

## The Connected Histories of the BBC

Provenance:	<p>The file reproduced here was provided by the BBC to be made publicly accessible through the Connected Histories of the BBC catalogue hosted by the University of Sussex. It was selected in 2021 from one of five collections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BBC Oral History</li> <li>• BBC History of North Regional Broadcasting</li> <li>• BBC Horizon at 50</li> <li>• BBC World Service Moving Houses Project</li> <li>• Alexandra Palace Television Society Oral History</li> </ul>
Clearance:	Interviews have been reviewed and edited to comply with GDPR and other requirements.
Copyright:	<p>© BBC</p> <p>© Alexandra Palace Television Society</p>
Conditions of use:	<p>This interview is available for private research. If you wish to use any of the interview in a published work or for a commercial purpose, permission must be requested from the BBC at</p> <p><a href="mailto:historyteam@bbc.co.uk">historyteam@bbc.co.uk</a></p> <p><a href="mailto:apts@apts.org.uk">apts@apts.org.uk</a> (for Alexandra Palace material)</p>
Partner:	The Connected Histories of the BBC research project was led by the University of Sussex, 2017-2022, funded by the AHRC.
More information:	The project's public resource including more information on terms and conditions of use are available at: <a href="https://chbbc.sussex.ac.uk/">https://chbbc.sussex.ac.uk/</a>

**File:** LR003227 - MICHAEL GREEN (Interview 37)

**Duration:** 01:10:08

**Date:** 16/08/2017

**Typist:** 702

START AUDIO

Interviewer: A history of north regional broadcasting, interview number 37 with Michael Green, now Controller Radio 4.

In November 1967, Radio Sheffield became the second station to open in the BBC's newly created enterprise of 'local radio'. The station manager at the time, Michael Barton, who had begun his career as a studio assistant in Leeds in 1953, selected his staff of 16 with care and, as things turned out, with remarkable foresight.

They included [Tim Neale 0:00:39], who in this year of 1991 is Head of Radio Training, Jack Thompson now the BBC's Overseas Correspondent, Ian Masters, currently the Regional Television Manager, South Hempton.

In the 1970s, the north regional network radio operation was to be greatly strengthened by the appointments of three others from Radio Sheffield: Max Easterman, a reporter on World Tonight; Colin Adams, now Head of Television Midlands; and [by that to 0:01:12] my own group of network radio producers, of Michael Green.

Michael, you're currently the Controller of Radio 4, the flagship of network radio in the United Kingdom, but can we begin at

0:01:24

the beginning? You're a northerner by birth?

Michael Green: Yes, I was born in Durham, in May 1941, and lived there for the first four years of life. At the end of the war, my parents moved to Barnsley in South Yorkshire. My mother is a teacher, my father a teacher, later to become the first music advisor ever appointed in this country by Barnsley. Extraordinarily, a very perceptive, and percipient local authority in South Yorkshire. So we moved there.

My father by training was a musician, and because of the war and other circumstances had not really been able to follow that career as he would have wished, but was very keen that I should become musically literate from an early age. Indeed, at the age of nine he entered me, after musical study of the piano and singing and so forth, for an open competition to New College school in Oxford, the choir school, to become a chorister. And, very happily, fortunately, I won the scholarship.

So, I left South Yorkshire for this most extraordinary place called Oxford. A northern lad down there with a strong northern accent, picked up in the streets of Barnsley, and spent the following 5 years there, until I was almost 14, I think, and I lived the life of a chorister, and in a prep school, with distinguished colleagues at the time, like Ian Partridge, and Rogers Covey-Crump who have both gone on to have distinguished careers as professional singers.

Sadly, when my voice broke, it broke the wrong way, and a lifelong ambition, really, to become a singer, which I wanted and my father badly wanted, wasn't possible. Simply because, if you're going to reach the top you had to have a very fine voice, and I had a moderate – not to say mediocre – voice.

I then went on to Repton School in Derbyshire, and I stayed there until I was 17, and then I found the life, the rather cloistered life of the public school not entirely to my liking, and asked if I could please leave, and I went to Barnsley Grammar

School for the last year of education. I then went back to New College in Oxford, and read modern languages.

