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File: **fi778c78 -- Interview_25 LR003243_-_John_Mapplebeck**
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START AUDIO

Interviewer: A history of North Regional broadcasting. Interview number 25, John Mapplebeck.

0:00:09 During the early existence of the BBC Light Programme, Tom Chalmers, the then controller, who was later to take over controllership of North Region, started a teenage magazine which was put into the hands of Lionel Gamlin. It was called The Younger Generation. And one contributor, in October 1954, was named John Mapplebeck. Was this, John, I wonder, your first introduction to broadcasting?

John Mapplebeck: Well, I was very impressed with you discovering this, because I actually had forgotten it.

I remember what happened. I lived in Leeds at the time, and there must have been some article in the Yorkshire Evening Post saying that they were on the lookout for contributors and to go and do some sort of audition.

I went to the old Mechanics Institute on Cookridge Lane and did this audition. [I don't know what the audition consisted of but after 0:01:00] they invited me to do a review. I went down to London to see the film version of Animal Farm and did a review of that, I remember.

It wasn't quite my first piece of broadcasting, because although I had failed the 11 plus and went to a secondary modern school we had begun a radio station. It wasn't my idea. It was a very good teacher who decided we should have a radio station in the school.

I was a total misfit at the school. In the sense that I suppose I always thought I should have been in grammar school, (Laughter) and I couldn't do any of the things that I was supposed to do in the secondary modern school, like metalwork or any of those sorts of things.

So we began this radio station. I actually now have forgotten the name of the man from BBC North Region who came to do the piece about our radio station, who did OBs.

0:01:58

Interviewer: Alan Dixon?

John Mapplebeck: It was Alan Dixon. And I used to remind Alan Dixon of this. That he had come to Chapeltown Secondary Modern School in Leeds and interviewed me, in the dim and distant past, about this radio station I was [running 0:02:09]. In a sense that predated the Younger Generation thing. I'm very impressed that you've dug up that. I had forgotten it.

Interviewer: Broadcasting in the blood at an even earlier age than I discovered.

John Mapplebeck: Yes. (Laughter)

0:02:22

Interviewer: But it wasn't until the beginning of 1961 that you got the job of a general programme producer with the BBC here in Newcastle?

John Mapplebeck: Well, again there was another slight run in to that, in that I applied for the job of a news trainee, I remember.

I had gone into journalism. I had got a job on the Yorkshire Evening News in Doncaster. And I was very unhappy there, because in a sense it predated The Sun really, only run as an evening paper, and the idea was that it would be totally different to the Yorkshire Evening Post, which was the respectable paper. And I was very unhappy there.

A job came up for a news trainee in London. I applied for this job, and when they told me what they were going to pay me it was less than I was actually getting in Doncaster. And although I hated the work in Doncaster I had just got married, and we felt we couldn't possibly afford to move to London on that sort of money. So they said, "Well, [will you be able to setup 0:03:23] in Manchester?" I said, "Yes," never expecting to hear any more about it.

I then moved from the Evening News to the Evening Post in Leeds, and I was very happy there. It was a very nice paper. I was the theatre critic, and that was great fun. I remember it being a very happy time.

Then quite suddenly, out of the blue, there came this dispute with the printers in 1957. The printers were on strike, and the NUJ said that journalists shouldn't work on a paper that was

being produced by black legs, and I was one of six people who supported the union.

Halfway through this rather painful dispute, as you can imagine, because I really liked the Evening Post and very reluctantly was on strike, this telegram arrived on our doorstep. It said, ‘Report to the Manchester Newsroom Monday morning’.

I thought, “Well, no problems now.” I don't know. The inference certainly was that I was going to start work. Because I had in mind [this session 0:04:37]. Would I work in Manchester?

I arrived and saw Jim Bell, and Jim Bell said to me, “I'm very impressed that you could...” And I had packed clothes for a week. Jim Bell said to me, “I'm very impressed that you could get away so quickly.” I said, “Well, it’s no problem, because actually on strike at the moment.” (Laughter)

Interviewer: What an honest man.

John Mapplebeck: There was a very long, embarrassed pause. He then made an excuse and left the room. He then came back and said, “Well, there isn’t an actual vacancy at the moment.” (Laughter)

Interviewer: “Would you like to go somewhere else?” (Laughter)

John Mapplebeck: Having arrived with a week’s things, prepared to work a week’s shift in Manchester, I got the next train back to Leeds. I was back in Leeds I think by three o’clock in the afternoon. But in a

sense I was saved from a fate worse than death, because that would have involved working in Newsroom.

And subsequently, after the dispute, I joined The Guardian in Manchester and worked in features there.

When I was on The Guardian Martin had come to Newcastle and done a piece about this remarkable wireless programme called Voice of the People. I read this, and I thought, “Well, that sounds [very much like 0:05:50] something I would like to do.”

I also had a curious sentimental feeling about the North East of England, in that my father had started work down the pit at Dean and Chapter pit, which is near Ferryhill.

He had then gone onto the railways, and one of the rules of the railways is that you only get promoted by moving on. So I was born in Middlesbrough and spent the wartime years in Hull. Then when he got made running foreman or whatever it was, I think in Neville Hill [Leeds 0:06:28], moved on to Leeds.

In a sense all my family and cultural links were with the North East, although I had scarcely known it, in that I think I was four years old when I left Middlesbrough.

So these two things seemed to combine. First of all, that by the sound of what Martin wrote Voice of the People was the sort of programme I would like to work on. This coupled with this other I think now rather silly, but at that time very potent, sentimental feeling about the region from which my father had come. So that’s why I applied.

The [news station 0:07:05] had this ad, ‘General programme producer required in Newcastle’. I rang up and found out it was to work on Voice of the People, and I applied to work for it.

In a sense, it seems to me that I didn't so much join the BBC as join Voice of the People really. Although I subsequently came to like and admire tremendously what BBC North Region stood for.

