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File: LR003210 - DEREK BURRELL-DAVIS (Interview 53)
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START AUDIO

Interviewer: A History of North Regional Broadcasting, Interview Number 53, Derek Burrell-Davis.

In 1936, thanks to a man of many parts, the BBC was able to start the world's first 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.

He's a North Country man, 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.

00:01:00 I think it was around 1945, Derek, you decided to forsake estate management in order to study art and design. What made you do that?

Derek: I was living in a hole at the time outside Tripoli at an airport called Castel Benito where I was lifting mines with some friends of mine. One of these friends came dashing around and said, "Derek, do you know that the NAAFI has arrived in Tripoli, and amongst other delights they've got a library"? I

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thought blimey, I haven't had a decent book for a long time. So I got in me vehicle and went into Tripoli, found the NAAFI, went in and said I'd like four or five books, you know, detective stuff with a bit of sex, something like that, and they said, "We have one book left," and I said whatever it is, I'll take it, and I took it and it was called Scenario Writing for Motion Pictures, and that's what redirect my whole thoughts of a future career, supposing I lived to tell the tale.

Well, from the point where I was in this hole, I came through that bit and went to Burma, came through that bit and eventually went home, and I had this idea in my head which had been nurtured by this book that my odd few talents, which I'd never brought any of them to proper realisation because of the war, might be used making pictures. I could draw a bit, I could write a bit, I could do a bit of this and a bit of that.

I found to my astonishment that a friend of my greatest friend was a designer, a man called Fred Pusey, a lovely man in pictures, I went to him for advice and took it and eventually finished off working for the Rank Organisation. I was a designer to begin with there and then I got involved with the process called Independent Frame which was a rational way of making pictures and working for a religious picture which was to be made by the Independent Frame method.

Since I spoke some Arabic from with my time with the Sudan Defence Force, I managed to persuade them that they should send me to the Middle East to direct the location sequences. So I went to Jordan and did just that, I directed all the location sequences for this film about Ruth, Naomi & Ruth.

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Interviewer: Did you get a screen credit for that work?

Derek:	I don't know, I never even saw the finished result.
Interviewer:	You got a few screen credits later on in your career but it's now 1950. You land a job with the BBC as a television studio manager.
00:04:00	Was that because you saw more future in the BBC's television service, Derek, than in the British film industry at that period?
Derek:	I think it probably was, although it seems simpler looking at it now. At the time, because I'd told you I'd worked in Independent Frame which was a rational way of making films in which you use multi-camera techniques. I went up to Alexandra Palace, Ally Pally, and watched them produced a drama there, and sure enough they're using three cameras at once, and I thought this is most interesting and perhaps the way one wanted to go. When a little while after this the bottom appeared to drop out of the British film industry, and I was all right Jack because I was on a long term contract, nevertheless, I struggled out of that and wrote to Norman Collins, who was then the boss of BBC Television, and told him I was keen to join. He said he was keen for me to come up and see him and so on, and I thought hooray, I'm in. The following day I'd read in the newspaper that he'd gone off to start ITV, so I had a sudden hollow feeling in my tummy and I thought what'll happen. I looked at his letter again and I saw that he said that he'd sent my letter to the heads of his department, so I had another look at my letter to him and I noticed to my dismay that I'd dated it a month earlier than it should have been, and I thought well, they'll give me a job, won't they, I don't even know which

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month it is. Shortly after that I heard from Philip Doughy who was head of films in BBC at the time saying that he was dismayed to find that my letter had been in his in-tray for a month and would I please come and see him immediately. So I rang up his secretary and went and saw him immediately.

Shortly after that, I was into BBC Television in its earliest days up at Alexandra Palace as a trainee holiday relief stage manager.

00:06:09

Interviewer: What were your first impressions of Alexandra Palace, can you describe it to me?

Derek: I suppose I can. There was no other place quite like it. There were these corridors with studios on the left going down, there were rooms full of racks and racks of equipment, huge quantities of equipment, a marvellous feeling of everyone finding out about this technique. A lot of humour, a lot of tolerance of newcomers, and one certainly needed it because on my first day as an SM, I put my foot in it about four times. I remember working on Julius Caesar where we had both studios engaged on this which really was a rare thing, it had to be a really big production.

The rehearsal had been done marvellously in one studio, all the senators, and it'd been done marvellously in this other studio, all the soldiers and the military. What hadn't been rehearsed actually was the changeover when all the soldiers had to get to the senate and all the senators had to get down to the set in the other studio, and nobody had envisaged what was going to happen in the corridor. They got through, dribs and drabs at a time, to continue the next scene.

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The real excitement of that was not in the studio at all, it was a scene Shakespeare never foresaw in the corridor outside the canteen in Ally Pally as they all fought to get through each other.

00:07:51

Interviewer: What sort of equipment did you have in those days, Derek?

Derek: There were one-lens camera with an upside down optical viewfinder and they had the same thing on outside broadcast too. There was a chap fainted on outside broadcast, a cameraman, he fell off his camera in one instance. He was doing a programme at the zoo probably with Cansdale in the birdhouse. He had a shot all lined up of a large macaw on its perch, and he looked off to look at something or adjust something and he came back to his viewfinder, and for the first time in television history he saw the object through the viewfinder upright, and he fainted because the bird had swung upside down while he was looking away. You follow what I'm talking about?

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00:08:48

Interviewer: So the television viewfinder in those days was like the old pinhole camera?

Derek: Yes, it was upside down, difficult.

00:08:54

Interviewer: So if something went down, the camera had to pan up, and vice versa?

Derek: That's right.

00:09:02

Interviewer: Gosh you had to be jolly clever and remember these things because of course we're talking about live television?

Derek: Of course. It was quite a new thing for the likes of me but I wasn't being entrusted with making any pictures at this time, I was a stage manager, and some extraordinary things happened there, I can remember tucking ladies' bosoms back inside their costumes with the camera coming in close on their face and this unfortunate incident, and all you could do was rush forward and adjust their costume and their various parts for them.

00:09:36

Interviewer: Without the sound of your face being slapped?

Derek: Oh, well, no, I mean they would thank you afterwards and congratulate you on the warmth of your hands.

00:09:47

Interviewer: So that's what the early days of television at Alexandra Palace were all about?

Derek: Well, yes.

00:09:53

Interviewer: I really am learning things today. Derek, when did you first direct yourself in television, do you remember?

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Derek: Yes. I try to forget it earnestly. After I'd been in the studios for some time as a stage manager, I eventually moved through and upwards as an outside broadcaster director, and the first programme I was given was during the Festival of British and it was called Living Chess. This was a chessboard about the size of a tennis court which had been made by the Shot Tower on the South Bank site and there were going to be various games of chess between boys dressed in costumes and champion chess players.

I got hold of the champion chess player to keep the game on a small board for the commentary and I thought I had a good idea when I approached Eamonn Andrews, or through his agent, and thought it'd be nice to have something a bit racy to life this perhaps rather dull programme. I asked if Eamonn played chess and they said yes, he did, and so he came in and we did this little live programme on chess, and it was an absolute disaster.

I discovered that Eamonn Andrews in fact didn't know anything about chess at all, but I did learn a considerable lesson out of this disastrous programme Living Chess which was dead from the word go, which was if you're given an impossible task, go through with it in the terms in which it is given to you, don't try and improve it because the improvement I tried to put into this, I carried the whole blame, whereas the blame really was in the idea.

Interviewer: Well, in any valid history, one talks about failures as well as successes. Let's come on to successes. I mentioned in the introduction to you, Derek, 1951, because that is a very important year as far as North Region is concerned. It was

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	Festival of British year and in the October of 1951 our then chairman, Lord Simon of Wythenshawe who incidentally sometimes called in unheralded to sit in on our Manchester children's hour programme. It took me a little to get used to the fact that at the other side of the glass there was the chairman looking at me.
	He declared the new [whole 00:12:35] mast transmitter officially open. That was a very important part of North Region's history.
00:12:46	You were responsible I believe not only for the televised coverage, but I'm not sure if you directed it from the town hall that night but you certainly yourself directed the very first televised variety show from the North of England, an historic occasion, Derek.
Derek:	Wasn't this from the Palace in Blackpool, the variety show? That's my recollection, with the scanner outside in the street virtually on the prom. A very weird thing happened here. You can imagine that it was one of my first programmes and I was very keen to do the right thing. I'd been working up this programme with Barney Colehan, he had done the production, the putting together of the show, I was going to put it on television. I was just due to go on the air when the door of the scanner was thrown open and in came four or five rather inebriated characters from a hockey team in Cannock, Staffordshire.
	Cannock, Staffordshire was a place that I'd lived in for many years and they had apparently said, "Jolly old Derek's doing this show, he'll let us go in," and they came into the scanner with about 45 seconds to go before the show went on the air, and they've never forgiven me since for ignoring them entirely.