I'd always been interested in radio. I remember the joy in my grandfather's house in the Midlands, of his old, large fretwork fronted wireless in the corner that took 10 minutes to warm up. Twiddling along the dial at night, and watching the needle cross all those magical names of Hilversum and Berlin and what have you, and just eavesdropping on the world, I thought was just an extraordinary world that I would like to inhabit as well.

That, combined with an interest in public affairs and in journalism, pushed me, to start with, into journalism as a career. I began, actually, in broadcasting, as it happened. I spotted a job advertised by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, who ran an overseas service, really the equivalent of the BBC's external services, and they were seeking people to work in the news room there. I, having done a little freelance journalism, thought, "I'll chance my arm on this," and lo and behold, I got it, and that's how my broadcasting career began: writing news bulletin for overseas consumption. My mother back in Barnsley could hear them as well, which gave us much delight, and friends in Africa could hear them and so forth.

My love of radio in particular really began at that point, and although I came back to England after a year or so of doing that job to work for United Newspapers – I won a graduate traineeship with them, and landed up in Sheffield, about which more anon – I was always very keen to see if I could work my way back into broadcasting.

It was a very useful formative period of training in Sheffield, principally on The Star, which was the evening paper. One had a very brisk and thorough training as a young reporter doing

the Magistrates' Courts of South Yorkshire, and the Crown Courts and so forth. You always imagine as a young man of 22 that you've seen life; I'd seen nothing until I went into the Magistrates' Courts at [Wombwell] and [Wafonderne 0:05:57].

As I say, one learned an enormous amount out of that, and gradually I graduated, if you want to put it that way, to writing features and to writing a lot of political stories, particularly the local government stories, for The Star. In tandem with that, writing quite a lot of the leader columns as well. The daily leader column was called 'Vulcan', and therefore by 9:15 in the morning one had to have thundered about something or other, and shown it to the editor.

That was an extraordinary experience, a mind concentrating experience, to actually have a view about something in public affairs by 9:15 in the morning, from a fairly slothful lad, was... It caused me to begin to appreciate the notions of discipline, and actually, it stood me in good stead. Deadlines are important. Clear thinking is quite important, and if you can meet a deadline and have something to say, clearly, one tends to make a bit of progress, in journalism and in broadcasting.

The interesting thing, obviously, about my time at The Star, was that I began to be absorbed into the community. I began to know the politics of Sheffield, I knew the personalities of Sheffield, and it was therefore not surprising that when the BBC decided to launch its new enterprise of local radio in 1967 and I saw an advert in one of the daily papers, I thought, "My goodness, this is a golden opportunity." It seemed to be an opportunity to deploy some of my journalistic talents to demonstrate to Michael Barton who was to run the station that I had an inside track on the city anyway, when opening doors is always useful, as you know. And also because I'd been a bit of a broadcaster. We had to, in Switzerland, with the Swiss

Broadcasting Corporation, both write and read one's own bulletins, so I wasn't microphone shy.

So all these things came together, and I thought, "I'll bung in an application for this thing," and lo and behold, someone interviewed me, in a preliminary sort of fashion somewhere, and then I eventually fetched up in London. I was summoned to Portland Place, the first board, and this whole notion of the BBC having boards – formidable. I mean, I'd only ever sat alongside someone and said, "Do you want a job?" So the formality of all that was rather forbidding.

But lovely Michael Barton was the person sitting opposite me, and I think we struck up an immediate rapport, and obviously he felt at the time I had things I could contribute to a new local station in Sheffield, and, wonderfully, he gave me a job. And that's really how my formal BBC career started in local radio.

0:08:47

Interviewer: Yes, I suppose you also had to take your turn, as any local radio station staff have, on your local versions of any questions, and things like record request programmes?

Michael Green: Yes, I mean, we were in those days, Jacks and Jills of all trades. We were not many. We worked pretty long hours. We made it up as we went along, because although we had been trained by, how can I put this, an older school of BBC men and women in London, we did a six-week training course down in London, learned to be technically proficient, though one could scarcely fly the operations desk when we started. It really was going in blindfolded in many respects.