0:07:33

Interviewer: Well, Voice of the People, one of the radio programmes as far as the North East was concerned, started I believe by your Newcastle colleague, Richard Kelly, in 1957?

John Mapplebeck: Yes.

0:07:46

Interviewer: Looking at the Radio Times, your name first appears as from January 1963, when you did an edition about unemployment rates, and the very next day The North East in Print. Was [That Strand] and What The Newspapers Say your idea? The latter beginning in March 1963.

John Mapplebeck: I think that was. I sense I was still very much a part of print journalism. So what I brought to the programme I suppose was a tradition of print journalism which Dick didn't have.

Harold Williamson had slightly, in the sense that he had been on the [Chronicle 0:08:24], but Harold was very much our great voice reporter on tape. There were very few people really who had any tradition of print journalism. So I began…

Although, in many ways, I have to say that I think I learnt more about journalism in its real sense from Dick than I ever learnt

in all the years since I had first joined the West Riding weekly newspaper around 10 years before. Because Dick had this uncanny capacity…

Well, there are two things about Dick. First of all, it seems to me he was the first person who really discovered the true potential [of the miniature 0:08:58] tape recorder in terms of news reporting, until Voice.

I find it quite hard when one's looking back at the archive to actually see that until that era people did [actually appear In Town Tonight 0:09:12] with, "You will [stick to] scripts, and you will say this, and you will say that, [and you won't be able to say the other."

I think Dick saw those big old [Emmys] which we used to lug around the North East of England as a way of totally freeing us from the constraints of the studio, and I think Voice of the People was always the best.

It was rather emotive, and I don't think in the end people in Manchester liked it very much as a title, but it was an extremely accurate title, apart from its rather emotive overtones, but it really was a very good title. It described the thing very well.

So Dick first of all realised what you could do with a miniature tape recorder. By taking it outside you freed broadcasting forever from the specialist, from the guy who is going to come in and give you the set interview.

And you opened it up to some of those classic interviews that Dick and Harold between them did. I'm thinking in particular of the women who used the [washroom 0:10:11] on Scotswood Road and numerous interviews like that.

It was a curious combination, because Dick had the intellectual capacity to decide on a story. In passing, on that, I would like to say that Dick had a remarkable ability. He was [the most 0:10:35] superb news editor [I've ever] come across. He would find stories.

You see news programmes constantly reproducing themselves, constantly going after each other's headlines. Dick would find something in the letters column of the Shields Gazette which would make the lead in that edition of Voice, and which nobody else would have that particular thing, and it will go into the archive and be regarded as a remarkable piece of broadcasting. Dick had that capacity.

But Harold had this amazing… Which came out later in Children Talking of course. He had these amazing blue eyes, and he looked not intellectual and bespectacled like the rest of us, but he looked like the lad next door who has got on.

Every Mrs Canny Body in the North East would look at Harold and say, "Ooh, what a canny lad. He's just the sort of person I would like our lad to turn out to be." And they would open their hearts to him.

I suppose one of the first interviews I ever did with Harold I was lugging the big old heavy Emmy, and we went out and did these miners.

Again, it was the sort of story that only Dick could pick up. Some letters, maybe the Shields Gazette, anyway a County Durham weekly paper, in which somebody had written saying that there was no point having pit head baths because everybody knew that too much washing weakened your back. That the only people that could hew coal were those who didn't wash their backs all that often, because it weakened you.

I remember going with Harold to this aged miner's home and Harold doing a vox pop about this. All these old miners. About whether it was really true that if you wash your back too much it got weak. You couldn't hew coal as well.

And the responses he got were just incredibly moving. It went on from that to other things about working at the coal face, the realities of it, and I just was tremendously moved by it. Harold had this capacity for getting this, which always moved you as the witness to tears.

Then as he walked out I remember him saying to me, "Who is charging the mileage for this?" (Laughter)

Interviewer: Well, John, you've talked in very glowing terms about Richard Kelly and about Harold. Let's talk about you.

0:13:15 You didn't take a copyright on What The Newspapers Say, and you can't now do a Roy Plumley, can you? What a shame. (Laughter)

John Mapplebeck: No, I can't do that. (Laughter)

0:13:25

Interviewer: Well, let me talk about another series, where you were the one who was doing a lot of the interviewing, Voice of the North.

John Mapplebeck: Well, yes. Voice of the North became a sort of version of Voice, because people really objected to Voice of the People as a title. So increasingly I found myself doing…

I think Dick had a sabbatical, so I tended to take over the programme slightly. In a sense I think already we were getting [quite hard outside 0:13:54]. I was doing rather more interviews than I had done before.

I think what I would say about Voice of the North was that it was a slightly smudged carbon copy of Voice of the People.

Then I think there was a spell when I went to Manchester for the first time, and of course they had a Voice of the North programme and I worked on that.

That brought me into contact for the first time with, in a sense… Apart from when I was appointed by Graham, but in a sense it brought me into contact with the North Region proper.

You've said that I've been generous to Dick, but Dick has a lot of enemies and fights a lot of battles. The difficulty is that you've got to sign up as a foot soldier on his side, totally and absolutely. And this tended to mean that you were against everything that Manchester stood for, because Dick on the whole had not had a very good deal out of Manchester really.

So when I went to Manchester to do Voice of the North I must say that we… I'm totally and absolutely in favour of public service broadcasting, but I remember I was rather shocked by how much time we actually had.

In a sense it seemed to me that we had long spells in the summer when we would go across and do Voice of [Cumbria 0:15:22] twice a week, and there would be three of us to do it and two freelance reporters.

I had been used on The Guardian to doing… Maybe you would do two news stories a day and you would go and do the [Lowry] Theatre at night. It seemed to me that we weren't working actually terribly hard. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Yes, of course. All in the days before BBC Local Radio, yes. (Laughter)

John Mapplebeck: Long before local radio. I think the pendulum has gone rather too much the other way, but at that time I was quite struck by it.