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00:14:12

Interviewer: You probably would have slightly more important things on your mind at the time?

Derek: Oh, yes, indeed. In London the credits were rolling from the end of the previous programme and I was saying things like, “Stand by on Camera 1. Camera 2, I’ll start on you, 3, we have 45 seconds to go, previous programming ending, announcement coming up,” while these idiots were breathing heavily down my neck.

00:14:41

Interviewer: You've told a story to me before about one time when you were in the scanner and you’d been rehearsing out in the street and you go through into the theatre, at least you think you're going into the theatre and the commissionaire stops you?

Derek: Ah, well, this was a little later on up in Newcastle where we were doing the first televised barn dance, and sure enough people tend to think that if you're working in television it’s all very glamorous and luxurious and you're surrounded by beautiful girls and all the rest of it, whereas in fact you're sitting in a very hot stuffy van full of equipment in the nearest side street.

I did this programme, which was reasonably successful as a programme, and at the end of it all I got out of the scanner a bit shot because it was all live and I’d been concentrating like made for a long time, I went up the door of the place where the barn dance was happening and said, “Open the door, will you?” and the chap says, “Don’t you know there's television

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going on in there?" and I said, "No, I don't really know what's going on in there except I made it go on." He said, "Well, you can't go in there." I had eventually to go back into my scanner and call up my stage manager to open the door from the inside and explain that I really had something to do with the business.

00:16:09

Interviewer: Yes, a little. Your stage manager, was that Willie Cave?

Derek: It was either Willie Cave or John Vernon, I'm not sure which one was on that show.

00:16:19

Interviewer: It was quite a week because I remember the opening. I had to go to our neighbour next door because they had a television set and we watched the variety show, and then I think I'm right in saying that later that week, again with Barney Colehan, you directed a special televised version of Have A Go from Blackpool.

Derek: Yes, that's right. This was mostly Barney's cup of tea here and Wilf Pickles and so on, I moved in the cameras and put it on as best I could for television. It wasn't a show I actually produced. There was a distinction here of the producer and the director.

00:16:56

Interviewer: You came North, you were dealing entirely, the producers, all of us of course were radio people, none of us had any experience. You were the first one who actually knew about this new baby called television.

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Derek: Well, that's it. I had to do it all at that time. That's what happened in The Good Old Days, this was an idea Barney had had and I believe he had done it as a radio programme, and we talked about this. He thought it would make a very good television programme and I agreed with him, and we looked at it together, but of course you can do a 'good old days' for radio from anywhere you like because the appearance of the place isn't of paramount importance.

We found the City Varieties in Leeds as an ideal place to do it, and in fact directed the first two or maybe three of The Good Old Days shows and they were thought to be reasonable, interesting, they were hammered a bit by London as usual, anything coming from the regions tended to get knocked slightly. Nobody was quite certain if it would run.

After a little while they decided to have another go, and it was still running -

Interviewer: Thirty-five years.

Derek: How long? Thirty-five years afterwards, so it was a reasonable success.

Interviewer: Unlike chess.

Derek: Yes. Well, they do chess properly these days without trying to gay it up.

00:18:33

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Interviewer: One of the first you did, and there are many firsts from you, Hometown, the very first North Regional opt out done especially for the North not carried by network. Do you remember that?

Derek: Yes. It was a bit of an experiment. It was to go into a place and find the aspirations of a town, what they were trying to do. It was quite a serious programme in its way. I tried an experiment here which was instead of having an interviewer in holding a microphone to people who were inevitably waiting for the interviewer to cue them, nudge them, push them, shut them up, wrap them up, whatever. I would go through with them what they were going to say, took away the interviewer and I would simply give them a cue, and it was then entirely up to them.

Once they get used to this idea they were very much better in performance because they got no prop to lean on, they had to be themselves and they had to say what they were going to say out of themselves. That's one good thing I think that came out of Hometown, it was a reasonable local success.

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00:19:45

Interviewer: An example of the interviewer not being able to lead the interviewee as I'm trying to do with you.

Derek: You are, that's what you've been trying to do.

00:19:55

Interviewer: That's what I've been trying to do, yes. I think we're getting on rather well. Derek, I want to talk to you, another first, you and the Reverend Peter Hamilton.

Derek: Yes, I remember Peter.

00:20:08

Interviewer: Peter was our religious broadcasting organiser at radio, took to television like the proverbial duck, I think, and together, with you of course doing the, as Peter says himself, he knew all about it, but together you did the very first televised service of holy communion from Liverpool.

Derek: That's right.

00:20:31

Interviewer: The coronation if you remember, the cameras left the abbey during the communion and we went down to see it.

Derek: That's right, yes. We got to know each other. We did every denomination, we did Church of England, Free Church, Roman Catholicism, and we evolved ways of doing every sort of service after very considerable thought and conversation about this. There seemed to us to be a way. I mean Church of England you go in and you watch the people worshipping. The Free Church was short the other way, from behind the altar as the people came down to the table. The Roman Catholic seemed best to respond to treatment as a sort of drama, almost a theatrical drama.

Then we came to do the first communion service from Liverpool. The difficulty was that I had felt very strongly, and so did Peter, that if we were going to do a communion service we had to really almost take communion on behalf of the viewer,

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not quite, obviously you can't, but you had to be at the rail and you had to see people receiving the bread and the wine.

The administer in London whose responsibility it was to make this decision was hanging fire on making a decision right up to the last minute. Eventually after some words on the telephone, he decided to let us go through with it. I recollect we accused him of being a mugworm which most people will know is a chap who sits on a fence with his mugworm side and he's one to the other, and we asked him to get off the fence and eventually he did, and we did it. It was the first, and all of these affairs, I can talk of them glibly now, but every time you do this, you make an act of worship as it were with cameras on behalf of viewers, it doesn't leave you unmoved. It really leaves you quite shaken.

Interviewer: You've just given me the most delightful description of what a director should be doing in terms of television given that you're talking about religion. I'm going to ask you about what a good director does in terms of other programme material in a moment or two, Derek.

00:23:14 I recall our very first children's television programme from the North which you also directed. You'd done these before for adults, this time it was Belle Vue, Manchester, it featured Gerald Iles of radio fame, myself as the interviewer, it was the second time I'd done the interviewing, and Herbert Smith and Fred Fairclough, and you cast them in a type of Laurel & and Hardy role. You had them eating fish and chips -

Derek: Are we thinking of a certain bank holiday?

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Interviewer: We are.

Derek: Well, this got out of hand. It was a beautiful day.

Interviewer: It was live.

Derek: We rehearsed this lovely programme. We were in with the crowd, the place was thronging with people and we were going to go on to the Big Dipper. Then we were going to go in and see the sea lions, then we were going to go around, I recollect, to see Speedy-somebody and his trick cyclists or cyclists of death, I think they're in one of those globe things, and it was going to be a marvellous example of the gaiety and happiness that occurred at Belle Vue on a bank holiday.

We finished the rehearsal and we got a sort of monsoon deluge, some of the heaviest rain I've ever seen. When we went back to our cameras shortly before we were due to go on, I think I should really have phoned London and said, "We've been washed out by rain," but I decided we ought to have a go. So we switched on the cameras and everything and I asked, possibly you, Trevor, and Herbert to go onto the Big Dipper, and the minute you went on the Big Dipper you got electric shock and the Big Dipper had gone live through our cables, so there was no way we could start on the Big Dipper.

They were pressing us in London to go ahead, I gave the cue, and the handout had to be straight in to the sea lions. So went in to these black sea lions against this light background. The now old-fashioned cameras reversed phase. It's as if a photograph suddenly went into negative so that all the blacks were white and all the whites were black. We went in to see

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these sea lions and suddenly we had white sea lions against black water, which was odd to say the least.

I was yelling to the camera who was due to be in with the fearless motorcycle riders to stand by, and he said, “I’m 200 yards away from where they are sheltering from the rain.” I said, “Well, you better get cracking.” I had one camera on the Big Dipper which was giving people electric shocks. I had another one with white sea lions, and I had no alternative but to come to the third camera because I only had three cameras. The third camera was bumping across and expanse of open ground towards this rather tatty shed where these cyclists were.

