig was still going strong and he was an important ingredient in these programmes. Ludwig would be wheeled on to play his latest recordings, recordings in the field. In those days, of course, he was still recording on disk. He was actually making records on acetate disks and blowing the swarf off with a paint brush as they did in those days. So Ludwig was an important person but there was also **Eric Simms**, who was the BBC's official Wildlife Recorder and people like me who were up-starts who though they knew more about it than anybody else and played weekends as much as anything. I would go off down to Pembrokeshire or somewhere like that and try to record Puffins and Seals and animals like that and then bring them back and we would weave them in to Radio programmes.

FG: Ludwig, we must make it plain, although he had that name he lived in England, he was not English I take it ?

TS: No, Ludwig was Austrian, wasn't he? We should know the answer to that one really. I mean he was widely regarded as a German anyway and of course his 'stock in trade' was this wonderful accent. I mean he always although he had lived in

England for, I don't know, thirty or forty years he polished up this lovely middle European accent which was his trade mark really.

FG: He was a freelance in the wildlife business and he had a great library of recordings didn't he?

*TS: Yes, well he pioneered the wildlife recording business. He published I think two gramophone records with EMI or HMV of wildlife sounds which were very successful, with books to go with them. I mean he made a living by writing and publishing wildlife sounds -so really it was quite important to Ludwig. I suppose he was overtaken in time by **Eric Simms** and who else? There were various other people whose names I can't remember. The Sound Library as it exists today relies heavily on any number of different wildlife recordists.*

FG: I remember the business of purchasing the bird song library of Ludwig Koch. It was quite an effort because he wasn't too keen to sell it anyway - and it wasn't properly catalogued and the records were lying all over the place in his flat, I was told - about three thousand of them if I remember rightly.

TS: Yes it was an extensive collection. He certainly had a very high opinion of its value and at that time it was worth a great deal. It isn't now because they were all recorded in conditions which made for a lot of noise - you know the background noise on all those early recordings makes them useless today, except in an archive sense because tape, the quality of the tape recordings which came later was so infinitely superior to the sort of stuff that Ludwig did in the 30's and 40's.

FG: Well by the time that television came along in Britain, BBC Television it would be, you people had really established a considerable stake in the sort of wildlife area of programming which one would have thought would transfer quite naturally to television - was that the case?

*TS: Well we certainly thought that. We saw a slot for ourselves immediately. I think others were less impressed. We were after all a Regional outfit. We sat in Bristol and it was not so easy to impress people in London but we knew more than anyone else about this particular area of broadcasting. I mean there were already wildlife films in existence after all **Armand Denis**, **Hans Haas**, even **Cousteau**, I think, in those days had made films and these were sort of middle of the road, basic programming, whereas we were offering new material and perhaps rather more specialist than was right for the time, I don't know. We certainly saw television opening up a whole new area for us. We felt the sort of things we did with **James Fisher**, **Peter Scott**, **Max Knight** and people like that would translate instantly and immediately. Our only problem was finding the right kind of film to illustrate the classic talk about wildlife.*

FG: You also had the problem of technical resources which Bristol wasn't very well endowed with if I remember.

TS: Well we had zero resources in those days. We had one Radio studio which was turned into a Television studio of sorts but we had absolutely no film facilities whatsoever so that when we were cutting film, for instance putting film together it all had to be done in London in the earliest days and we were allocated a pitiful amount of time for putting these things together. One of the first films ... television programmes

which Desmond it's Desmond Hawkins after all who spawned all these things. One of the first television things which Desmond did was the obvious film .. programme about Slimbridge, about the Wildfowl Trust because Peter Scott was one of our main contributors. Peter had this wonderfully visual, rich - 'bird' rich place out at Slimbridge - it was obvious for a programme. Peter went round lecturing freely, he had a little bit of film, of Slimbridge and he had a standard lecture which translated very easily to television - and that's really the way it started, with Peter doing his lectures straight on to telly. But we had to go to London in order to cut the film down to size - in double quick time. So we chaffed about this and felt that a lot of the work needed to be done in Bristol.

FG: And indeed a lot of the work was done in Bristol - is that not so? Tell us about that?

TS: Well, we were short of facilities so we went out ... we all had to be very resourceful in those days, as you well know and we went to the local camera shop and bought a splicing machine ... we worked in 16mm film incidentally, which was regarded as the bottom end by all the professionals in London who came from the industry and worked only in 35mm film, which was serious film. So we were toy film makers from the start - but 16mm was the amateur gauge and still is. So we went to the local camera shop and bought a splicing machine and a bottle of cement to put the joins together. We made up an editing box from a ... we made an editing box from a tea chest with a frame work across the top, banged in a lot of pins, so that we could cut film and hang it up and we used a pair of scissors, a splicing machine, bottle of cement, in order to cut the film together - and in order to run it we had a Bell & Howell projector, exactly the sort of things that they used in schools, to run movies in schools. Our Cutting Room set-up was a Bell & Howell projector and a splicing machine which we bought from the local camera shop and we, or I anyway, lusted after having a camera so that we could shoot our own film.