Interviewer: Lunches tended to be rather long at times, as I recall.

John Mapplebeck: Lunch times were long, yes. (Laughter)

0:15:57

Interviewer: Now I think I first remember meeting you when… It was in 1964, and Colin Shaw, as our assistant head of programmes under Graham Miller as head of programmes, Colin's idea for our Sunday morning talks programme for the whole of the region.

And you launched yourself, I think, into this informative and indeed entertaining series. It was entitled Talk About. And you had a very catching title for your first subject. As far as Radio Times tells me it was Ready, Steady, Stop.

John Mapplebeck: Oh, yes. Ready, Steady, Stop with David Bean. Yes, again I had forgotten that. Ready, Steady, Stop was…

I was terribly idealistic at that time, and one of the things that struck me a lot was an attempt to discriminate in terms of pop

culture. It was rather like F.R. Leavis really, in the sense it really made an attempt to make…

It sounds very old-fashioned now. Very Workers Educational Association. Although we did it with more fun that, because David did it, but the attempt was [to be quite 0:17:15]…

Pop was just exploding then. The Stones had just arrived. The Beatles were already established. So it was an attempt to take a rather more critical look at pop music. To talk about its lyrics in rather a fun way, but nevertheless in a very critical way.

I think the problem really was that the audience for Talk About might have appreciated one being a bit rude about pop music, but the people, once again, for whom it was really intended weren't listening to BBC North Region's Talk About, unfortunately. They were listening to the real thing.

I was struck by hearing some of the trailers for Radio 5 recently, because I think they're making the same mistake that I made back in the 1960s actually. (Laughter)

Interviewer: History does have a habit of repeating itself, I believe, yes.

0:18:14 You did quite a lot of interviews yourself.

John Mapplebeck: Yes, I've always enjoyed that. In the sense that…

Again, one of the things was, I suppose, learning from Harold Williamson. The great thing about Harold was he realised that tape was really quite cheap and he listened. How many times do you hear news reporters actually listen?

Then when people paused Harold would never jump in with the next question. He would let the tape go until the person,

almost out of embarrassment, would say what he really meant to say. And editing those tapes of Harold, which one did in those days, one of the chores of working on Voice…

Dick didn't ever edit tapes, and we never edited them physically. It was a gentleman's job in those days. You had Norman or Ken Spelman to edit the tapes.

Interviewer: From the audio unit. Studio managers, as they then were, yes.

John Mapplebeck: That's right. But you at least saw what Harold's technique was, and how good it was, and how perfectly suited it was to the tape recorder. So in some ways I was basically following the example that Harold had shown me really.

0:19:36

Interviewer: Well, I'm going to jump in on this pause, John. I note some of those you interviewed. I see Len Doherty on problems of being a working class writer. Jennie Lee on government and the arts. Arnold Wesker. And a name that always many of us associate with you, that of Melvin Bragg, on a new novel he had just published.

John Mapplebeck: Yes. My relationship with Melvin goes back a long way, in the sense that it goes back to the BBC's general trainee scheme, which [I don't know whether it 0:20:11] works in a slightly different way [now], but what used to happen in those days was that the graduate trainees would be given a spell out of London.

And [some had got the] nous to see that Dick Kelly was something of a guru, and so almost all of them arrived in Newcastle for a spell, which is where I first met Melvin.

My abiding memory of him is singing Jailhouse Rock on the table of the Rockliffe Arms in Whitley Bay shortly after we arrived. It was a superb version of it, and my son told me that he did it on some television chat show the other week.

But he was very bright, very original, and really very nice indeed. He liked Voice, and he took to it very well.

In a sense he was responsible for my moving to television, so shall I move on to that now and talk about that?

Interviewer: Yes.

John Mapplebeck: Well, what happened was-

0:21:16

Interviewer: And New Release?

John Mapplebeck: And New Release, yes.

What happened was that… I think it must have been during the spell that Dick was on his sabbatical. Tonight, as it then was, when we were all shocked that unemployment had reached nearly a million, came up to Chester-Le-Street, did an interview, and then got some boys to walk over the slag heaps picking up coal.

This caused a tremendous scandal, because it was so obviously staged, and of course it meant that the local programme makers suffered tremendously.

Now the director of this piece was Derek [Amor 0:22:01], and I picked up the telephone and told Derek Amor what I thought of him for doing this and had a blazing row with him.

A couple of months before that I had realised that I ought to get some television experience, and I had gone down to a board in London for a producer on Tonight.

He explained to me, “You can’t leap straight from being a radio producer to being a television producer,” and I need an attachment. And as John [Decker 0:22:32] was already on attachment I would have to wait for my attachment until he left.

All this was explained by Alasdair Milne, who phoned me and said how well I had done at the board, and he much he wanted me, but I would have to wait until John Decker had done his attachment.

In the meantime of course Baverstock had decamped, having taken the huff at not being appointed controller something or other. Controller [of one 0:22:59] I think it was. And out of sympathy Milne went with him.

So the editor of Tonight then became vacant and went to the man that I had just bollocked for staging this thing, with whom I was then going to have an attachment. (Laughter)

So I rang Melvin, who had then become editor of New Release, and said, “Look, I'm in some difficulty here. I've got an attachment on television. Do you think you could probably push me on to New Release rather than Tonight?”

And I don’t know what happened. Various wheels were turned, and I ended up having my attachment with New Release.

Which really was a very good thing, because it certainly taught me about filmmaking.

I think in a sense if I had gone to Tonight I would have been doing the usual journalistic chores of ringing people up, fixing stories. And if I had been shooting stories it would have been shot in a very different way.

By going to an arts magazine, which in those days had the most incredible luxury, because I think it was when BBC2 had just started, and was seen in London only, but had a very large budget, you could virtually do what you wanted and spend as much money as you wanted. Often [to a 0:24:18] fault of course. But it gave one the chance really to cut one's teeth tremendously on filmmaking. So that was a good thing.