We went bumbling in there at least 15 minutes before they were going to be ready or expected us, and thank heavens they all had their trousers on but a lot of them didn't have their boots on and they were just sort of sitting there scratching themselves, and that was rather the end of the show.

We then went back to Herbert Smith who said goodbye.

00:26:53

Interviewer: The fish and chips by then were sodden, if I remember.

Derek: You tell me, I wasn’t that end.

00:26:58

Interviewer: Here we are, we’re 41 years on, why aren’t you white haired?

Derek: Aren’t I? No, not quite. Do you remember what the newspapers said after that? They seemed to hold me

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personally responsible for the weather and for all the breakdowns, that this is no way to represent the North.

Interviewer: Well, it was a memorable programme from our point of view.

Derek: Really was ghastly, wasn't it?

00:27:26

Interviewer: Derek, you had a very small team at that time. As I recall there was yourself, Peggy Walker was your production secretary, yes? [Crosstalk 00:27:36] Your phone would ring and a voice would say, "Television."

Derek: That's it, that's all you needed to say in those days. You didn't have to say whose television, what sort of television. You didn't have to qualify it, we were television north of Birmingham. There was just Peggy and myself, Peggy a stalwart Yorkshire lass.

00:27:57

Interviewer: Yes, straight from Have A Go, touring secretary with Barney Colehan.

Derek: That's right. Well, I had quite a good deal I managed to negotiate was that I would have a part, almost a half share of the Birmingham unit, the Midland unit, and the same share of the Scottish unit, which meant while they had half of their unit half of the time, by having half of one and half of the other I had a unit all of the time. I used to use the Midland unit to the west of the Pennines and the Scottish unit to the east of the

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Pennines, and I used to turn backwards and forwards and there was no motorway in those days.

00:28:40

Interviewer: Did the BBC provide you with a car and a driver?

Derek: No, they didn't. When I first went up there, because I was so new to the BBC, I didn't even get my moving allowances paid to me, and so that I could afford to move from London to Manchester I had to sell quite a few things including my car. Eventually they let me have these things but at the time it was very awkward because you couldn't become a member of the BBC under, what was it, two years? I had probably a year to wait before I got my allowances. So I hadn't got my car and I was shuttling between Manchester and Leeds, and of course people in London tend to believe that Manchester and Leeds are a couple of three miles apart.

Frequently people would ring me up and say, "Will you tell Barney so-and-so?" and I said Barney isn't here at the moment, and they said, "When will you be seeing him, later today?" and I'd say, "Look, Barney's about 60 miles away." "Oh, really?" That was going to Leeds backwards and forwards when in the winter a very difficult journey.

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Interviewer: A lot of your output was given over to sport. Was this because of your own early participation in cricket, soccer and athletics, that must have come in useful?

Derek: It came in useful but it wasn't because of it, no. It was because I was the only chap up there and by and large, unless it was a

highly specialised subject, I did the lot. Of course, the first thing I had to get to grips with was this strange northern pursuit of rugby league. My first visit to the North after I'd been appointed and before I'd actually moved up there was to see a rugby league game and to learn something about it. This was the New Zealand-Great Britain test at Swinton, I think it was.

Anyhow, I went up to Manchester and I expected there'd be a little interest expressed up there like maybe a newspaper man to meet, "This is our new television producer, etc.," but in fact I was welcomed by the head of programmes who, almost looking over his shoulder as if somebody would hear, said, "No one knows you're up here." I thought really, what am I, some sort of a criminal. "No one knows you're up here. Now then, we've booked you a seat down at Swinton, so go down there and watch the match. Oh, if you run into a chap walled Eddie Waring, have nothing to do with him at all. He's not very persona grata with us here."

I thought this was all a bit odd. Anyhow, I took a cab, went down to Swinton, found my seat and watched this rather difficult game for a man who had played hockey and soccer but had never played ordinary rugby, let alone rugby league. I was a little bemused at halftime and thought I need to powder me nose, I'd love a cup of tea and I'd love somebody to tell me what this is all about. I stood up and turned around and there was a round faced ruddy looking chap in a brown fedora cocked over one eye.

This chap says, "You'll be Burrell-Davis, won't you?" and I said that's right. He said, "Well, my name is Waring," and I said, "Thank heavens to meet you, Mr Waring." He said, "I can tell you what you want," and I said yes, he said, "You want to powder your nose, won't you?" and I said yes. He said, "While you do that I'll get you a cup of tea. When you come back,

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shall I come and sit next to you for the second half and tell you about it?" and I said right, so he did, and the game began to make some sense. I was in effect probably the first man to hear a Waring commentary expressly in my left ear.

Anyhow, I was most impressed with Eddie, his information was absolutely first class, and what's more he couldn't have been more helpful, but when I got back to Broadcasting House, they were not altogether overjoyed that I'd booked him for the first rugby league transmission.

00:32:57

Interviewer: It turned out to be quite a good choice, didn't it?

Derek: It did, he was different, Eddie, he did not fall into any of the moulds or patterns that commentators should do, and he started a totally new way of doing commentary. He was funny, he talked a bit too much, he let his personality intrude, but one way or another he turned what for most of the British public was a rather unknown and strange game into an entertainment of some sort. I think that the rugby league, although they've altered the pattern of their commentary and coverage now, they have a great deal to thank Eddie for, for his enthusiasm.

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Interviewer: Another young man and I think you introduced to the television screen, he'd been with us in the newsroom on radio, David Coleman, Fallowfield Athletics.

Derek: Yes, well, David was quite an athlete in his own account. I don't know how far he runs now, although he looks pretty fit still, he used to run into the office into Broadcasting House in

the middle of Manchester, have a shower, dress for his job and then run home again. I discovered that he was the winner of what was called, was it the Northern Mile or the Manchester Mile?

00:34:12

Interviewer: I think it was the Manchester Mile.

Derek: The Manchester Mile. When I undertook to do some athletics from Fallowfield, the Manchester athletics track, with Rex [Altercham 00:34:25], a beloved memory, I asked David if he would like to come and do commentary, and he did, and he was very good.

00:34:37

Interviewer: David Coleman starting on radio. Another programme on radio, Top of the Form, didn't you do the very first televising of that?

Derek: Yes, well, it was split as with the radio version, you had a school here versus a school there. Here I think was somewhere in London, I'm not sure, Highgate perhaps, and there was up there in Sheffield. Certainly we did that end of. Dennis Monger in London did the other end of it, so we were the first people to do Top of the Form which was a forerunner, so it turned out, of Mastermind, at least as far as television was concerned.

00:35:28

Interviewer: We talked about The Good Old Days, your association with Barney Colehan. You were first all directing it before Barney had learnt the secrets of television direction. Another

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programme that Barney did on radio was Top Town. From Top Town, is that how It's a Knockout came or were they two separate programmes going?

Derek: It might have done. There is a germ of an idea there, isn't there, one town versus another town, but Top Town tended to be singing, dancing, things of that sort. As you know, the way It's a Knockout settled on was feats of strength and so on. In the middle of all this, in Europe a series had started called Jeux Sans Frontières, Games Without Frontiers, and this was international which Top Town of course never was. In this, members of one town in one country would go across to a town in another country and they would play them various sorts of games.

Robin Scott who was one of our outside broadcast producers, he was first of all a radio producer and then he went to Paris as the Paris rep. He spoke absolutely fluent French and subsequently he came from being Paris rep, he joined us in outside broadcasting in London. He was very aware of Jeux Sans Frontières and I think that he probably introduced the thought of doing it in this country to us.

At that time I was the executive producer in outside broadcasts having gone back from the North down to the South when this idea was being thought about. Anyhow, we thought we'd put this game to the North, to Barney to explore, and he started Jeux Sans Frontières in the North and it was called It's a Knockout, and it first came from Morecambe.

00:37:40

Interviewer: Yes, with the tide coming in.

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Derek: With the tide coming in, as you say. It eventually became known and loved for that matter by the country at large, it was very much different from when it started in Morecambe.

Interviewer: Having mentioned Morecambe of course in order to keep faith with the North, a place we both served, I must now mention Blackpool. I don't know if this was another first but here I have amongst the souvenirs that I picked up in your home, Derek, as we sit here in another seaside resort in fact called Bournemouth [Slat 00:38:19], it says 'The big switch on. Millions watch on television as the lights leap into life. One moment 12,000 people in Talbot Square Blackpool stood waiting in the darkness, and next this was the brilliant scene'.

