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'A History Of North Regional Broadcasting' - DEREK BURRELL-DAVIS

(Interview 53 - Notes)

Trevor

Hill In 1936, thanks to a man of many parts, the BBC was able to start the world's first regular Television Service. Besides Engineer, **John Logie Baird** was, believe it or not, also a manufacturer of boot-polish and, in Trinidad, of jam ! Be that as it may, another man of many parts particularly in his 1951 'creation' of a Television operation in the BBC's largest region, and in later years, of its expansion,is **Derek Burrell-Davis**. Himself a Northcountryman, born in York, educated at Repton, he went on to study Law and Estate Management, joined the Territorials pre-war - and picked up some further expertise whilst serving as an officer in the Royal Engineers.

Come 1945, and you decided to forsake Estate Management in order to study Art and Design. Why was that, Derek ?

Derek

Burrell-Davis (briefly explains his reasons for this; how he joined the Art Department of the **J.Arthur Rank Organisation** at Denham studios working as a Technical Assistant, then in Film Research department and, getting his first experience of directing on some of the Rank Religious Films, working in Cyprus, Palestine and Jordan - in order to gain as wide a range of film production techniques as possible)

Trevor Its 1950 and you land a job with the BBC as a Television Studio Stage Manager. Was that because you saw more future in the BBC's Television Service than in the British Film industry at that period?

Derek (Replies - and then please go straight into a description of the BBC Studio operation at Alexander Palace as you saw it on joining; briefly mentioning some of the early shows you worked on before joining the Outside Broadcast department as a producer. Please mention your very first production - the team and type of equipment in use).

Trevor I mentioned 1951; Festival of Britain year. And in the October our then Chairman, **Lord Simon of Wythenshawe**, (who sometimes called, unheralded, to sit in on our Manchester 'Children's Hour' programme), declared the new **Holme Moss** transmitter officially open.

Trevor (cont:) You were responsible not only for the televised coverage of that event from the Town Hall; you followed that by directing the very first Televised Variety show from the North of England. An historic occasion, Derek.

Derek (Talks about these two occasions; of his association with the late **Barney Colehan**; of a special televised version of 'Have A Go' from Blackpool in that same week - North region now being able to offer 'live' Outside broadcasts to the nation. Some of the 'Firsts' being, ... '**Home Town**', the very first North regional 'opt-out'; how, with the **Rev: Peter Hamilton** you televised, from Liverpool, a whole service of Holy Communion for the very first time; [at the Coronation, the cameras left the Abbey during the Communion] - the very first '**The Good Old Days**', produced by **Barney Colehan** - which was to go on for another thirty five years).

Trevor I recall our very first **Children's Television** programme from the North, which you also directed. It was from Belle Vue Zoo, Manchester, and featured **Gerald Iles** of radio fame, myself as the Interviewer and **Herbert Smith** and **Fred Fairclough** in a type of Laurel and Hardy role. And wasn't our Floor Manager come Assistant to D-B-D, one **Willie Cave**?.

Derek (comments - and here, if you can, please mention the names of some of our regular **Technical Staff** in Vision and Sound in those early days, explaining that a large portion of coverage done by the three-camera, 14 man Unit, shared with Scotland, was given over to Sport - your own earlier participation in cricket, soccer and athletics coming in useful here; **Eddie Waring's** first televised engagement with **Rugby League**; **David Coleman's** with **Fallowfield Athletics** - and the very first '**Top Of The Form**' coming from North region; '**It's A Knockout**' series which stemmed from **Barney's** Radio series 'Top Town', et cetera)

Trevor Since the North is by far the largest region in land mass alone, did the BBC provide you with a car, secretarial and other back-up assistance. And were you expected to plan as well as to direct the programmes ?

Derek (Rises to this - explains that the output at that time covered 'Events', besides Features, Music and Entertainment programmes throughout the region. Here mention a few of the memorable ones - and with year if possible having previously consulted the D-B-D archive!)

Trevor I think Barney was the first of the established North regional Radio producers to attain the art of directing, followed by **Ray Lakeland**. My directing as opposed to a 'performing' debut was at the old Manchester Playhouse with **Violet Carson** appearing in vision for the very first time. Another making her first television appearance that day as she introduced '**Out Of The Bran Tub**' for me, was a very young **Judith Chalmers** - two people who, in the years ahead, were to become regulars in the homes of literally millions of viewers.

But I wonder if you, Derek, recall a certain Friday in May 1952 ? The BBC was holding its annual exhibition at the City Hall Manchester; a miniature of the Earls Court Radio Show. Barney had persuaded one of his neighbours from Guiseley, Yorkshire, who'd played piano for him from time to time on 'Have A Go', to come along for the daytime auditions of amateur talent.

At 6.0pm you would be directing the best acts that day on 'Closed Circuit' for the benefit of visitors and exhibitors alike.

Fortunately for Barney's neighbour, just as he appeared on a screen for the very first time, so BBC Light Entertainment producer, **Eric Fawcett** arrived at City Hall, just off the London train. Eric would be producing and you'd be directing the best of the week's auditions in a 'live' transmission the following evening. But instead of playing the piano, the young Yorkshireman did some magic tricks assisted by a small glove puppet he called '**Sooty**'. And two years later, when we had **Dickinson Road**, the first BBC television studio outside London, '**Sooty**' assisted by **Harry Corbett** began the longest-running television contract with North Region. We went on, boy and bear together, for 12 years. A short while later you return to London and to the expanding Outside Broadcasts department.