0:24:29

Interviewer: Tell me about some of those early films you did on New Release. Can you remember?

John Mapplebeck: Well, yes. I remember the first one I did, which was… Inevitably one goes back to the stories one knows, the regional stories, and so I decided to do something on the Morden Tower, which was a poetry reading room in Newcastle which had been begun by Tom Pickard.

But there was a second story, which was that Basil Bunting, this long forgotten poet, a friend of Ezra Pound, had been lapsing in obscurity, [a down table sub for 0:25:10] [The Journal].

Tom Pickard had discovered that this was the Basil Bunting, the poet that Ezra Pound had called the greatest of his

contemporaries, and had gone and picked him out, and then together they had formed the Morden Tower reading room, which is a poetry reading room on the old city walls of Newcastle.

This seemed a good story for New Release, and certainly a good story for me to start with, as I knew the area.

I remember it was November, and Tyneside in November is very grey and very dark. I had carefully worked out, [at great labour 0:25:52], an opening sequence, the way you do. [Really it's] on paper. 'So and so walks to here', etc.

The cameraman was a man called [Feroze Sarosh], who had flown into Newcastle from Calcutta, a freelance.

When we reported for the shoot the first day I said, "Well, this is the shot I want. I want him walking down the street. He puts this letter through this empty letterbox. You cut to the thing coming through and you see it's not really a letterbox at all. It's just part of the city walls. Then we pan out, and [we mix through to there's actually a 0:26:32] poetry reading going on there."

He said, "Yes, very good, but we can't film today." I said, "What do you mean you can't film today?" He said, "It's too dark." So I looked around, and it was like Tyneside in November. I said, "You really can't film?" He said, "No, it's too dark to film today." So I said, "Okay. Well, we will go back to our hotels and see what it's like tomorrow."

By this time I'm getting quite desperate. There's a whole day's filming gone. Even though New Release was very generous with their budgets.

The second day was just like another Tyneside November day.

I had sort of hit up a friendship, as I always seem to do with film crews, with the sparks. (Laughter) So I was asking the sparks for information, like you do. “What’s happening now? What do we do next?” Things like that. In a sense because it felt embarrassing to have to ask the cameraman, because it would reveal how ignorant you are.

Anyway, so we turned up the second day and Feroze said, “No, it is too dark. We can’t film today.” I was like, “I'm awfully sorry, Feroze. We’ve wasted one day’s filming. We’re going to have to film today. It’s not going to get lighter on Tyneside in November, I assure you. This is what it’s like. It’s not like Calcutta.”

He then put the first board on, which was shot one, take one, director J Mapplebeck, and then underneath it said, ‘SUP’. [I knew about 1, 1 0:27:58], and I could follow J Mapplebeck, Director, so I turned to my friend the spark and I said, “What’s SUP?” He says, “Shot under bloody protest.” (Laughter) The first [job] I ever directed was actually shot under protest. (Laughter)

Interviewer: He couldn’t stop down anymore, no.

John Mapplebeck: No.

0:28:17

Interviewer: Had you [Colour Trend] then? Because that was a great asset, wasn’t it, to us in filming?

John Mapplebeck: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: Those little portable sets, which seemed to give a…

John Mapplebeck: That's right. [Crosstalk].

Interviewer: But you can't light the whole of Tyneside with Colour Trend, can you?

John Mapplebeck: No, you cannot.

Interviewer: Well, you couldn't in those days.

John Mapplebeck: Again, I tend to be mining the same sort of seam of provincial life, because I've then followed that with a profile of Peter Terson at Stoke, [which was at 0:28:38] Stoke. At that time Peter had not done Zigger Zagger. He was just a writer in residence at Victoria Theatre.

I suppose I first hit on this curious little London susceptibility. In the sense that the obvious question for Peter was, "Look, why are you messing around being a writer in residence at Stoke, to this limited audience, when you could be writing a Play for Today?" And Peter launched into this diatribe against Television Centre and all its works. (Laughter)

I was naïve enough to assume that because you asked somebody a question like that it was fairly important to keep

their answer in, and I kept the answer in, this attack on Television Centre and all its works.

And I was told in no uncertain terms, I think by [Attenborough 0:29:28], that this was a terrible thing to have done and that the BBC didn't really want its employees to go around shooting it in the foot.

I think to some extent that certainly blotted my comic book as far as arts features were concerned in London. I mean that first spell I had down there.

0:29:47

Interviewer: You were also involved with something which was at the time I think, John, unheard of. A non-London critical review, which went out late on Saturday nights on BBC1.

John Mapplebeck: Yes.

Interviewer: Now Graham Miller was amazed, he tells me, that the channel controller, it was then Paul Fox, should accept a non-metropolitan series entitled Somewhere Up There, but he did.

John Mapplebeck: Yes. Well, I suspect that the reason he did was that…

You can put this in the right order, but when I finished arts features it had been suggested the point of a television attachment was to create a television producer post in Newcastle, which is what I wanted. Still with this tremendous sentimental view about the North East of England. And Colin Shaw said, "Well, it hasn't come up, but we would like you to

take over Look North in Manchester." So that really came before that.

And I will talk in a minute, if I may, about that spell doing Look North in Manchester.

Then of course I began the Nairns off the back of Look North in Manchester. So to some extent Paul Fox trusted me because of Nairn.

The other reason I suspect he trusted me was he thought that [Wheldon 0:31:03] would never see anything wrong in Melvin, and the reason I suspect…

Two things I think went for it. Fox was, as you know, very close to Wheldon, liked him enormously, and felt that he couldn't fail if he put Wheldon's protégé doing a programme from Manchester with me, who had given him a successful Nairn series.

In fact, it turned out to be an absolutely disastrous combination. (Laughter) For all sorts of reasons it didn't work, and it lasted I think about four/five weeks.

It's quite a painful part of my own life, looking back on it. [Not from programme terms 0:31:49]. Because my own father was dying of cancer at the time.