There's a picture of George Formby with his wife Beryl. 'He mounted the red carpet dais in front of the town hall, he sang a couple of songs strumming his ukulele, then pulled the chromium plated switch which lifted the curtain on the 21st birthday illuminations' and they bill it as 'Britain's biggest free show'.

00:38:56 That I think might have been the first time that the illuminations were covered on television?

Derek: I think so. Certainly the first time I did them and I think I was the first man to do them.

00:39:05

Interviewer: There wasn't anybody else.

Derek: I think this was possibly the first extensive use of the roving eye. We rigged up a tram the way that many vehicles these

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days are rigged up with cameras aboard which can track alongside race horses and one thing and another, but it hadn't really been done much there. It meant that you couldn't of course connect your camera by a wire to the transmitter, you had to send a radio signal from the vehicle you were on, and the vehicle we were on was a jolly old tram.

We had one or two cameras en route and you had to go to these when we lost the signal from the tram. We had Richard Dimbleby doing the commentary and we went right down the front at Blackpool finishing up on the far end somewhere past the Miners' Home there, and I think this was the first time. Of course it was in black and white, of course it was live, but it was still enormous fun.

Interviewer: Of course in later years all in glorious colour. Another first, Derek, and a programme that I remember very well, not only first of all as a viewer, and then in later years Her Majesty had done her Christmas Day broadcast, and that year we had preceded it with a programme, it wasn't just carols, it was a programme about Chetham's Hospital School in Manchester and the message came that it was thought to have been a very nice programme to precede the Queen's Speech.

00:40:54 I inherited that from you, the actual idea of going to this school to do a Christmas programme. You did the very first one. I think it was, according to the Manchester Guardian, Monday 20th December 1954. The radio critic starts by saying, "Carols from Chetham's Hospital worthy of a European audience." What gave you the idea of doing this?

Derek: First of all, it was worthy of a European audience. What gave me the idea? Well, the Chetham's is there, here are the

Under copyright

scholars there in their blue coat uniforms, and we know that it was a music school. I went down there and had a look at it. Half your life as a producer is spent looking at things to find out what they're like, and this impressed me enormously and the offers of cooperation I had were marvellous. I thought this is going to be quite good enough to offer to Europe, and I put this to London and they were a bit depressing as they very often were and said, “No, we go to King's College and that’s where we’ve always been and you won’t better that.”

I thought maybe we won’t better it but we can be as good and we can be different, but we went ahead without it going to Europe and it was a marvel from this, what do you call it, a mediaeval hall?

Interviewer: Yes.

Derek: Certainly ancient.

Interviewer: Tudor.

Derek: Tudor, with the boys in these costumes and their beautiful voices, all the help you wanted from the masters, nobody saying you can’t do this and you can’t do that, and I put together a delightful and simple programme of boys and a Christmas concert, culminating in two of the senior boys who were leaving that year, and I think some of the emotion that they felt leaving after their education and going out in the world perhaps came across in the programme.

Under copyright

Once again, a live programme, which everything was in those days, and although perhaps you couldn't get the polish there was some degree of spontaneity and life about them that I'm not sure you can get in the same way when you record a thing.

00:43:22

Interviewer: If I mention the Guardian, another paper, 'A carol concert without one of those hardy annual sun on my doorstep sounds an impossibility, but the local Chetham's offering went bravely on in its unusual way.

Derek: Great.

00:43:36

Interviewer: Then I come to one more cutting, if I may?

Derek: You may, I haven't seen these for years, they've been shut away.

00:43:42

Interviewer: I've been sorting them out. It says 'He always wanted to go arty-crafty'.

Derek: Who's this?

Interviewer: It's you.

Derek: Arty-crafty. Dearie me.

Under copyright

00:43:54

Interviewer: Yes. ‘When Northern TV producer Derek Burrell-Davis finishes work on Sunday’s presentation of Belle Vue Circus,’ we’re going to come on to that subject later, I hope, ‘he’ll be down for Lyon Grove to specialise in arty-crafty programmes and to live on a Thames barge’. You've always had a bit of a sailor about you, haven't you, Derek, as I know. ‘He’s been promoted from regional duties after three years hard work producing four to six outside broadcasts a month in the North. What pleases him most about the move is that he’ll have a chance to specialise in certain types of programming which give him scope to express his artistic sense’.

So having done all these unartistic programming up until now, Derek, you move back to London in the 1955. Tell me about your duties there.

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Derek: I must pick up on that quote, quite extraordinary. It doesn't sound like me saying I want to be in arty-crafty programmes. I always thought of myself as a documentary producer, and the powers that be in London thought I’d beat a good big drum so they made me beat big drums for a great deal of the time.

As for living on a barge, that was Richard Dimbleby’s Dutch barge and it happened when I first went down in a hurry that I hadn’t got anywhere to stay in London and I said to Richard any suggestions where I could stay in London and he said, “If you want to go and live on my barge for a bit, you can do,” so I did.

Now your question, I suppose my approach to most programmes whether it’s a sport or documentary or entertainment, I’ve always had a particular concern with the picture. It’s not just broadcasting, it is pictures in frame, one

after the other. I've always been able to draw frames and drawing and painting with cameras is fascinating, so I suppose one has to be aware of the artistic content of a picture.

What you're doing is one picture after another, continuous moving pictures, it really is absolutely fascinating but I wouldn't call it arty-crafty which sounds a bit amateurish, doesn't it?

00:46:13

Interviewer: Do you recall some of the very first programmes you did when you got back to o outside broadcast in London?

Derek: No, not immediately. The last one I did before I went was from Belle Vue in Manchester and that was the first circus programme I ever did. I didn't know I was going to do a lot more, I didn't even know I was going to like it, but I watched the one up in Manchester I think it was 26 times, I really got to know the artists and thought they were remarkable people.

I heard I had a new assistant waiting for me in London and I phoned her up, a girl called Mary, and said did she want to come up and look at this circus and get to know me before I came to London, but I think she must have been warned about me because she declined this invitation.

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00:47:05

Interviewer: This is Ms David we're talking about?

Derek: Mary David, yes. I went down to London after this programme which happily was something of a success and started working in London and met Mary then and we started working together.

00:47:22

Interviewer: And you've been together ever since as Mr and Mrs Derek Burrell-Davis?

Derek: In effect, but we didn't know that for a long, long time. We worked together for, it's difficult to say because there were so many capacities, but I think she was my assistant for about 14 years, something like that, then I encouraged her to try and climb the ladder which was in those days not too easy for a woman, particularly in outside broadcasts, but from being a producer's assistant she became a production assistant. From becoming a production assistant, she became an assistant producer and then she became a producer and director, but that spans the best part of 20 years I suppose.

00:48:12

Interviewer: You did a film feature on the Soviet State Circus?

Derek: Yes, this was after a little while because I had worked with Smart's and I had worked with the French circuses, Buglione, Medrano, [Rancit 00:48:26], and so on, and then it was when [Norbury Singer] was the assistant head of outside broadcasts. He suddenly turned up, I had just finished a programme at Buglione Circus at the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris, and he was sitting on the ring fence like a garden gnome as I staggered in after this immense undertaking and said, "I want you to go to Russia." I said, "What, now?" he said, "No, tomorrow will do."

This was midnight when this occurred. Anyhow, I refused to go off like that and I went home first, but sure enough I did go to Russia and I spent the best part of three months there and worked in Leningrad, Moscow, Rostov, Tbilisi, Krasnodar. I had a really remarkable and marvellous time there with a

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Russian unit, they were absolutely super. In fact, they overdid it, they gave me too many cameras which was nice of them, wasn't it?

On some hands they were brilliant, their technicians were excellent, first class. Their administration was appalling. The last thing that happened after I'd done my original reconnaissance was I was sent for by a man called [Berlian 00:49:56] who was a ministerial rank and he was in charge of the sort of entertainment in the Soviet Union. He said, "Now look, we don't want any of your Western ideas on this, we want you to be efficient, thoroughly Russian in your approach to all this, no wasting money on lolling about," and I said, "No, sir, absolutely, yes, sir," and so on.

They sent us off to start this filming in a [two prop jet 00:50:25] to Tbilisi in Georgia and they sent the equipment by car, these thousands of miles, and it arrived about 10 days later while we sat on our bottoms being able to do nothing. As soon as the equipment arrived, I said to my administer, "Go up to the circus, tell them we'll start work tomorrow," and the word came from the circus, "Sorry, we can't start tomorrow, we're going on holiday."