But despite the formality of the training, in a sense, nobody quite knew what this bizarre animal 'local radio' might be in

BBC terms, had there not been experiments in various places in the preceding two or three years, but very much local, off-air experiments. This was for real, and we were all young, relatively inexperienced broadcasters, and we rushed towards the cliff edge and hoped we wouldn't fall off.

But it was an exhilarating time, we did indeed have to do everything. I concentrated quite a lot on the politics on the local government stories of the time, for obvious reasons, but everybody had to take their turn at record shows, record request programmes. My wife, poor soul, who had to tolerate me at the microphone in guises that she scarcely recognised, said that I played record request programmes, I lacked conviction, she said, when I announced people's record requests, and my attitude towards some of the music we had to play was less than generous.

I remember people and records that you would never forget. Jim Reeves, I remember, endlessly I used to play Jim Reeves. And then there was Engelbert Humperdinck, and then there was Lily the Pink, do you remember that record by The Scaffold?

Interviewer: I do, yes.

Michael Green: Lily the Pink I must have played about a million times.

But it wasn't my forte, and I would say to Tim Neale and to Michael Barton that if they would kindly take away this chore from me, I think on the whole the station would sound a lot better.

But it was an exhilarating time. It was a tiring time. It was an adventurous time. We created programmes that had not been

done on the BBC before, the beginnings of the phone-in, for example, really was the stuff of local radio. It was cheap and it was cheerful, but by goodness it was effective.

Although the irony was that at this time local radio was broadcast only on VHF, FM as we call it now, and we had to be issued with sets when we arrived in Sheffield back from the training course, because nobody seemed to know what VHF was, and very few people had access to that frequency. This was still a world of medium wave and long wave. I was never quite sure how many people we were broadcasting to, since the availability, as I say, of VHF, was extremely limited.

But despite all that, despite the fact that we were reaching only a small percentage of the community because of the choice of frequencies – and I think it was a barmy notion, frankly, to have started on VHF, and that was later changed just after I left, three years in. Despite all that, I think the station established a rapport with the community quite quickly. It began to get into the [paws 0:12:19] of Sheffield, and despite the initial resistance, particularly from the newspapers, who perhaps not surprisingly had seen some of its staff go up the road for another £5.00 a week.

The local newspapers were quite hostile to begin with. They thought, I think, rather as newspapers had done when radio was established back in the 1920s in the metropolis, that this would be the death knell of journalism, of print journalism, that meant utter nonsense, as we all knew. But it bred a suspicion, and an indifference, which didn't help. But the people of Sheffield suddenly found that they had a radio station of their own, and what one discovered was that, for many years, although the north region, based in Manchester, had been covering the whole parish, including Sheffield, there was a sense of disaffection in Yorkshire, particularly in South

Yorkshire, with the metropolis, however it manifests itself, whether it was London, or Manchester, or Newcastle. If you're not part of the charmed circle, people feel outside it.

I think Radio Sheffield gave a voice to the citizens of Sheffield, which is, as you know, widely described as the largest village in England, and the village wanted to talk to each other, and this was a very effective way of doing it. I think the station burgeoned quite quickly, found its legs, and, as I say, gave young broadcasters an opportunity that arises probably only once in a lifetime, to start something fresh, and to draw your own maps.

Interviewer: Well, 1967 is when you came into the BBC, Michael. Sheffield, as I recall, had been a stronghold of Labour for, what, some 40 years?

0:14:11 And then you handle the radio coverage of a local election, which changes all that.

Michael Green: It was astonishing. The city's political scene had actually been quite dull for 40 years. I mean, Labour had been a very good controlling authority, actually. The Labour Party had done wonders for the city; it was fiercely proud, it was at the forefront of all kinds of municipal development, but inevitably it was a bit inward looking, a bit introverted, it needed the stimulus of real political competition.