I got to the stage where I could patently see that it was just another television programme, and compared to the reality of my own father's death it hardly mattered very much. That's not to say that I didn't try very hard to make it work, and there were some very good things in it.

Again, one of the ironies that dog you throughout the BBC is that the person who was sent up to 'rescue' it was Derek [Amor 0:32:18] ___ [wish to see]. The Derek Amor who I had slagged off for doing the Chester-Le-Street fakes.

He came up after two weeks and more or less saw the last three editions out. Not that we changed them very much, because they're more or less already pre-set, but it lasted five weeks at the outside, I think.

0:32:40

Interviewer: There was an accusation, of course, London's accusation, that the programme was very left-wing bias.

John Mapplebeck: Yes. I'm quite happy to talk about that. My view about broadcasts is that they ought to be outside the apparatus of power. And it seems to me that whoever is wielding that power you should approach them with the same amount of scepticism. Whether it's a Labour council in County Durham, or whether it's a Conservative government, or what it is, you should be duly and properly sceptical about it.

I think the item in the first edition, which I thought was quite superb, and which caused…

There are programmes I've done which I know were bummers right from square one. That I could see didn't work properly in the first edition. But the actual item that caused the most trouble was in fact I thought far from being a bummer, which was…

At that time the Pilkington glass workers were on strike. And it was a curious time, when the official union, the GMB, or General Municipal Workers it was then, wouldn't recognise the strike. And so in many ways there was more venom directed towards the union than there was towards Pilkington.

We persuaded the then general secretary or chairman of the [G&M 0:34:09], Lord Cooper, to come in the studio and face the Pilkington workers live. He told us in advance that if questioning got to a stage he didn't like he would walk out. So I had warned the cameraman that we could well have a walk out.

Now the interviewer was Mike Nally, and I remember hearing the talkback. Because Mike's father had been a Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent. His grandfather had been Lord Mayor of Manchester. And in a sense Cooper saw him as part of the old Labour Party establishment.

And I remember hearing on talkback Cooper say, "Look, I'm so glad you're doing this, Mike, because I knew your father, and of course your granddad was a great friend of mine as well. And I'm really pleased that somebody like you is going to do the interview." Well, it didn't stop Mike. [As usual 0:35:05], Mike really went for him.

The workers then came in, because it was the first time they had a chance to talk to their union, to the people that represented them and who they felt weren't representing them very well. And as he had threatened, and as we prepared for, Cooper walked out. And we had the cameras following him out.

I thought that was a remarkable piece of live television, but in fact it went down like a sort of lead balloon. I think there was some joke of Bill Tidy's about [Arabs 0:35:39] which also didn't go down very well. So we were in trouble after the first edition.

We had two bad performers that Melvin insisted on bringing. One was Cate Haste, [who became his 0:35:53] wife, and the other was Sarah Boston. They had not done television before.

They were no good. Basically, if I had had any sense, I would have said, “Not on your nelly,” straight away.

Again, I think we all knew that the reason we had actually got the programme on was because of the fact that Fox thought that the sun shone out of Melvin. Or, more importantly, that Wheldon did, and that if Melvin wanted it then Melvin had to have it.

I've worked with Melvin subsequently, and that tended to be the way he is when he presents programmes. But one ought to have been a bit more tough minded about it.

As I say, on that particular issue of left-wing bias I would go back to my general view, [that was my other 0:36:38] example, of the fact that we were outside the apparatus of power asking hard questions, hopefully getting good answers.

And if we were being biased, if [you think we were] being biased, we were being biased ‘against’ the trade union. Not against anybody else. Only against the trade union. On that particular [incident 0:37:03] I mean.

But this whole thing of left-wing bias goes back again to the Look North period before that. Because when I took over Look North I think it was [John] ___ and Colin Shaw that asked me.

And I said to them, “I will take over the programme, but I'm not going to worry about inserts for Alexandra Palace,” as it then was, ___[0:37:28] as it is now. “Somebody else can do that. I will edit you a magazine programme. I will make a magazine programme for the North of England. That’s what I will do. That’s the brief I will work to.”

That was agreed. I think they agreed because, frankly, Look North was, like Hartlepool, in the Fourth Division. The only

place was up really. So it was a good thing to take over, because the only way to go was up.

But this immediately ran me into a number of conflicts, the principle one with Harold Webb, who was the northern industrial correspondent.

At that time, once again, it was a strike story. The dockers in Liverpool were divided between those who were in the Transport and General Workers Union and those who were in the ‘blue union’, the stevedores.

Now the stevedores had a major strike that was crippling the Port of Liverpool, and I asked Harold to go and do an interview for me. He said, “I'm awfully sorry. I don’t talk to unofficial strikers, because it affects my relationship with the TUC.”

One talks about bias, but here’s an industrial correspondent actually saying that that’s the way he saw his job. I was pretty startled really. So I said, “Well, alright, Harold. I'm sure you don’t mind, but I will get somebody else to do it.”

Of course we were then using Mike Nally for the harder news stories, so Mike went. And he happened to have hit the time when it was a very big story. I don't know. Maybe a major ship hadn’t got in that day and it was suddenly a big national story. So the nine o’clock news used not Harold Webb but Mike Nally talking to these striking stevedores. And Harold wasn’t suited with this at all.

In those days Look North covered the whole of the region, of course, from the North Sea right across to the Irish Sea, and at that time there were these terrible fatalities, with all these whole trawlers going down.

I think Mike must have done the story on the Friday, and on the Monday the major story was yet another whole trawler had gone down off Iceland.

I remember being in the gallery fixing up a phone call to the Icelandic coastguards, [trying to get it recorded 0:40:04], when Harold came in and said he had now done the definitive story on the dock strike and we had to use it.

This all hit on a very uneasy relationship, because although Colin and John had given me a free hand they had omitted to tell Tom German that they had given me a free hand, so Tom was still nominally regional news editor, and Tom had commissioned him to do this.