FG: And you were the only person handling the film - or were there others in Bristol at the time?

TS: There was nobody else in Bristol at the time.

FG: So you made a rough cut in Bristol on this amateur apparatus?

TS: Yes we ran the film .. you've got to remember these were .. the people who bought the films in regarded them as finished articles, of course, because they were using them for lectures and the films would go on for about an hour, I'd say. We would want to cut them down to about twenty minutes because we had a thirty minute show in which there was ten minutes of talk and introduction of people's faces and twenty minutes of film, in two or three different sections. So it was mainly a question of reducing sixty minutes to twenty five minutes or so. It was always a very nice thing to do. It's always easier to cut something down than to build it up.

FG: Yes I can see that. Now, so this was the film that was available to you, film that amateur - gifted amateurs, like Peter Scott...

TS:the film that was available ... was shot by serious scientists but amateur film makers, yes.

FG: *And was it really suitable for Television?*

TS: Well, yes, because after all the film was shot for lecture audiences - what's the difference? *You are* ^{you} showing a film to the local Womens Institute, if it's on telly the audience is the same - the same sort of people after all.

FG: *But you must have felt this was highly unsatisfactory - you must have been longing to enlarge the operation?*

TS: Well we were very short of material and in the early days when we were running a programme called 'Look' - it didn't even have a title at all in the beginning - but we had a slot about once a month and in those days we would do a film, a programme. The very next day Desmond and I would say, you know 'What can we do next time?' and partly my job was ringing round likely people like **Eric Hoskyn, Dick van Oakley Ernest Neal**, the Naturalists of the day, to say 'Have you got any film?' Eric Hoskyn, distinguished stills photographer who also had played about with a little bit of amateur film and we would ring them, have a look at their film and buy the stuff and bill it in Radio Times within a week. I mean - the whole thing was very much hand to mouth. We were really short of material. We had the best subject in Television but we were short of material to demonstrate it.

FG: *But there came a time, a day, a great day in the mid-fifties or thereabouts when you were able to show the first really professional wildlife television film - you know what it was.*

TS: There came a day when we couldn't hold back any longer and we needed to shoot film ourselves and again we went to the local camera shop and bought a Bolex camera. That was the sort of serious amateur's 16mm camera. We bought this thing out of petty cash - **Pat Beech**, who was Head of Programmes, no Assistant Head of Programmes at the time, organised it so that this thing got paid for, I don't know .. travel expenses or something like that. So we had this camera - I had conned everyone here in Bristol that I knew all about film and was the answer to your prayers and I would go out and shoot film. So after a couple of sort of abortive attempts locally with it I went off to Fair Isle, in order to film Fulmars because **James Fisher**, one of our more distinguished contributors, had high-jacked this particular bird as his own bird - the Fulmar - had written an exhaustive book about it - the authoritative book about the Fulmar. Very interesting bird with a good story. So I went off to Fair Isle and spent I suppose about a week, which was regarded as a long time in those days, making a film of this beautiful bird, the Fulmar. We then looked into archive material, library material of all kinds - put it all together and ended up with thirty minutes entirely on film - which was regarded as a very brave thing to do in those days because Desmond especially relied heavily on people talking - that was his enthusiasm really - and I finally persuaded Desmond that we should make up a film film about wildlife - the Fulmar was the first one. It was in Black and White incidentally.

FG: *Of course another great landmark was the Woodpecker one. Tell us about that?*

TS: The Woodpecker film was the great landmark really and the story is that **Peter Scott** had gone to the International Ornithological Congress, I think it was in Basle and at these Congresses they have serious papers all day and in the evening people would show their movies. **Heinz Seelmann** was there and he was making films, educational films in Germany at that time and he showed his film about the Woodpecker. It was quite short, it was about 12 or 13 minutes I think, but it was beautifully shot and quite sensational in that he had pictures of the Woodpeckers inside the nest, inside the tree. None of us could believe or think how he had done this but he had Woodpeckers feeding their young literally inside the tree -and this was such a breath of fresh air at the time. Peter came back from the Congress saying to Desmond 'You've got to see this film.' Desmond saw the film and it was on telly straight away and was a sensation. The newspapers were full of it next day and it was what really made the Natural History Unit possible.