The same happened when we went to Rostov, they flew us there in a fast aeroplane and sent the stuff by car. The penny dropped, because I kept writing to them polite letters. By the time we had to go from Rostov to Leningrad because we had to go via Moscow, but now they sent us all in a huge cargo plane so we all arrived together, having put down in Moscow, taken off again and gone to Leningrad. My first day in Leningrad I said, "Come on, let's off to the circus and start filming," and my administer said, "I'm sorry about that but when we put down in Moscow all the unit went to see their wives and families." So we now have all the equipment but now people.

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00:51:42

Interviewer: Just as well this was not a film problem. Was it a film feature? By the way, I just discovered now, looking back again at the television and radio critic who says his headline on you, you always wanted to go arty-crafty, it's at this point that you come into the category of a very high class song and dance man. You can't deny that because I'm thinking of the Bolshoi Ballet which you did. You did the Polish State Song & Dance Company. You did the Red Navy Singers & Dancers. You did the Czech State Song & Dance Ensemble, and doubtless, Derek, in order to preserve the BBC's all important sense of balance, I see you did the Commonwealth Great Dance Gala.

Derek: We did, and the [Mosay 00:52:28] of dancers you haven't mentioned, and the Omsk Siberian Dancers you haven't mentioned, and the Kirov Ballet you haven't mentioned.

00:52:36

Interviewer: No, I've got about five more of these data cassettes, so four or five hours later I shall catch up with your list of credits. Anyway, it's not the complete list. The song and dance, arty-crafty, deny it if you wish, apart you also did the opening programme of the BBC's first official colour service, BBC Two, with a family who were to become very close friends of yours and of Mary's, the Smart Circus family. Tell me about that.

Derek: That's right. We did that programme actually from King's Park in Bournemouth and this was when Bournemouth was enlightened and not being stupid about circuses appearing here, but that's another story.

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I met the Smarts a long time before that event. One morning, not too long after I had got back to London, Mary David and I went up to Clapham Common which was shrouded in a mysterious mist with the trees growing out and a scattering of caravans and the four bare king poles waiting for Smart's tents to come up from Margate where it was doing its last day's performance.

I went across to Ronnie Smart's caravan at about 8:45am little realising that circus folk go to bed very late and they like to lie in a little bit in the morning, so he wasn't terribly pleased to see me and he sent me straight off to Margate where I saw a marvellous circus performance and I was very much impressed with the lions and, in fact, had the idea of dropping a camera in the ground so we looked straight through the bars of the tunnel that the lions go in and come out of, and I thought we could bring 8 or 9 lions into everyone's living rooms.

When I got back to Clapham, Ronnie thought it was a great idea. I eventually persuaded my engineers that Smart Circus could best be left to dig a hole in the middle of the Clapham Common cricket pitch, thus absolving the BBC of any nonsense in that area.

Anyhow, Ronnie realised he'd been had a bit but the shot itself was really quite something, and it was wonderful at that time, and we were so lucky because if you had a good idea and put it into effect, the probability was that you were the first person ever to try it on television, so you got a terrific reaction from people, and we certainly got a reaction on this. Every one of the daily papers had photographs of these lions whipping into your living room, headlines and so on.

That was the first programme I did with Smart's and I did many, many more. I was so enchanted with the whole circus business, with the life they led, and I think one thing that

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appealed to me there, you have this ring, it didn't matter which circus you'd go to in the world, it's 42-foot across so that anyone knows the area they have to perform. You would have Germans and Poles and Jews and Arabs and Americans and Mexicans and so on all mingling in this ring. When they were there they would all get on together because the life of one could rely on the ability of another one to see that a rope was secure or tied off, and you got the whole sort of lingua franca of a circus which is a sort of German-French-English way of speaking, and this wonderful international feeling.

I think that's one thing in particular that appealed to me. The other thing that appealed to me was the cooking. You could eat marvellously well all around the circus, and Smart's really was a big one, they had tents at that time that would hold 5,000 people and they had about 200 vehicles, and some of the best artists in the world.

I got this name of doing nothing but circus but in fact I used to do around four shows a year, that was all, which isn't a great number, is it?

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00:57:19

Interviewer: Though quite spectacular. There was a time, the early circuses I remember seeing on television, the cameras were very much on the ground, we were always looking up at the trapeze, but I think you decided that there may be other views.

Derek: Yes, as I got close with the subject. It is a problem when you have an artist working at a height of about 60 feet. One of the things they say about outside broadcast is you should give people the feeling they are sitting in a seat in the place that the performance is happening, but if you are sitting in a seat looking at an act at a height of 60 feet, you can project your

mind up there, but if you are sitting at home watching the same thing on a screen that measures 14 inches or something across, it's going to be a pretty small view you've got at this daredevil aerialist up there.

Okay, the answer is go close with your camera which you can by putting on a different lens, but then you're not aware of the height. So I thought the idea might be to put a camera above the act. I started off by building scaffolds so that they would look down above the act and you could see the artist close up and you could see the immense distance below the artist down to the floor of the ring.

The problem with this was though that so as to get your engineers moving you have to have what's called a planning meeting, and your planning meeting has to probably be upwards of a month, at least two to three weeks before the programme, when you tell them where everything is going to go-

00:59:18

Interviewer: So they can light it?

Derek: So they can light it and how much you want of this, that and the other, and if you're going to build a scaffold, how high it is and exactly where it goes. So you take them down to where the circus performance was going to be, and there was absolutely nothing except a field, just a field. With luck you might have got Smart's to mark out where the ring was going to be with a circle of pegs or with some sawdust or something, but you have to use a lot of imagination to say this scaffold is going to be here and it is going to be so high and the tent is going to miss the cameraman's head by 3 foot 6 inches or whatever, and the lions are going to come in there and the

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horses are going to go out there, when there is nothing there to look at.

However, we did it of course. Eventually, you've got these marvellous cranes that you can see all around the place now, the Simon Crane. The first one went up to about 40 foot, the next one went up to about 80 foot, heaven knows where they go up to now. If you look at the BBC coverage of Wimbledon with this huge height above looking down, well, that is a Simon Crane, if that's what they call them these days.

01:00:40

Interviewer: The film industry one was the Transatlantic, do you remember?

Derek: Ah, that's a different scene altogether.

01:00:44

Interviewer: We managed to get one for the very first time, I remember getting it into Dickenson Road and we thought this was wonderful.

Derek: Yes, but that wouldn't go out more than 12 to 14 feet, I shouldn't think.

Interviewer: Yes, but we thought at the time-

Derek: Oh, it was absolutely brilliant.

01:00:58

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Interviewer: Yes. Another inaugural programme, we talked about the opening of BBC Two in colour which you did, was the Early Bird satellite. You did that in conjunction with Paul Fox and would it be Noble Wilson?

Derek: That's right. Mary and I went to Brussels for this, and I don't know if you know the Palais de Justice in Brussels. It's a domed building and right on the top of the cupola there's a little green pimple because it's copper, I suppose, copper coloured. The Eurovision control room used to be in that pimple. It used to take about 20 minutes to get there.

Anyhow, up there was the Eurovision control room and that's where we were for this Early Bird programme which was a marvel. That was really planned. We were planning there in, I remember a colleague in Denmark who was most enthusiastic. I think we have them 2 minutes 8 seconds or something like that, and this chap got on to us and said, "Can I have another 12 seconds?" and we said, "What do you want another 12 seconds for?" He said, "I've got 800 baton twirling girls and 100 cannons and I want to bring the girls in and let them go twirl and let the cannons off and I can do it all in 12 seconds, I practiced." So we added another 12 seconds.

The Spaniards we thought would be a disaster because they weren't really well up in television then, and they were marvellous. They came over in such a marvellous and imaginative way with the fiesta through the streets and all this lovely Spanish trumpet music.

The French we thought probably would be a bit French as they usually were in Eurovision and so it proved. About the middle of the day the call came, 'over to France, cue France', so we cued France, nothing. We've cued France again. Nothing. The

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whole world was hanging on this. The whole blessed world all over the place. Houston was hanging on with 'Welcome World' on its big board and so on. Cue France. Nothing.

We got on the telephone, or Noble Wilson did who spoke extremely good French, to the people in France and said we are not getting our signal. They said, "You are not getting our signal? Why not? We will go and see." They came back, they said, "Alphonse who is the engineer, you understand, who presses the switch. All that is in order but Alphonse has gone to lunch and he has taken ze key to the building with him."