I said, “Look, Harold. There’s yet another trawler gone down in the North Sea. That’s my main story today. I have no room for your story, and I'm not going to use it.”

Then Harold sent a memo to news in London saying that I was some sort of Maoist or Trotskyist who had infiltrated the BBC. I suppose, to some extent, most of my problems with arguments about being left or left-wing biased almost certainly spring, looking back on it, from Harold Webb’s intervention. I suspect very strongly that that was the time when I got labelled really.

0:41:20

Interviewer: I'm raising this because at the time of the Somewhere Up There ‘row’ with Television Centre we were doing It’s Saturday. We’ve talked about Talk About. Do you remember that radio magazine, It’s Saturday?

John Mapplebeck: Yes, I remember it very well actually. It was a very good programme.

0:41:35

Interviewer: Yes. Well, at that time I, unfortunately for me, was the acting network editor, and on one It's Saturday it happened to be the Tory Party Conference. Ian Trethowan, our then managing director of radio, was listening in his Blackpool hotel to It's Saturday, as a change from his London based programme, whatever they did.

0:42:00 London would not have done a sort of It's Saturday programme, would they?

John Mapplebeck: No, they wouldn't.

Interviewer: Anyway, he was listening to the programme, and he heard Bill Grundy refer to Mr Heath, our then prime minister. He talked about him at the Blackpool bars. He said, "Divested of his suit, Mr Heath looks just like any other pot-bellied Englishman."

Well, this made our managing director choke on his breakfast time flakes. He immediately rang up the BBC in Manchester, who said, "Ah, well, yes. We will put you on to the network editor."

So I had a very irate managing director on to me, and I made the great mistake, John. I said to him, "Will you listen to the edition we did sometime ago on the Labour Party Conference? Perhaps you will feel/hear there is some balance."

So Ian, being a very reasonable man, listened, and he came back to me and said, “That is even worse. You will fire the producer.” Well, the producer at the time was freelance. Graham of course was acting head of centre.

I said, “I'm not happy about the programme, and I've already given instructions that I want in future certainly to see the lyrics of the songs that Alex Glasgow was writing.” Quite amusing, but that particular Saturday we had one entitled Bombs For Africa.

In the end it got to the point, and this does happen unfortunately at the BBC, we let the programme run on, and we didn’t take a firm enough hand.

I told Alec, “In future I would be looking at the material, exercising editorial control,” and he said, “I will not put up with censorship.” I said, “Well, perhaps I'm an old-fashioned Tory, but I do believe that if an editor is in that position then he is entitled to do some editing.”

0:43:49 That didn’t help me in my career. Did Somewhere Up There, do you think, affect yours? You went on to lovely things after.

John Mapplebeck: Well, I don’t know really. I really do think that the Webb incident probably did me more harm than Somewhere Up There, because I think that was quite calculated and on record. Yes, I suppose it did. I know by that time I had already decided…

A curious thing happened, if you remember. It was when Broadcasting in the Seventies came out and we lost two producer posts in Manchester.

Again, this curious sentimental view of mine about the North East. I think somebody said I'm the only person who volunteered to work in regional television. So I had already volunteered to work in Newcastle, because I really wanted to do that anyway.

The only point of going to television experience was because they were going to create a television producer post in Newcastle. Then when Broadcasting in the Seventies came out there was going to be a post, and I had already said I would go for it.

So Somewhere Up There happened as I was in the process of moving back to Newcastle. I had already handed over the Nairn series to Barry, and so Somewhere Up There didn't worry me as much as perhaps it ought to have done. I was moving on. I was doing something different.

In a sense, I suppose I was saying, "A plague on your houses," both Manchester and London. "I will go to Newcastle and we will do what I think is real television there."

0:45:29

Interviewer: Well, in 1967 you made a film for viewers in the North of England, The Glory That Was Bradford. That was I think the first, was it, with Ian Nairn? And this started-

John Mapplebeck: Bradford was John Betjeman actually. And that was a curious attempt to make him into… Well, to try and spread the Nairn method. Not as happy a working relationship [as there was with 0:45:52] Ian. [The working relationship] with Ian was quite remarkable. He was very prickly. Very difficult.

Stanley Williamson I think had tried to work with him before I did. It was a pretty obvious idea really. Because Ian had come out with these anti-ugly pamphlets about the look of urban Britain sometime around about the early '60s. And he had a column in the Observer, which was immensely readable.

It was pretty obvious that he would make a very good television series, even though he was personally not at all the sort of person you would think of as a television presenter. He was large, ungainly. Never could remember his lines. Got drunk most days by about two o'clock in the afternoon, so all takes had to be in the can before opening time. He wasn't easy to work with. But he was superb. What he had to say was marvellous.

With John Betjeman, John had done a lot more television, and he was much more mannered and knew it all much more. I never felt quite the same sort of agreeable feeling I had with Ian, which was quite remarkable.

Interviewer: Well you did Nairn at Large. You did Nairn's Europe.

John Mapplebeck: That's right. We did. It's a great part of my education. Ian was a sort of education for me really. Certainly Nairn's Europe was. This had all begun from Nairn's North, as a sort of subplot to Look North.

It began in the most incredibly appalling circumstances. The idea was that Ian would go and look at various Northern towns. We would extend Look North. We would have his film report about what was wrong with them, and we would get some local worthies in to answer the criticisms that he had made.

I remember the first one was Wigan. Gerald Harrison was supposed to chair this discussion. Ian's report was to go on first.

I was standing in the gallery, and I suddenly saw this pile of film beginning to mount up at my feet, and I thought, "That can't be our film." Because I looked on the sprocket gate of the telecine machine and it was still there. But of course it was delayed, and it indeed was our film. Somebody hadn't clipped the reel on properly and the reel was all over the floor.

We had promises that it would be got on and we would be able to get the film back.