FG: *You at this stage or sometime round about this stage did a great expedition to the Galapagos Islands with Peter Scott.*

TS: Yes, we had a .. what was to become a long running series called 'Look', which was the wildlife series at the time and one of the ways of filling the slots in the year was for Peter to go off on an expedition which we called 'Far Away Look' and he would go with a cameraman, a BBC cameraman Charles Legat was the obvious one who was a wildlife cameraman at that time and they went to Australia and had an expedition, they spent sort of two or three months in Australia, came back with seven half hour films - quite successful, so the idea was to do this all over again. I came in to it because the second one planned to go to Galapagos and Charles, I can't remember why, was unable to go and this was at the time when we had just started making films with our little toy Bolex here in Bristol and I said 'No problem. I am the man to send off to Galapagos to do this series' and I couldn't believe my luck .. I got the chance to go. It was my first serious overseas job. I'd been to Normandy with a school friend for one week, camping, from school and my second overseas trip was to go straight off with Peter Scott and Phil to the Virgin Islands, to Venezuela to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands - and I went off with, I may say, thirty crates of gear {end of tape}

FG: *How on earth did you get to the Galapagos - it wasn't on any tourist route in those days?*

TS: No, it was quite a complicated affair. It was almost my first time away from Britain in fact. I had had a weeks holiday, camping holiday, with a school friend in Normandy but my next trip was effectively to New York and then the Virgin Islands, US Virgin Islands, British Virgin Islands, Venezuela, Ecuador and Galapagos and it involved an awful lot of aeroplanes and an awful lot of changing and I remember it very clearly because I took thirty boxes and crates of the equipment. I had everything, kitchen sink and all. We had underwater gear because I was very enthusiastic about underwater filming at that time. We had an underwater case, we had a compressor, we had diving gear, you know the cylinders, all the 'hikey' stuff of the time and I ... with no help at all I may say - there was a film crew of one. I had much too much stuff and

almost everywhere we went I was pretty embarrassed about all this gear and I would start sending it back. I ended up with five boxes of stuff at the end but I had spares for everything when we went off - far over, over weight and Peter I remember at the time had a bad shoulder and couldn't carry anything. So I had to carry all these thirty crates every time we got off an aeroplane and on to the next one. So I learnt very quickly about how to travel lightweight on that particular job.

But we were going to Galapagos which at that time was a very difficult place to get to. There were no contacts there, there were no facilities there of any kind so that it was important to be prepared for problems.

FG: But there were no air services to Galapagos?

TS: Yes, we flew there. It was possible .. normally people went by sea and I think there was a twice yearly local ship which went there to supply the very few islanders who were there but there was talk of the tourist potential of Galapagos and there was an airstrip on Seymour Island which had been used by the Americans during the war. So it was possible to land there and we had a charter plane which took us across and landed on Baltra and Seymour where we were met by the Angermire family and one of the Angermires had a little fishing boat and he took us across to Academy bay which was the main centre of population on Galapagos, where there were two families and a few Ecuadorians - and it was there that we picked up the Ecuadorian Navy, which was on loan to us and the Ecuadorian Navy consisted of a patrol vessel at that time - little 70 foot patrol vessel and that was given to us, effectively to Peter, for the five and a half weeks we were on Galapagos. We were there for five and a half weeks which is the same amount of time that Darwin was there - a little bit before us.

FG: And what wildlife were you after?

TS: We were telling the story of Galapagos effectively and the fact of islands being separated in time, really from the Continents, from the North and South American Continents - these Islands 600 miles out in the middle of the Pacific where on the different islands different groups of animals have evolved separate lives and have become different in the course of time. So we were telling the Darwin story effectively and in order to do this we travelled to half a dozen different islands and demonstrated the way that the little finches are different on different islands and so on. The little finches are of course the very difficult things to film and as always we actually concentrated on the bigger, easier, more predictable animals - so that we were filming the Flightless Cormorants there, cormorants which don't need to fly because they've got nothing to be frightened of. Flightless Cormorants, the Penguins, there are Penguins on the Equator there, the Galapagos, the tiny Galapagos Penguin. We hoped to do the Albatross, which is a very special Albatross there but it was a non-Albatross year, and we did quite a lot of underwater work. We filmed the Sealions and Sharks, all the sort of thing one does underwater - but most importantly the Marine Iguanas. The Marine Iguanas are wonderfully attractive creatures there which sort of haul out on the rocks and look very beautiful on the rocks, very sort of heraldic but then go into the sea, swim to the bottom and feed on algae, feed on the veg at the bottom of the water. No-one had actually filmed these things and as always one was very keen to film something for the first time like all people in broadcasting do - like they will say 'I was first' to do so and so. I wanted to be the first man ever to film Marine Iguanas

underwater and I was frightened of sharks at this time, so Peter, who was a sort of 'beginner diver', .. I said to Peter Scott 'You've got to be behind me keeping an eye open for sharks while I'm trying to film these Marine Iguanas.' Down we went to the bottom and we found the Iguanas and I was filming away on these things and was terribly proud of myself, turned round to say 'Peter I've got it, I've done it' - no sign of him, no Scott and I thought, you know, he's dead, been eaten by a shark and how can I go back to Bristol and say 'I have lost your secret weapon, the greatest broadcaster in the natural history world', and so on - swam back to the beach and there was Peter of course, long way away, painting fish. He'd just begun to get obsessed with fish, which became a really important thing in his life there, diving and fish painting and there he was with his little aluminium sheet, which I'd got out for him, painting a fish. I was absolutely furious with him because his job was to protect me from the sharks.