Derek (gives his reasons for this move - and here, please mention some of the major 'Events' and 'Spectaculars' you were to tackle, working in various European Countries, also in Russia and in America).

Trevor Tell me about some of those spectacular and, literally, breath-taking televised times !

I'm referring to '**The CIRCUS**'.

Derek (Does so, including your filmed feature on the **Soviet State Circus**. And here, please mention when a young lady named **Mary David** began to work with you - I'll add the rest)

Trevor You were also in the category of a very high-class 'song-and-dance' man. I'm thinking of **The Bolshoi Ballet**, the **Polish State Song And Dance Company**, the **Red Navy Singers and Dancers**, the **Czech State Song and Dance Ensemble**, and, doubtless in order to preserve the BBC's all-important sense of 'balance',..... **The Commonwealth Great Dance Gala.** And that is not the complete list. You also did the opening programme of the BBC's first official **Colour Service - BBC 2**, and with a family who were to become close friends of yours and of Mary's - the **Smart Circus Brothers.**

Derek (To talk about those first days of Colour; the problems and advantages)

Trevor Another innagural programme was on the '**Early Bird Satellite**' which you did in conjunction with **Paul Fox** and **Noble Wilson.**

Derek (Talks a little about that)

Trevor Having worked, from 1955, as producer then Senior producer and Executive producer, in what year did you become the Editor in charge of the BBC's Television Outside Broadcast Entertainment's department? And were you still able to play an active role in directing your own programmes ?

Derek (Replies - saying he was only in that role for a short period because as a result of '**Broadcasting In The Seventies**', he was then invited to become the North's first **Head of Network Production Centre** in Manchester, working in those days to **Pat Beech** who was Controller, English Regions)

Trevor Did it seem strange coming back to Manchester after an absence of fifteen years - and what did you see as the immediate task ahead now that you were at the helm ?

Derek (Replies - and from here on, your 'Page 2' of events and dates is the line I suggest we take for it is one of great expansion and progress)

Trevor (when we arrive at 1974, after the 'Topping Out' Ceremony) That, in my own experience and estimation, brought us into a truly 'Golden period'. **David Hatch** became our **Network Editor, Radio** on the retirement of **Grahame Miller** (whom doubtless you will have mentioned. - And I'll give your splendid line. 'Well thank you, Grahame, I'm just stepping out to cut my throat' after his report on the state of Radio in the Region),

Shortly after David's appointment, **Duncan Thomas** arrives on the Manchester scene as Head of Engineering Services, at a point when we are finishing the Planning of the new Music Studio, **Studio 7**. And with **John Ithell** in charge of Finance and Personnel, you undoubtedly have one of the best and most professional of Management Teams.

Derek (comments - then goes on to the '**Northern Symphony Orchestra**', beginning the 'Master Concerts' at a time when **Ernest Warburton** was the Head of Music, **Radio Drama** for the second year receiving Awards. July 1974, the first staff moving into **New Broadcasting House** - and the very first programme to be produced from there on Saturday 6th September 1975, **William Keenan's** play for 'Saturday Night Theatre', - '**The Dark Windows of A Room**' - producer T.Hill - the new stereophonic Drama studio becoming host to more serials and single plays than originated from any othe Studio Centre outside of London - the re-introduction of **Television Drama** - and back to List).

Trevor Those are all successes - some after battles won. What about battles lost ?

Derek (Talks about trying to get 'Regional recognition' on all fronts e.g. **Bill Cotton** pinching various artists the North had been 'building up' - the increasing distasteful problem of trying to work with **John Grist** once Pat Beech had retired as Head of English regions. Here, you may like to talk about the **English Regions** and the **Network Centre** concept - together with detached **Autonomous Local Regions** being, in your opinion, ill conceived. 'I argued for something on the lines of the present set-up. I also thought that Production Centres should not be based in Town centres').

Trevor You brought with you to the North a very different 'style' of Management. I'm thinking of those Staff 'Newsletters' for which you were responsible, telling all working under you of progress and of the Network Centre's successes, - many such Newsletters, I must add, brilliantly illustrated by you - or by your late son who worked with the Film Unit; a throw-back to your own young days as an Art student. We all learn, consciously or unconsciously, by example. Would you care to mention some whose advice, attitudes, and expertise in broadcasting came readily to your attention during your career with the BBC.

Derek (Does so - and please include **Stuart Cross**, who later was to become Bishop Cross, since he has not been talked about very much, Peter Hamilton having left before Stuart's arrival, I think)

Trevor In March 1977 you decide to leave the BBC.

Derek (Explains why he did so, becoming a free-lance)

Trevor And the best days for you ?

Derek (Says what they were - and why)

Trevor (does the same) and appropriately enough, that brings to an end - for the present at least, this Oral History of North Regional Broadcasting. Long may Regional broadcasting continue within the BBC.

(Interview 53 - Derek Burrell-Davis
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