But one never imagined for a moment that it would ever find it, even when the fortunes of the Conservative Party nationally were running in the other direction, the Conservatives locally never managed to break through. They had, on one or two

occasions in the 1950s I think, come a bit closer, but the stronghold was very solid.

Then, yes, suddenly, after we'd been on the air, in existence for a year – I think this was, it was either '68 or '69, I can't remember exactly which – the political balance swung, and it was one of those magic nights of broadcasting, when one had sensed that something was up, that the Labour Party had appeared in the election campaign just before the May elections to have lost some grip. There was a sort of disaffection running in the city over one or two issues. And then, as the night wore on and we were live on the air, we discovered the Tories had won.

It was an extraordinary moment, and the city suddenly realised that politics was other than having a one-party city. And for the following year, where Labour regained it, as we'd all predicted, but for a year, politics was a fascinating subject in the city, and I think Radio Sheffield thrived on that. For the first time, there was real political debate, that no longer did Labour politicians come into the studio and go through the motions and say, "Well it's alright, we'll be back tomorrow. That for the first time, both parties knew there was something to argue about.

We had a year of tremendous daily journalism, I think, on Radio Sheffield, where politics was tossed to and fro. It was a fascinating time.

Interviewer: The early experimental pilot work on local radio was – you've touched on this – carried out in the north region at the behest of the then Director General, Sir Hugh Green. Certainly, once it had been given the go-ahead, Radio Sheffield, which did much of the on-air pioneering work, is certainly acknowledged as having been one of the most successful of those early stations.

0:17:06

Since you were very much a part of Michael Barton's celebrated team, and now, Michael, in the light of your professional experience during the intervening years, was the BBC right to go into the business of local radio in the mid-1960s?

Michael Green:

Yes, I think it was. The problem was that it went into it without conviction. I think the story of local radio has been one of continuing uncertainty about its future, not simply because of political attitudes outside the corporation, but more profoundly because of an unwillingness, I think, for 15, 20 years, until quite recently, for the senior management of the board in the BBC to actually get behind it and say, "This is of value, it's of worth, let's do it, and let's do it properly."

They were absolutely right to get into it, because I felt that the concept of a large region was making increasingly less editorial sense. It made engineering sense, and I suspect that's, in a sense, how the regions were created in the first place.

Interviewer:

Entirely on an engineering basis, yes.

Michael Green:

Right. And then to try and fit the editorial need to the engineering requirement struck me as being increasingly difficult. In other words, what was it that bonded people in Carlisle with people in Lincoln? There were certain things, weren't there? There was the Playground of the North, and I remember wonderful programmes that I heard in my late teen age, when I listened to a great deal of radio from the north region, about Cumbria, about the Lakes, about characters in

the Dales and so on. It was wonderful. And there were programmes that had a universal relevance, and I use the word 'universal' advisedly, because actually if you were in Tunbridge Wells it was of as much interest to you as if you were in Lincoln.

So I think that there was a tension building up, I suspect, in the '60s, between the requirements of management and of administration, and actually what people wanted to hear. I think that tier was on borrowed time, that regional tier.

Nonetheless, the BBC had to get close to its communities; it couldn't rely on networks to do that. People had to feel that broadcasting was close to them, and we couldn't, I doubt, live in a world where the BBC was simply a series of ivory towers around the land, not connected closely to what people were telling us, and the plays and the poetry and everything else they were writing and needed expression.

So I think the logic of moving into local radio was absolutely right, and the logic has really been sustained by everybody else since, the commercial local radio tier that has emerged and so on.

But as I say, it was done on a shoestring, there was not much conviction. Indeed, I think local radio as a concept was vilified, I would go almost as far as that, at some levels of the BBC in London at that time. I'm not sure why that was. Perhaps the anxiety that if local radio was a bouncing and cheerful baby it would increasingly suck radio resources away from the centre, and everybody in the BBC is competitive about retaining its resources and its little bit of empire.

So it's been a long, hard struggle for local radio, but I've no doubt at all that we were right to be in that.

Interviewer: Interestingly, you referred immediately to commitment, a sense of commitment. Between 1974 and 1987, Michael Barton, as the General Manager and then the Controller of the BBC's local radio operation, tells me that he had to persuade some five managing directors to stick with it?