FG: *Did this result in one programme or quite a few programmes?*

TS: We ... the whole trip - we were away for 3 months and we brought back material for seven x thirty minute programmes. Which I think is pretty good really because there were just the three of us, Peter and his wife was the back-up and I did all the filming.

FG: *Wonderful, wonderful effort. Let's talk...*

TS: Lot of it is pretty rickety stuff actually if you look at it but there was also some very nice material in there as well.

FG: *Let's talk a bit about 'Look.' You mentioned it several times already, I know but the programme 'Look' - it became a regular, the first regular wildlife television programme. Is that not so?*

TS: Yes, that's right. In the beginning we did the odd, one-off, film, when we could find something which was suitable it was put into the schedules and we did it - but the woodpecker film of **Heinz Sealman** was the turning point - it was so good and got such tremendous audience reaction and appreciation that that was what gave us the opportunity to have a slot, a regular monthly slot, with a title. There was a lot of agonising about title and it was **Pat Beech** I remember who came up with 'Look' in the end - which is actually an American magazine, if I remember rightly at the time. But it was a good title, good, snappy, short title and it became a regular series for, well, quite a lot of years, I think. We ran it for years.

FG: *What would have been the nature of a typical programme?*

TS: There was a bit of a formula to it really. We'd either choose a subject or have a subject foisted on us. Either it would be someone's films or someone's lecture films or the equivalent of the Woodpecker film or whatever, in which case you would find the 'authority' on the subject, bring him in and Peter would interview the 'authority' and then show the film. Or we would have a theme, it might be 'flight' or 'habitat' or 'migration', something of that sort and we would raid the library and everyone else's library, for material to illustrate the theme. In which case again you'd have the authority on 'flight'. For instance, I remember we had **John Balee** who was a fellow who knew more about the mechanics of bird flight than anyone else and we simply raided the library, put pictures of birds in flight and then ran them all together in a

logical sequence. So there were two kinds of programme - there was the fellow bringing in his holiday film, effectively, or his enthusiasm for a particular animal or there was the theme, where we would take a theme subject and build a programme round it.

FG: So there was always a studio element in it?

TS: In the early days, always a studio element. Desmond Hawkins, who was the Producer, who was the progenitor of all these things - Desmond's enthusiasm was for words and he would want to get people who could talk well into the studio being interviewed by Peter - for him, I think, always the joy of it was to have someone talking well and informatively and enthusiastically about a subject. I think the film element was less important always to Desmond, although, I think, from the audiences point of view it was the film which made the programmes.

FG: We're talking about the mid-fifties - the first few programmes of the new Look series couldn't come from Bristol because Bristol was inadequate, isn't that so?

TS: Well we had no studio, of course, so we had no studio we had no film cutting facilities, we had no, really, no serious expertise in the television area. That was all at that time in London, so that one looked to London for everything - and we had to go to Lime Grove to get a studio, we had to go to Lime Grove to get film cutting facilities. So we felt that we were providing the expertise in the subject, if you like - we reckoned we knew more about Natural History than any one else in the business but the technical side, the facilities, all at that time had to be in London.

FG: And then when you eventually started locating the programme in Bristol, Bristol was still without important technical resources that you needed.

TS: That's true. We had no film cutting facilities, we had no telecine machine - we didn't have the machines which run film, so that the telecine, the film element of the programmes was played in, again, from London, so that we had the people, the live element, the people talking in the studio here, the sort of make-shift studio, in Bristol with live cameras and then in the gallery, in the sort of control area we ... and then in the gallery, in the control room, we would be in telephone contact with the telecine people in London. So at the appropriate moment and it was usually my job - you'd be listening to them talking and then they would give the cue word of some kind and I would say 'Run Telecine' and the guy in London would press the button there and magically up would come the film. This is on transmission, in rehearsal, during the day of course we didn't have the facility of film at all, unless we used our little schools projector and took the projector physically into the studio and ran it on to a screen in front of their very eyes.

FG: These live transmission, under those circumstances must have been pretty hairy. Did it go wrong at all?

TS: I don't remember it ever going wrong, Frank.

FG: Now tell the truth.