01:03:56

Interviewer: Now you know why we always refer to them as 'Radio Confusion Francaise'.

Derek: Don't be unkind. We did a lot of lovely programmes in France.

Interviewer: Anyway, that apart, Derek, you worked from 1955 as a producer, then senior producer in London obs, executive producer. You became the Editor-In-Charge of BBC Television Outside Broadcast Entertainments Department. Then comes broadcasting in the '70s and you're 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.

01:04:40 Having done such a very wide range of programmes, by my standards very exciting programmes, we've only just touched on the edge of them. Wasn't it very difficult for you to think if I'm the boss, if I'm the head of production centre, I've got to give all this up, I'm no longer going to be sitting in the hot seat

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calling the cameras but I'm going to be looking after and encouraging others, was it a difficult decision to take?

Derek: Not eventually. Initially when I'd been asked to take some sort of administrative job, I'd turned it down, and I had been asked over a period to consider one or two jobs because I was fairly senior and it was only reasonable that I should be considered from time to time, and I always felt that what I was doing was more fun than anything I could go and do.

There were eventually a number of factors. I thought maybe the time has come when this is the last time I will be offered a senior post. I should think of the family and I should think of my pension because, as you know, your finishing salary is what conditions your pension, and that was a practical thought. But it still might not have got me moving except for the fact that this was an invitation to go back to Manchester.

I had a particular warm spot in my heart for Manchester. It was a sort of fairy tale story, you go up as the first television producer and not much wanted to begin with, but the thought of going back there as the ultimate boss was really a marvellous and enchanting thought. So once I'd got the money right, I welcomed it with open arms. I realised I wouldn't be able to go on flying the aeroplane as it were, but I was beginning to mind less.

On the day of a programme, Trevor, I never used to have a drink of any sort, alcoholic I mean, I wouldn't even take an aspirin if I had a blinding headache because I had to be exactly me, not under the influence of anything. This sort of terrific tension got worse, so in a way it was almost a relief not to think in a week's time I'm going to face this ghastly situation and at the morning of the day of the programme to think what

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you've got to achieve by the evening. So it was a bit of a relief that way.

01:07:41

Interviewer: After 15 years' absence you returned to us in the North of England. Derek, what did you see as your immediate task ahead now that you were at the helm?

Derek: One became aware in London, I think, that things in Manchester were a little doldrumish. I don't want to be unkind, the North is always very proud and rightly so, but a little doldrumish. I didn't go there like a medicine man with some pills to give everyone. I really went there thinking how nice it would be if I could get the people in the North to realise their potential and to realise some of the potential of the North because it's such a huge region, it's got such a huge population. If you start analysing where the majority of the country's top entertainers and comedians, writers come from, a huge proportion of them come from the North, so why shouldn't they be working in the North?

I think I had this sort of feeling. I suppose it was a bit high-flown, idealistic and so on. Of course as soon as I got into the chair, it became my life, my work, something I had to do, but from my first time in the building, in my office, I had the feeling that everyone was a bit constrained. I don't know if they knew me or much about me but I seemed to be instilling in people I ran to and met much too much a feeling of awe, if you like.

I don't know if you can recollect the first thing I did, which I'm still uncertain if it was the right thing, Trevor. It was coming up for Christmas and I was sitting in my office where somebody had just brought me a cup of tea and somebody pottered along and said that such-and-such a department or gathering were

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having a little Christmas drink in such-and-such a room and would I join them. So I went down, and the moment I went in the whole room went quiet and I was solemnly taken around and shook hands here and shook hand there and shook hands the other and offered a drink and then everything was very quiet.

I thought this is quite astonishing, I'd better go away again and let them get on with it. Then I had an idea. I went back to my office, picked up the tea cosy off the teapot, put it on my head and returned to the party, but after a moment of stunned silence there was a very jolly reaction to this, and suddenly it was as if one had broken a great sheet of ice, on that occasion. This obviously didn't put everything right in the North but it certainly made a jolly party out of something that was a bit stiff.

01:11:09

Interviewer: Did you find it was slightly different inasmuch as Bob Stead had retired as part of broadcasting in the '80s. Graham Miller who'd been head of programmes for many years had been acting head and then he had to step down to become the first network editor. I was his deputy, and then you were appointed, as it were, over him. Did this make for difficulties at all?

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Derek: I don't think so. It might have made it difficult for Graham, if he had felt a bit put out I would have understood. I was always conscious in the time I was in the North of his overall seniority and the fact that I had taken over from him, but I don't think it made life difficult. You see, Bob hadn't been a television man, Graham wasn't a television man, so in a way I was the first television professional to come and have a crack at this.

Graham had plenty of expertise in running radio. He also had you as his deputy, which was a considerable advantage.

01:12:23

Interviewer: Nice of you to say so. I remember the first time I heard the word ‘seminar’, Derek. You took us all out, I say all, the various heads of output departments, and we discussed programme output. I remember you turning to our network editor and asking him how he saw the present and the future of network radio in the region. Graham did a Graham piece, looking rather solemn about it all.

You were smoking a cigar, you got up and you said, “Thank you, Graham, I am just stepping out to cut my throat.”

Derek: I think this is what a seminar is for actually, for everyone to let their hair down, and that I think is probably why I made that remark, without wishing to be hurtful.

The other thing was not really to give everyone a nice weekend, it was to get everyone away from their offices and their telephones, and so that I wouldn't have any people saying, “I'm sorry, I can't do this, the wife won't let me,” I invited all the wives along to come and have dinner on the Sunday, if you remember, which I thought would be a good idea and put a nice finish to our seminaring.

It was a good idea this seminar, I thought of doing it to learn with Kenneth Brown, my head of personnel, with his considerable support.

01:13:52

Interviewer: I don't think there's any doubt that the seminars were very useful because they brought both television and radio staff

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together. On the television side, Derek, it wasn't long before the output had increased quite a bit?

Derek: Yes. During '71 and '72, the television activity increased by about 25%. Then in '71 in December, Dougie Edwards who was Lord Mayor of Manchester, he opened the site for the new broadcasting centre for work to begin, operating a huge dragline excavator with the help of quite a few artists including Duddy.

01:14:34

Interviewer: Yes, that's on the All Saints' site.

Derek: That's right. During the next years, '72, '73, building work was on schedule as I recollect and there was another substantial increase, 24% to 25% in TV resources. There are a lot of figures here if you want to go into them, but overall there was a satisfactory increase all around in radio, and Radio Manchester as well. We also saw the 150th gala edition of The Good Old Days. London took a decision in concert with us to build a second TV studio, which was a happy thought.

Then in the summer of '73, we topped out and TV by now had improved so much that it was only a modest 9% but we established the Northern Radio Orchestra at this time, which was a marvellous thing, and over the next year or two a huge reorganisation in radio production department.

01:15:55

Interviewer: Of course by then, David Hatch joined us as the network editor of radio on the retirement of Graham Miller.

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Derek: That's right.

01:16:03

Interviewer: Shortly after David's appointment, Duncan Thomas arrives on the Manchester scene as-

Derek: They were both marvellous captures, and they didn't just happen either, I can tell you, there was quite a lot of searching and looking for the right man for the right job and I think we got him. If you look to where both of them have gone, both of them have ascended such dizzy heights now I don't even know what their titles are.

01:16:30

Interviewer: David Hatch as we speak, at the end of May 1992, managing director of network radio. Duncan Thomas of course is his deputy, still of course in charge of radio engineering services.

Derek: How really fantastic.

01:16:46

Interviewer: Then you mentioned Ken Brown?

Derek: Ken got very, very poorly and had to an enforced retirement, which was a pity, and [John Ittle 01:16:55] as the head of personnel. John was absolutely superman. He only has one fault John, he's not overly ambitious to leave Manchester, never has been. I think he could have gone up the ladder the same way as the other lads but he wanted to go on living in, where does he live, Wilmslow.

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Interviewer: Yes.

Derek: But as a team, the three of them, they were marvellous.

01:17:20

Interviewer: Well, you had possibly one of the best management teams that the North has enjoyed for quite a time.

Derek: Well, you tell me that, because you are more in a better position to judge this than I was because you were there longer and you knew more about the other teams, but I could not have been happier with the support of these guys. It wasn't a sort of arbitrary loyalty, they brought so much to the job, new ideas, new thoughts.

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01:17:53

Interviewer: So things got done? That was the impression I had.

Derek: Yes, where you've got a team with great enthusiasm and they're all trying to go the right way, you get a positive response and you don't get a lot of argument. What have they got to argue about really? Maybe I'm naïve in this matter and was just very lucky.