0:48:49

Interviewer: That night? (Laughter)

John Mapplebeck: That night. Poor Gerald. (Laughter) I was on talkback to Gerald, and I said, "Look, they say they will get it back, so just keep it going. Talk a bit about Wigan, the problems they've got and so on."

I think with about five minutes to go I can still remember Gerald Harrison saying, "Well, what do you think you would have thought of Mr Nairn's views if you had seen them?"

It was indeed the most unpromising start to a series. (Laughter)

0:49:15

Interviewer: You mentioned when I was talking to you before Alastair Hetherington's book on regional broadcasting.

John Mapplebeck: Well, news, or at least a very narrow definition of it, increasingly became London's only concept of non-metropolitan broadcasting. This led to the destruction of feature broadcasting out of London, and in radio the introduction of local radio, and in television a progressive diversion of resources towards newsrooms. I do believe that's true.

0:49:45

Interviewer: Well, the features certainly stopped. I think it stopped for Stanley Williamson to a great degree. Don Howarth carried on doing his things. And you carried on doing yours. With great difficulty or…?

John Mapplebeck: With some difficulty. I think we should split it between two things. First of all, the advent of local radio, and then the emphasis on news.

The [other thing on 0:50:07] local radio I thought was curious, really BBC-ish, in the sense that the argument for it was always that it was going to give more power to the provinces. It would give more proper broadcasting in a way that places like Liverpool, Stoke, all those areas hadn't known before.

Now I think that on the surface this seemed a very attractive argument. I think it was blatantly obvious that regions which had been basically created, and not because of any sort of social or cultural identity but simply because they happened to fit the broadcasting patterns of transmitters, didn't work. But to go from that to a local radio concept was disastrous.

It seems to me that Gillard went to America, went to a continent, and came back and started preaching the wonders of local radio. Local radio works a lot in a continent. It works a lot where there is almost no network radio.

The UK is a small island. There was a very good network radio service. It seemed to me at the time extremely foolish to weaken those.

What I could see, developing the system, would have been to have given the regions more power and for the regional power to have included the opting-out facility for the various localities within that.

I could imagine a 24-hour service, for example, for the North East of England. In which at key points, and whenever they wanted to, because Middlesbrough had an important home game, or because Sunderland had an important fixture, or whatever, that those areas, in terms of news bulletins and in terms of events, would be free to opt out or really have a 24-hour service.

It seems to me that with local radio you don't have a 24-hour service at all. Most of the time, it seems to me, whenever I want to listen to it [it doesn't seem to be on 0:52:14].

But a much more crucial thing I think was that it weakened provincial life. It seems to me that because it was conceived in such a narrow way, and because it was conceived on such incredibly low budgeting and incredibly low standards, local radio interviews go on and on and on. They go on and on and on, because there's nothing else to put on and on and on. So all standards slipped.

So the ability of a man like Alfred Bradley in Leeds to become a sort of catalyst for talent, so that talented people, the sort of people that wrote for Northern Drift for example, could feel that

they could remain and live in provincial England, and get due recognition without going to London, having different values to London, that went.

Went totally, because there just wasn't the money there anymore. In the way that regional radio used to have money to encourage writers to try out scripts, to take a chance on things. All that was lost.

I think anyway the basic point of Gillard's was totally fallacious and should have been seen for what it was. The UK is a small island. It's not [without 0:53:33] the wit of man to divide it up in such a way that local communities get a good service. But on the other hand they also have a sustaining service, which has the money to insist on high standards and can pay people properly for appearing on it. That's my basic case against local radio.

We then come on to news, which in a sense springs from that, because again all the justifications of local radio I think really is it gives newsrooms in London instant access to news stories which might break all over the country.

In a sense I think that's always been the view of news. That news magazines, the Look Norths of this world, are a luxury which you're allowed to have, again on very limited budgets and resources, in return for being able to provide them with pictures when the Tyne Bridge falls down or whatever.

The only regional news editor I can remember who has ever been disciplined or reprimanded was the news editor in Bristol. He wasn't reprimanded or disciplined for running a bad Points West. He was reprimanded and disciplined because he didn't get pictures of the St Paul's riots to Television Centre when Television Centre wanted them.

Now that may or may not be a sacking offence, but I would have thought it was rather more important to provide the people of Bristol with a proper evening news magazine programme than that national news should have pictures, when and how they want them, at the click of a finger.

Yes, it's important to provide a proper news service. There are ways in which you can do that by delegating jobs. As I think I tried to do in Manchester, when I took over the magazine programme and left it to somebody else to provide London with the pictures they wanted.

That's fine. You can do both. But what they can't do is expect that one should have parity over the other. And when it comes to the crunch you know very well what the true parity is, and the true parity is always how many inserts you got onto national news.

You see regional news editors boasting of this. Their justification is that they got that many stories on national news. They got this on national news. They got that on national news.

The fact that from 6:00pm or 6:30pm on BBC1 at night there was the most appallingly awful magazine programme never worried anybody. It worried Colin Shaw, and it worried [a number of people in North Region 0:56:14], but it certainly never worried London. You could have gone on running that awful programme as long as you wanted, just so long as you provided them with the pictures they wanted when they wanted them.

I think the other point about news, before I finish it, is that news essentially is reactive. It's not creative. The agenda for news coverage is decided elsewhere.

When I was saying how glad I was not to have joined a newsroom it's basically because I think the concept that the BBC has of newsrooms, and how news is organised, has always seemed to me pretty disastrous.

In that first of all they employ people, paying quite a lot of money, who are basically merely dictating stories that other people get. They don't even have the creativity of a sub-editor, basically a sub-editor's job in print journalism.

There's not even the creativity that a sub-editor would have, of layout or [topography 0:57:13], because they don't have the knowledge of that, and so therefore they're very much in the hands of the directors and of the electronic engineers.

They've learnt that talking heads are wrong, so we must have programmes that are full of moving pictures. So moving pictures become little more than visual wallpaper. Moving pictures that mean absolutely nothing.