TS: We did have problems, it's perfectly true and the problems usually involved live animals. We didn't actually use live animals very much. We rather looked down the

zoo type programme which was typical of London, we felt .. where **George Cansdale** or somebody would bring in an animal and tickle its back and show it had four legs and so on and **David Attenborough** would do his version of the same sort of thing. We regarded ourselves as much more serious and scientific than that - but we did have live animals sometimes - I had a Polecat Ferret here in the office in Bristol for sometime until the cleaners in the morning finally rebelled and I had to find another place for it. I used to sleep in the office at that time, I may say - but I suppose the worst thing that ever happened to us was - we did a programme about migration - Peter with film mostly shot a Slimbridge, the Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge and in order to talk about the process of 'ringing' birds and 'tracking' birds by ringing - finding out where they go, how long they live and what their movements are - Peter actually bought a Mallard duck to the Studio and demonstrated the process of putting a ring on its leg and clipping the ring - so you put a ring on it, it has a number - we know this bird, it has a name and a number. When it flies away we'll be able to track its progress because sooner or later it will turn up somewhere, maybe thousands of miles away and maybe in twenty years time, you know, we'll know how long they lived and so on. And he went .. we had a live camera on the roof of Lime Grove - he went up on to the roof and released this bird with the ring on its leg. It was a very wet evening and it went away into the distance and Peter was saying, well you know 'Who knows how long it will be and where this bird will turn up next' and it turned up in the Goldhawk Road next morning and was on all the newspapers. It was an embarrassing business. It just crashed straight down into the road.

FG: *Well it mistook, presumably, the wet road for the river, for water?*

TS: I think it was the lights that confused it, really.

FG: *I remember, very humiliating for Peter - certainly was. Was there a sort of campaigning spirit in the Natural History Unit, campaigning on behalf of wildlife or were you doing a professional, practitioner television job of putting on programmes that were of interest and educative to your audience. Where you campaigning on behalf of wildlife?*

TS: I think our primary interest was in reaching a big audience because that was the 'B-all and end-all' in those days. Don't forget that we were not regarded highly - the wildlife programmes weren't seen as a truly important part of the schedule in those days and we were still fighting to get a decent slice of the cake, to get money and to get broadcasting time. So that our prime interest was in reaching a big audience - but of course there was a very strong educational element in what we did. We were interested in exposing and exploring the whole relationship of people with animals really - most wildlife programmes are about people, effectively and what we were trying to do was to explore this relationship between people and wildlife. Talking really about the ecological aspects of this thing, how do animals live, where do they live and how do they manage, how do they relate to each other, how do they make a living? These were, remember, the early days of the concept of conservation and we were, I suppose you could say, in on the beginning of that - but we were really concerned, I think, to promote awareness of the relationship between people and animals and the requirements of these different things and how important it is to make space for them.

FG: The BBC ran its own competition in order to stimulate wildlife film production - wasn't that so?

TS: We were terribly short of material and we were literally ringing round trying to find people who'd shot wildlife film. So it was very much in our interest to promote the idea of wildlife filming and so, yes, the BBC set up a you did this didn't you, in fact, you set up a competition ... it was you, wasn't it. I remember that the 'powers that be' in Bristol, Head of Programmes, doubtless **Frank Gillard**, at the time set up a competition to encourage people to send in wildlife film and there were a lot of contributions in fact - a lot of the material was very, very poor quality, you know 'My holiday with the seabirds on Scomer Island' but there was some good things and what it really did was to winkle out some very good potential film makers and the guy, I forget his name, the guy that won the competition made a film about the Alder Wood Wasp and it was a controlled laboratory type film but it was good material and it actually spawned the ... one of the .. what was to become one of the more important film making outfits, Oxford Scientific Films, so that it did actually have a very useful end product.

FG: Tell us about the disappointing Dolphin story.

TS: I hate to tell about the dolphin story. I went to Florida on one job and was absolutely knocked out by the excitement of the Sea Aquarium in Miami. They had this place where they demonstrated the extraordinary acrobatics of creatures like dolphins and they allowed me to dive in the main tank - there's one very big tank in the Sea Aquarium where they had Bottle Nose Dolphins, they had Swordfish, there were Sharks, there were Turtles, there were Moray Eels and big Rays, all swimming round in this fish soup - and it was one of the most exciting things I've ever done really - to be in there as a diver with the gear on, just swimming round with all these animals, taking absolutely no notice of me at all {*FG: Filming?*} This was filming for ... I was filming for Look, yes that's right. It was really an enjoyable thing to do, to swim around in this fish soup with all these things and I thought 'Why don't we have a places like this in England. Why don't we have places where you can go and see a dolphin jumping about' and so we arranged to bring two dolphins from an Italian seaside place, Chesenattaca (check spelling) They had dolphins and I went there and I said 'Please can I have two of your dolphins' and they said 'Yes' - we brought them back in cradles in an aeroplane to Exeter, drove them to Plymouth where there was a big salt water, sea water pool available in the winter - put the dolphin in there and they swam about. I was very fond of them, they were very lovely animals, I swam with them and they were taking fish, wonderfully well and then a week after they arrived in Plymouth they died on us. Which was a most traumatic thing I think that has ever happened to me because I was very fond of these animals and it was a very embarrassing, awkward, foolish affair really because I think basically they shouldn't have dolphins in swimming pools being shown off to people. Right place for dolphins is in the sea - but we all make mistakes and that was one of my mistakes - one of the many. (*end of tape*)