01:18:16

Interviewer: I think it's a question of people's security, Derek. If we feel secure, we're not looking over our shoulder, we're not looking over our shoulder, we're not trying to pick an argument. We're

thinking, if you like, forthright thoughts, creative thoughts in programme making.

Derek: Yes, I had felt that quite a few up in the North had for some reason been screwed down a little. They hadn’t been allowed to flutter their wings, and if they had fluttered their wings I don't think they had been duly rewarded. There are quite a lot of people up there who I tried to see their skill, and efforts and enthusiasm was reflected, I think you were probably one of them, Trevor, and Ken Brown was another one. I can’t mention all of them but I’d like to think if somebody needed a reward, then he got it.

01:19:20

Interviewer: Did you find it, Derek, difficult to sell to network?

Derek: it was. People down in London had very preconceived ideas and were very protective of their spheres of influence which seemed to me to be a pity. If you consider light entertainment, and I have always thought that the North was well equipped to historically in terms of entertainment, writers and so on, but take just one or two artists, Paul Daniels, magic. Now then, I went down to an office meeting and offered a programme there to which I had given a title at the last minute of And For My Next Trick, not highly original but I offered this to Paul Fox and he got Bill Cotton to come in.

Bill said quite simply, “Magic’s finished.” I said we’ve got some very good people going on this, we’ve got Paul Daniels and so on and so on. He said to Paul, “If you want to give it a little whirl, give it a little whirl, but I reckon it’s finished, magic on television.”

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Well, look at it today, it's bigger and bigger and bigger, and Daniels is really the man who's done it as frontman, and we found him and we were going to exploit him in the North. I think we got maybe one programme going before he was pinched by London who had said magic was finished.

Then Charlie Williams, the marvellous coloured comedian from Yorkshire. We were convinced that we could do a wonderful series with him but that he should be done from the clubs or from his own habitat because we didn't think he transplanted very well to studio. We put this idea forward, Bill Cotton came all the way up and saw Charlie in one of clubs, said he was great, etc., and that he would think about supporting the idea, and the next thing we knew he took him down to London and gave him a contract for a studio series, which killed our idea, and the studio series was not very successful and taken off, which we thought in our judgement it possibly would be.

Then Olivia Newton-John, you know Olivia, don't you?

Interviewer: Yes.

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Derek: World star. Well, we started off with Olivia and Nick Hunter really was responsible for starting Olivia in a programme of love songs. She was the most enchanting girl, sang beautifully, and the whole programme was sentimental and done around love songs with this sort of setting and so on. We'd just about got it going, Bill I remember said, "Who is this girl? She's not much of a singer, is she?" or words to that effect.

We proceeded with the series which after about five programmes showed signs of becoming really very strong. The next thing that happened she was pinched by London as the

singer for the next Eurovision Song Contest, and that's the last we saw of her. I think she got a bit disenchanted with television in London and went to Hollywood and they didn't say, "Who is this girl?"

I think the heads especially of this department felt that whatever the specialism of the artist was, it should be under their wing in London and that was the safest place. Of course, this is fair enough and no doubt true, as long as you go on denying somebody else the chance of doing something, they won't be able to do it. This is what they appeared to do, but it's a very great pity. I think things have altered a bit now from what I can see.

01:23:51

Interviewer: As a head of centre, one of the three heads in the regions, was it difficult for you to have to sell things through Pebble Mill?

Derek: It wasn't particularly difficult, it was a sheer waste of time. Pebble Mill and Bristol and Manchester had their roles to play, and they had the staff to administer, to exploit, to produce and direct their own programmes. In Manchester, we had a head of programming services and engineering, a manager of operations, a manager of programme services, manager of communications and engineering, head of personnel and finance, contracts and finance executive, house services, catering, transport, film unit, etc. Why duplicate everything in Birmingham when we've got all this on our own of capable people? There was no point of it in my view. I had opportunities to see the London controllers directly without in any way going behind Birmingham's back or behind Controller English Regions.

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After all, he was my boss and I didn't see any point in making life difficult for him. The fact that he had a job which was a no-job and that he was trying to make into a job was no reason for me to try and make life uncomfortable for him, but I didn't have to really because I had access to all the programme controllers. They made dates for me to go down to see them and offer programmes and so on which, again, indicates that Birmingham really didn't need to play a role except by interference.

01:25:48

Interviewer: By the same token, again, as a result of broadcasting in the '70s, we had an area television operation going, we had a local radio operation going, we had the network operation going, three destroyers going around and around the battleship with the admiral aboard. Did this make for better broadcasting?

Derek: I didn't think so. I must confess that maybe I didn't do my homework properly before I went up North or maybe by didn't tell me in sufficient detail, but I was surprised when I found the degree of separation there was between the production centre and regional radio and regional television and so on. Of course if you put someone there and call him a manager of regional this or that, he is going to act like a manager of regional this or that, if you give him autonomy he's going to behave autonomously. But the effect would be that he wanted to do his little programmes. He had a certain amount of access to the network for his programming. He certainly had his local programming.

These were programmes of different type, different degrees of difficulty requiring different degrees of skill. Inevitably if you're recruiting for the bottom end of a broadcasting system, the

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regional system where the grades are not as high and so on, you're going to get your beginners, which is good. They've got to begin somewhere, but unless there is some sort of tie-up with the bigger organisation, how do they get their promotion?

If the small organisation, the regional organisation, has a complex production it wants to undertake, how can it do it with a comparatively new, inexperienced producer? They should have available to them these skills and more experienced people. They should just be able to turn and look across the road literally and say, “Can we have your top drama producer? May we have your senior music producer? Can we have an experienced outside broadcast producer?”

There was none of this cross-fertilisation and I had felt from the very start that you can have a manager, after all, I just listed a whole lot of managers that were part of the network production centre. Why shouldn't there be one more called ‘Manager of Local Broadcasting’ or ‘Manager of Local Television’ who is responsible for his whole area of output, but who can call upon all the resources of the network production centre and his staff can work in the network production centre? You can flow across with all your skills, and I think that possibly happens now.

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01:29:07

Interviewer: Yes. In your time [Ray Collier 01:29:12] would have been the area television manager.

Derek: That’s right.

01:29:15

Interviewer: There seemed quite a bit of cross-fertilisation of ideas and talk and that between Ray and other producers, not so much

perhaps Allan Shaw, he would have been running Radio Manchester I think in your time, Derek, occasionally would meet together and he'd say that he'd met, had an artist in, a writer, an idea, would this do for network, could we sort of work the idea up.

But as you say, they were working in separate compartments.

Derek: Yes. Jolly good chap, Ray, I recruited Ray at the BBC virtually and I trained Ray myself. I gave him his first programmes, I showed him how to do them and we could have been very, very close. We were separated by the system. We could have achieved more between us if we'd been together, I think.

01:30:08

Interviewer: Which was perhaps do you think the fault of broadcasting in the '70s?

Derek: Yes.

01:30:13

Interviewer: It was cobbled together rather badly?

Derek: Yes.

01:30:18

Interviewer: it brought a different style of management. I'm thinking of your staff newsletters. You were responsible for them, you were telling us all working under you of the progress of the network centre's successes. Many such newsletters, I must add, beautifully illustrated by you, and as I recall some of them by

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your late son who worked with a film unit, a throwback perhaps to your own young days as an art student.

We all learn consciously or unconsciously by example. Would you like to mention, Derek, some whose advice, attitudes and expertise in broadcasting came readily to your attention during your career with the BBC?

Derek: Yes, when I joined the BBC I had lots of film experience but no television experience. I would say at the beginning practicality everyone I met had something to tell me. [Lobbi, Dillop Binnier 01:31:18] who was head of radio obs and television obs to begin with and subsequently of television obs then, he was the most marvellous man. The word gentleman springs readily to the tongue here. He put into television operational terms these attitudes that a gentleman should have in pursuing this at times rather ungentlemanly career, I suppose, how to behave, what you could get away with, what you shouldn't try, even down to not watching royalty eating.

That's just a detail, but how to behave, because we in outside broadcast impinged on the public. It's all right for people in studios to turn up unshaven with long hair in jeans, but if you're going out on an outside broadcast to meet the public generally in whatever sphere, you are the BBC's visible representatives, and Lobbi put a great deal in terms of morale and proper approach into all of us. I still remember what he taught me and have tried to pass it down to people who I have subsequently taught.