Conceived of by journalists who have this inbuilt guilt complex that they know nothing about the way the medium works, but have cottoned on to the fact that it's about moving pictures and that that's about all they can echo.

So I think that the whole BBC approach to news has always been wrong. That news for a lot of people in BBC newsrooms only exists when it's already appeared in print somewhere else.

You try and tell a BBC news journalist that you've got a story for him and his first words will be, "Where has it appeared? I haven't seen that. What papers is it in?" The idea of the old journalist's job, which to create news, to pick up things which are news before somebody else gets them, rarely occurs to them.

And I wish I could say that I thought that the [Birt 0:58:31] revolution will improve these things. I don't think it will. I think the Birt revolution actually has made it worse.

0:58:38

Interviewer: You've been involved with current affairs programmes also, with Watch This Space, BBC1 North East, Coast to Coast, and then another name which we always associate with you, that of Eric Robson.

John Mapplebeck: Yes. [Crosstalk].

0:58:51

Interviewer: Did you start the allotment series?

John Mapplebeck: It was my idea, yes. Curiously, we're trying to revive it now for Channel 4, but it's become a victim of a new news obsession. But I felt we needed an alternative gardening programme and The Allotment Show seemed to be the thing. But all I did was have the idea. Other people executed it and did it very well. Yes, to that extent, because I was…

You said that Newcastle is a graveyard. That once you get in Newcastle you don't want to go anywhere else. One of the nice things about Newcastle is that you are…

I think if I have any criticism of Manchester as a broadcasting centre, and it is my only criticism, because I look back with great affection and pleasure on the people I worked with there, it struck me that they were probably…

And that goes probably for most of the network production centres. They were far too obsessed with what London was doing. Always looking over their shoulder to see what the latest style was, what was in. And by the time they had done that and produced it in programmes it was out. I often feel now..

I will watch at home, and I will say to Pat, “You watch. It will be a network production, regional credit.” Not because in itself it’s a bad programme, but because it is just slightly old-fashioned.

What attracted me about Newcastle always was that we didn’t need to do that. We didn’t look over our shoulders. We did what we thought was important.

So that, for example, it was possible to say, “Well, look. Here we are in a region surrounded by allotment growers. People for whom the Pebble Mill gardening programme is totally upmarket, not their sort of scene at all. What they want is a programme about allotments called The Allotment Show.”

I said, “It must include things like pigeons and rabbits, and it must include the whole cooperative ethic of allotments. And that’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to do an allotment show.”

Rather in the way that Voice of the People was like that. It always seemed to me that too often what’s gone wrong with regional broadcasting is it’s tried to, as I say, be a smudged carbon copy of London originals. When in fact the nicest thing about being 80 miles further north, and slightly off the map, meant that one got away with a lot of stuff that…

Perhaps going back to your experience with It’s Saturday. One would probably have got away with that in Newcastle. Maybe it was more difficult to get away with in Manchester.

Yes, I think when I became editor of features here I very much felt that. And of course it gave us a remarkable strike rate as far as BBC2 repeats were concerned, because we were offering stuff that just wasn't the sort of thing that they were getting from anywhere else.

I know when we had a 10:15 slot on BBC1 we began Coast to Coast, and again that was a slight copy of Melvin's South Bank Show type presentation. So that even when we had a film..

One of the problems with the regional feature programmes was…

Everybody knew Look North, because Mike Neville is, I think, the greatest television magazine presenter in this country and has been for the last 20 years. The fact that he hasn't made it into network and London says a lot about their prejudices. But Look North was always associated with Mike Neville.

We had a great job defining what features was, so we decided we would have Eric at the top. When we did a film that Eric would appear at the front of the programme. Coast to Coast titles. Eric pops up.

When we could afford a film, because we could only afford about four or five films a year ___[1:03:14]. And he would say, "We've got something rather special for you tonight. It's about this, this and this. I hope you enjoy it." Up would come the film. At the end of the film he would say, "I hope you enjoyed that. We will be back next week with so and so."

So we built it very much around his personality, as a way of giving the feature programmes the sort of identification that Mike Neville gave the news programme.

1:03:40

Interviewer: You've left the BBC, John, but you have not retired.

John Mapplebeck: Yes, I left the BBC.

I want to go back to something I said in response to your first letter, which was that it was looking back to the heydays of one's life. The BBC North Region was, for me, very much that.

I don't think I've known, certainly not at a production level [among us fellow 1:04:06] producers, a quite tremendous feeling of – old-fashioned word these days – comradeship and fellowship.

And not in any sort of slack way that one sometimes finds at network production centres outside of London. That people are just friendly with each other because they've got to cling together to hide their collective lack of talent.

That was never the case in Manchester. It always struck me that you had a very creative atmosphere, without the bitchiness and the unpleasantness which I regret I certainly always associated with [Kensington 1:04:50] House.

Not with Lime Grove, oddly enough. Lime grove had quite a nice atmosphere. But certainly Kensington House and Television Centre were, by contrast, to me very unpleasant environments.

BBC Manchester and Newcastle, more so because I knew it and I've known it more closely, were always remarkably friendly and user-friendly places to work. So when I left the BBC, as I did in October last year, that was my deepest sense of regret.

My feelings of relief I suppose were based on the fact that basically the features empire – hardly an empire anymore,

[that's more corny 1:05:44] – couldn't survive. Because of the way in which the BBC, once again from its centre, had decided that the new orthodoxy was to have news-based programmes.

News-based programmes which resembled Breakfast Time. Resembled Breakfast Time because Ron Neil's greatest time was when he beat the opposition and began Breakfast Time for the BBC. So you then get a whole series of Breakfast Times right across the country. That seems to be one of the awful things about the BBC.

It used to be that, as the New Testament put it, 'In our Lord's house there are many mansions'. And there were many lovely mansions in the BBC, of which BBC North was probably the best.

[Break in conversation 1:06:44 - 1:07:07]

END AUDIO