FG: *Did you get a programme out of the dolphins?*

TS: The poor sad dolphins. Yes, we made a film called 'Ride a Dolphin' and it was largely about the historical and the legendary aspects of dolphins, you know, the sort of ancient stories of people riding on dolphin's backs - people being saved from drowning by dolphins. Which does have some, some founding in truth, I think. There seems little doubt that dolphins will pick-up things and push them ashore - so it is entirely possible that children were rescued from drowning by dolphins in the past. But there are lots of nice legends about it and I sort of collected all the material, postage stamps with dolphins on - coins, ancient Greek coins showing the legends of people riding on dolphin's backs and so on and we put that all together into an anthology, really effectively a dolphin anthology and told the story of our .. of the growth of Seaquaria in the States and the demonstrations of dolphin jumping, playing with balls and so on and then the sad story of our two dolphins in Plymouth. So that we did end up with a film. It was a sad story and I don't like talking about it.

FG: *Let's talk about a happier one, the seals. You were very successful, the seals - underwater shooting there if I remember rightly.*

TS: Yes, seals were a nice ingredient for films. Classically we used always to say that ducks were the animal made for television because the aspect ratio of a duck is the same as a television screen - 4 x 3 - so we used to say 'ducks were made for television' but seals faces are made for television too because they've got big eyes and ~~their~~ nice and hairy and interesting animals. However I've always been interested in seals, I've recorded them at their winter haul outs, the beautiful noises they make on the beaches in winter and always desperately wanted to film them underwater, which is a very difficult thing to do because, certainly round the British Isles they tend to be in rather murky water, you don't get them where it's very clear and they are rather shy animals anyway - it's quite difficult to get close to them underwater. But I had a friend... there are two people really who are involved in these things. There's **HG Howell**, a naturalist, close to my own home down in South Devon, who is a very good naturalist, a very good film maker, who had a talent for keeping animals, wild animals, in captivity in a wild sense. He had a whole lot of pine martins living in a woods round his house and he had a seal which had been picked up sick on the shore somewhere in South Devon and had that in his swimming pool so I took advantage of that, filmed that underwater there. Another fellow called **Ronnie Pearson** had a beautiful house in Wiltshire, Bengton House (check spelling) with a very fine big pond and his ambition was to be towed around in this pond by a seal. So I filmed this guy going through the motions of training a seal, a Common Seal in this case, to towing him round in the water. We made a little film about that called 'The Underwater Horse' - so it only ran for 12 minutes which was quite successful - it was a struggle to make it longer than that. But seals, I think, have always been good value for films, yes.

FG: *Did you have to improvise much for underwater shooting? Was it difficult to take cameras underwater?*

TS: Well in one sense no. We did experiments with plastic bags which of course is absolutely useless really in just putting cameras literally physically just a few inches under water - that was no good. But the Bolex people in Switzerland actually devised an underwater camera case for the Bolex camera quite early on and we had the

prototype of this underwater casing and that allowed us to go underwater. I used it first in Dartmouth. We were filming seaweed there and a cormorant which I had at one point - we made a film about a cormorant and I actually filmed this cormorant which would walk about on my arm like a hawk. We would go swimming together this cormorant and I and I filmed that underwater with this special casing made by the Bolex people. There're very much more sophisticated ones now of course but that worked perfectly well in those days with just a single lens, wide angle lens on it underwater. We did quite a lot of material with that, first in Galapagos and then around the British Isles. No one at that time, so far as I know - we all like to say we're first at anything - no-one at that time had shot underwater film off the coast of Britain before I did it with the Bolex camera.

So what did we film - some difficult seal shots, this cormorant underwater which was superb diving and fishing underwater and a lot of seaweed - seaweed, you know, doesn't run away from you so I filmed seaweed underwater quite a lot. It's quite difficult to find somewhere to use this material but it was a lot of fun shooting it.

FG: How do you get lighting underwater?

TS: Oh, we used natural light because the truth is all the best things underwater happen in the first 7 or 8 feet, so that you are using natural light. Nowadays of course ... we're talking about, what ever it was, - 20 / 25 years ago, nowadays there're much more sophisticated cameras with lots of artificial light as well of course.

FG: But you had to be improvising with equipment all the time?