Another man who was really wonderful with me was Cecil McGivern. When I came in contact with him I was a very junior cog in outside broadcast and then I went up to the North where I was the only cog but still not a very big one. Cecil was the

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head, the boss, I don't know what they called them then, the controller of television, period. I mean it wasn't split up, he was managing director, controller one, two, three, the whole lot, there was just him.

Yet after I had done a programme, probably a live programme in those days, Cecil would have his secretary give me a buzz and ask me to come around to his office in Lime Grove down the corridor, about the third or fourth door on the right, and in you'd go and he'd say, "Have a drink, Derek," and then he'd say, "Have another one," and then he'd raise the subject of the programme and he'd say, "We're going to talk about this last programme of yours and your approach to your work."

He would then proceed to tell me what he liked of my work, what he didn't like of my work, how I should think of it, how I should script, what sort of tempo I should introduce if I'd taken something too fast and not enough colour, too staid, whatever, he would cover the whole range of one's thinking about a programme and send me off an enlightened and a better man.

He would do this not infrequently, I mean he wouldn't do it every other week but he might do it once a month or once every two months which, for a tiny cog, is something. I don't know if he did it with everyone or if he felt that I had just a little spark he'd liked or something, I don't know, but he was absolutely great.

The next person who comes to mind as somebody who influenced me at the time was Stewart Cross was the religious broadcast organiser in the North during my term there. He came in without any experience of television and in fact, once again it was my pleasure to teach a willing and talented pupil. Stewart would have made a first class music producer because he was very knowledgeable and skilled in music. He

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was a first class still photographer and he was also the most delightful man.

He used to go and visit anyone who was poorly, he came and visited me when I was poorly, and Mary when she was poorly. He used to run services in the buildings in the mornings that people could come to before their work, and he was destined for great things. I recollect he had done a church programme on a service on the Sunday and he came in to see me, I think it was the following Tuesday. He probably took the Monday off because he'd been working so hard on the Sunday.

He came in to see me on the Tuesday and I had one or two notes I'd made watching his programme, little points of criticism about his camera handling and so on. Sure enough, in he came and I brought up the little points in my mind to say to him, and he said, "Derek, I've come to say goodbye to you." I said, "What, Stewart? Goodbye? I mean your programme wasn't that bad." He said, "No, Derek, I've been made a bishop." So instead of gently criticising, I had to kiss his ring.

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01:36:51

Interviewer: We were fortunate because of course Stewart's son Jeremy came into the BBC in Manchester in the audio unit.

Derek: I didn't know that. Isn't that delightful? Jolly good.

01:37:04

Interviewer: Yes. Very sadly missed, Stewart. In March of 1977, Derek, you decide to leave the BBC.

Derek: Ah, yes. It was the time that we opened the new centre, wasn't it, New Broadcasting House in Oxford Road. Everyone was on

parade, we had been working there for a while but this was the official opening and the board of governors was there in force, the director general was there, and we were waiting for the Prime Minister, James Callahan, who was going to do the job of opening it.

I had said hello here and hello there and I had been on the go for quite a long time and I thought I'll just take a quiet little time in my office having a little think and settle myself down before the Prime Minister comes. So I was sitting there quietly and Charles Curran, our director general, came in and said the sort of nice things you'd expect that a director general would say at these times: well done, you've had a hard job, you've accomplished what we asked of you, and now you've got this nice new building and everything can go before you, you'll be able to sit back and enjoy yourself and so on.

He said, "Is there anything you want to tell me or ask me?" I said, "Yes, Charles, I'm thinking of taking an early retirement." At this, he said, "I think I will take that drink you offered me when I came in." Anyhow, we sat down and I said I wouldn't go for a year and the terms on which I went were very, very good, and the BBC in fact treated me remarkably well at the time. The reasons for me doing this were that I'd fear that'd I'd got increasingly concerned about my role with the controller of English regions rather stirring things up, and I wasn't enjoying my work the way I had when I first went in, yet on the other hand I had done what I had been asked to do which was to increase the activity, sense of purpose, in broadcasting in the region, the area, and here we were sitting in our new building and it seemed to me an appropriate time to go and to make a break.

01:39:59

Interviewer: What for you had been the best days of your BBC career?

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Derek: In the whole career? In a way it's easier for me to say what my worst ones were because most of them were marvellous days. Joining, to begin with, and learning it all, new techniques, that was absolutely splendid. The travelling, widely in Europe, around Russia and America and so on, all wonderful, refreshing and exciting. Being entrusted with going up to a region where there'd been no television before in the largest and most heavily populated region in the whole of the country and being asked to accept the responsibility of starting television. I mean what a marvellous challenge for someone that was.

Then coming back to London, realising some of my skills, polishing them up, getting on, going up the ladder. There was a point when one might have said that's it, I'll settle for what I've got, suddenly being asked to go back to this very region in the North again. That was marvellous. Once I'd settled in a bit there and the staff got used to me and knew I wouldn't bite them, the reaction, the warmth of feeling which came back to me from staff was really marvellous; the people who used to come in and talk about their problems and about their programmes and so on. There weren't all that many problems happening, mostly discussion about should I do this, should I do that, shall we try the other, and so on. This was all wonderful.

I agree with you, that was a sort of first phase in the North, but the next phase was when Duncan came up and we had, what did you call it, a golden era, was it?

01:42:08

Interviewer: A golden period for management.

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Derek: A golden period, because I think we'd probably had the best radio editor in England and the most delightful man in John Ittle who we haven't seen go up the ladder because he felt in achieving this post in Manchester he'd got already got to the top, which was very nice.

01:42:32

Interviewer: Two phrases of yours have gone into television usage, probably not only within the BBC but now outside the BBC. One is if there's something really big that you want to happen in television, you think this is all we need, this is going to be it. I shall say these two words to you and you tell me the story: cue train.

Derek: When we go straight into this and are waiting on the other one.

01:43:04

Interviewer: No, tell me about cue train first.

Derek: You may not know it, Trevor, there are two stories and I'm not certain which is the one that... This expression was certainly used on a Saturday Night Out that we did from the Royal Engineers railway training depot in the South of England not far from Aldershot. We had this idea, Peter Webber and myself who was my co-producer on Saturday Night Out, in searching for a subject which hadn't been done on British television to have a train crash. It was much easier than it might appear at first sight.

We got on to British Rail. Yes, they had an old engine that they were going to scrap. Yes, for the price of the coal and the drivers' wages, we could have it delivered anywhere we

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wanted and the Royal Engineers said, “Yes, you can bring it here. We’ve got four, five miles of track and we’ve furthermore got all the rolling stock from Bhowani Junction that we’ve wondered what to do with. We can smash it up, can’t we, and have some firewood.”

Who else had to say yes? That was about it, I think. We had Bob Beatty and we had Bob Danvers-Walker who were doing our commentary for us, so we were all set. We wanted a nice dark night, so a lot of floodlights. We had an embankment 30 or 40 foot high. This was mined so that it’d blow up. Just to make quite sure we had a spectacular crash, the rails had been bent up and sideways.

Their little railway station about three miles away was illuminated. The driver fixed the throttle and pulled the siren down, which he also fixed, and slowly, all on its own, on the cry of “Cue Train,” this railway engine, quite a big one with five or six carriages behind, started going slowly and then faster and faster into the night. Then we went out to our cameras in the country and there distantly with the light over the trees which are in silhouette in the foreground, appeared the engine on top of embankment streaming along, it was most eerie with this siren.

It got to the point where there was this explosion and where the track had been turned sideways and the engine leapt through the air, descended 40 foot, landed on its wheels and continued running in a swamp. Beat that.

01:46:10

Interviewer: Right, so we’ve cued train, and secondly, Mr Derek Burrell-Davis, “Hold that bear.”

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Derek: Oh, well, hold that bear is a very brief story, it is quite simply a remark I made to my stage manager but it was made as a troika, a Russian sledge with a wild man in it towed by two huge bears sped without cue into the circus ring. It was purely coincidental that my cameras were in fact turned on, but I was incensed because nothing was supposed to happen until I told it to happen. I said to my stage manager as this apparition appeared and sped towards him, "Hold that bear." It is to Peter Marsh's credit that the dear man took several paces forwards towards this bear before he realised what he was doing.

That has come to be taken as a sign that I expect anything, including miracles, to happen if I ask for them.

01:47:32

Interviewer: And why not? Appropriately enough, that brings to an end, for the present at least, this oral history of North Regional Broadcasting. Long maybe regional broadcasting continue within the BBC.

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