TS: Yes, I mean, we had no resources and our sights, in some ways, were set rather low. It never occurred to me to spend money, to persuade anyone to spend money so ... almost everything we did was using our own resources and stuff which we could buy locally.

FG: We ought to have a word about the 'bought in' programmes that you used - particularly people like Armand and Michaela Denis and Hans and Lotti Haas. Take Armand and Michaela first - who were they, where did they come from?

TS: Armand was a Belgian, I'm not too sure about Michaela, maybe she was Belgian as well. Armand was a famous Belgian film maker in his own right in the industry, in the cinema business and he had made films for television which were shown before the Look days, before the Natural History Unit, he was one of the wildlife elements in BBC programming in, I suppose, what would be the 40's or early 50's, maybe. This was quite independent of anything we did in Bristol. The Armand and Michaela Denis series were very successful, they were famous people - we actually ... I certainly didn't regard them very highly. I felt that their films were overly sentimental - it was the husband and wife venturing into the deepest, darkest Africa stuff and she always had her hair beautifully coifed and he was doing the sort of brave struggling through the swamp business and I thought they were rather dishonest movies in many ways, really but they were very successful. They were not part of our scheduling until much later and I always was a bit sniffy about the Armand and Michaela Denis films, I must say. The other people in that same area, I suppose were, Hans Haas - Hans and Lotty Haas, who were making underwater films and I certainly regarded him very

highly. I think he was a very skilled operator, made very fine underwater films - though like all of us he was dishonest in some ways. I mean all that early underwater film was shot in moderate slow motion, so that the entire nation felt fish swam about in very gentle, elegant way - whereas, in fact, fish move about just like the rest of us in fits and starts. So in order to make life easier for himself underwater he shot everything slightly fast so that it showed slightly slow.

FG: I remember when I went to America in 1954 you and Desmond beseeching me to find good naturalists with television experience in the United States in Natural History film and I located one in Boston but he said he was giving it all up and he said 'Unless you come close to death every three minutes they don't want to see you' and I always felt that Hans and Lotti and Armand and Michaela were tinged with that kind of attitude.

think TS: Yes, I think that's true. Armand and Michaela Denis, Hans and Lotti Haas, there had to be confrontation all along the line, there had to be a lot of sickly sentiment and certainly they were at death's door - something was about to eat them every few minutes - and that was typical of the sort of film which was on television in those early days. We regarded ourselves as a whole breath of fresh air doing something quite new and coming at it from a more strictly scientific, although popular scientific, sense. We felt that ..we wanted to be film makers of integrity, we wanted to do things which were entertaining but which were also genuine and we wanted to talk about animals as they genuinely are and not as they can be made to by sort of anthropomorphic treatment.

FG: What about programmes for children?

TS: Right from the beginning the Look programme tended to have an adult showing in the evening and then the next day we would do a slightly revised version, with very little change. I think we had ... cut a couple of minutes out but it was done in Children's Television at 5 o'clock, 5:30 the very next day but effectively they got exactly the same thing.

FG: But they had things like Animal Magic for example.

TS: Animal Magic came rather later than Look, didn't it? Animal Magic was the creation of Animal Magic came rather later than the Look programme. It was designed specifically as a children's programme and we shot film especially for it. It tended to have a lot of short items in it and of course its secret weapon was **Johnny Morris**.

FG: Who was the narrator.

TS: Johnny was the prime Presenter and I was his side-kick. I was his number two. This was when I first started broadcasting. I think my first time actually on the screen was with Johnny because until then I had sort of been very purist about it and said that we should make films about animals and that we shouldn't be in these things - but I was Johnny's number two, Johnny did the ... made the animals speak, did these wonderful impression things and I did the more strictly straightforward, straight down the middle wildlife pieces.

FG Johnny had his critics - there was a lot of talk about anthropomorphism and that sort of thing.

TS: Yes, I bound to say I was one of them in that sense. Professionally I felt that the anthropomorphism went a bit too far sometimes but Johnny was such a wonderful guy and such a marvellous person in himself and he was so brilliant. I mean what he did with animal film was so clever and so funny that you couldn't ... I felt you couldn't possibly object to it but I certainly felt that my own attitude towards film making was a very different one from Johnny's so that kind of professionally I think we were an uncomfortable pair to put together but we were tremendous friends and I admired enormously the work that he did. I was never absolutely sure that it should be part of the Natural History Unit.

FG: Was there a sort of conflict between the pure naturalist which you were and the people you were using who, in a sense, were amateur film people but thoroughly professional naturalists and on the other hand the professional film maker who was only interested in box office attitudes and prepared to rig and fake anything for the sake of getting a big audience?

TS: We would never have anything to do with the people who faked outright - in one sense all films are faked because, I mean, they are fiddling with time if nothing else, so that you have to draw a line. There is a grey area always but we very consciously rejected any of these ... the more overtly fiddled films. We regarded ourselves as fairly straight forward scientific material. We were working mostly with a group of people that we'd known for years, that we had great respect for, who had authority in their own right, they were the James Fisher, Peter Scott, Max Knight, Ernest Neal, Bangla (check B van) Oakley, people like that, who already had good strong reputations and weren't going to be associated with any kind of dishonest type of film. So I don't think that was ever really a problem with us and we were always working with people who wanted to communicate enthusiasm in their subject to an audience at large. So that there was never any conflict, I think, between the sort of strictly scientific approach and the more popular 'please the audience' approach. The two things after all do go together, in order to get your story across you must entertain people, mustn't you? They've got to enjoy the pictures, they've got to find them interesting before you can get your message across. People always have messages but I think they were wrapped up in a professional sense really.

FG: As you became more and more professional and your expertise developed you began doing many more really imaginative and enterprising live programmes. I was think of Bird Watch and other 'Watch's' - tell us about those?

TS: Film was obviously a major component of the sort of programme we were making but we were always very much aware that we were dealing with live wildlife, live subjects, living their lives out there in the field as we were actual talking about them and showing films about them. So there was always this feeling we ought to try to show live action, live and as it happened and we experimented with that first by going to Slimbridge. Slimbridge was convenient and we had long associations with Peter Scott and the Slimbridge ethic and the wildlife there, the geese in the winter, very predictable so we felt this was the sensible place to start. So we took cameras out there in the middle of the winter and filmed geese flying in and geese and ducks on the

saltings out there at Slimbridge. We did ... showed it live throughout, I think it was a Sunday and we did what we called Bird Watch, ran several short sections of programming through the day. It was really an up to date version of the 'potters wheel', really, these were sort of 'fillers' in between scheduled programmes. We would do five minutes showing the geese arriving in the morning and then later in the morning, ten minutes, talking about the geese grazing on the saltings there and then at the end of the day a recorded pull-together of the high-lights of the day. It was quite an attractive project and it was very successful, so we went on to do live broadcasts from other places.

FG: Badgers?

TS: We failed with Badgers. The badgers were an absolute disaster. I mean, we sat up at a badger set near Bristol and achieved nothing at all. On the first go we had, if I remember rightly, about three separate attempts to do live Badger Watch because it really is an incredibly difficult one to do. The truth is one should always choose more predictable subjects and our more successful ones were the flamingos in the Camargue in the South of France, the seabirds on the Farne Islands, the big sea bird cities up by Aberdeen and waders on the estuary, on the Exe Estuary in Devon - those were all reasonably, reasonably predictable events. We knew that the flamingos would be there, we knew that the shags and the puffins and the guillemots would be on the Farne and in the case of the Exe Estuary, where we were effectively working the tides, we knew that if we got it right the tide would rise and bring the waders, the oyster catchers and sandlings and the dunlins and goodness knows what, goblets and so on, right up to our hide where we had the live cameras - and the Exe one, I assume was one of our more successful ones where we were lucky with light. We had very beautiful light that day and we had sensational pictures of waders coming up very close to cameras - live. To us anyway, I'm never so sure that the audience actually responds to this so much but we always get very excited about doing things live and as they happen. I'm not sure that the audience isn't more happy with a nice bit of film carefully shot with good pictures put together.

FG: You must have felt very gratified as natural history programmes established themselves as a fully recognised element in television programming, as it certainly did and the Natural History Unit in Bristol became a recognised, properly organised institution within the BBC?

TS: Yes, I am proud of what we did but you know we knew right from the very beginning that we had a prime subject. We knew that we had a good subject, with good stories to tell and that it was only a question of getting space and we felt absolutely certain, right from the very beginning, that wildlife programming was going to become more and more important and more and more effective. I don't think there was ever any doubt in Desmond Hawkins' mind or yours, in Frank Gillard's mind, or mine that we had one of the best potential television subjects and all that we needed was a bit of a chance and some money.

FG: Is the well ever going to run dry?

TS: It is inconceivable that we will run out of programme ideas. I remember in those early days people used to say 'Goodness, what a wonderful film last night but

you know you're very soon going to run out of subjects' - people would say this kind of thing. There's no way you can run out of subjects because what you say about Shell Ducks this year is not what you say next year - new things are learnt. They change, animals change as the years go by. They adapt to new circumstances, they take new opportunities - we learn more about them. There are always more things to be said - there is no such thing as the end of a film story. We could go back and do almost every title we've ever done, do it all over again and it would come up fresh and new. It's a dynamic subject. You might just as well say that you finished talking about people - you'll never finish having things to say or discuss about people and peoples relationship with the world - it's exactly the same with wildlife. There's no end to the subject.

FG: You've given us an excellent note on which to end the interview.

Interview Ends

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