0:21:08 Had there been no BBC local radio operation to finance in the 1990s, Michael, would your Radio 4 budget be appreciably larger?

Michael Green: I don't think it would have made much difference, frankly. I mean, the key element of the local radio service, as it has developed – and it's much more a service of news and local journalism now than it was when we started, sadly, I think the diversity of programme-making in local radio can no longer be afforded, and I think that's a shame.

But were it not to exist, we would need to reinvent a tier of local regional journalism as an input into networks, and that is a very expensive operation. Local radio has really sucked into its body many of the local regional news services, freelance news services that used to sustain the BBC before 1967.

Something like that would have to be put back, otherwise the conduit of news and information from around the UK would dry up, and that's very expensive, so we'd need to put back a lot of money anyway. But I don't feel in any sense impoverished, running Radio 4, by the presence of local radio. I feel enriched by it.

In some measure because it's a training ground – it trained me, and young producers are coming through from local radio with imagination and ideas. It sustains, as I say, a second tier of journalism, which is vital to our survival. I think we'd be talking about peanuts, I might get an extra million or two a

year, and if I felt in any sense impoverished in what I do at the moment, I might take a slightly different view, but I don't.

Interviewer: No, no. Well, undoubtedly over the last 24 years the BBC's methods of working have been greatly influenced by the advent of local radio. I'm thinking in terms of [union 0:23:15] agreements on manning levels, hours worked, cost savings.

0:23:21 But as you say, especially the individual career grounding, which for many staff initially has [evolved] through the advent of broadcasting at a local level.

Michael Green: I think the idea of, I talked earlier about Jacks and Jills of all trades, was really rooted and took off in local radio. The fact that you could actually broadcast, you could write a news bulletin, you could go to a studio, open some faders and speak, was unheard of in network radio, I think.

The sad thing, in a way, is- And that was tremendously liberating, and began to pull down the divides between different categories of staff and so forth. We could get away with it there, because we were all at it, and we were all in it, and if we didn't all do everything, the place would have folded. It certainly wouldn't have flourished as I think it did. The sad thing is, it had taken so long for us to move in network radio terms towards a slightly looser structure. Old traditions in Broadcasting House in particular take a long time to remove.

But the seeds of that change were sown then, and a generation of broadcasters, trained and brought up to understand that it was possible to do things differently.

Interviewer: Yes. I think it was a shame, in a way, that the BBC went ahead with co-sited operations. I'm thinking in terms of Manchester, when Radio Manchester first opened, it was in the same building.

0:24:54 I don't think this advantaged Radio Manchester one dot. They couldn't enjoy their own identity.

Michael Green: No, I agree with that. It did strike me as very curious, when I finally came over to Manchester, that there were two separate BBCs under one roof. Again, times have marched on and things have loosened up and so on and so forth in the intervening 20-year period, but there was a sense— I understood what they were about. They wanted to protect their own, their own style, identity and so forth. They felt, I suppose, a little in the shadow of the big brother, network production centre and so forth.

But it reinforced prejudice, and stereotypes, and one had to work very hard to begin to break that down. It was easier perhaps for me than for some others; having been in local radio, I understood their ethos, their style, their resentments against other parts of the corporation that seemed to be fatter and better nourished. But I think we lost some good opportunities in the early '70s to actually create a sense of one radio operation at different levels.

Interviewer: Well, may we go back to January 1971, you've been appointed as a [talks 0:26:19] producer within Manchester Network Production Centre.

0:26:23 Michael, what were your impressions on becoming a member of the network team as opposed to your start at Radio

Sheffield? Tell me about your start at Radio Sheffield, your views then of what you were coming into?

Michael Green: At Radio Sheffield, I had no idea what I was coming into. I was sent on the training course in London, and at the end of that I spent a week or so visiting various programmes in Broadcasting House. I remember Home This Afternoon, I remember the World at One with Bill Hardcastle, because he'd been a journalist at Sheffield and therefore knew that I was when I introduced myself. That was a nice conversation; he looked after me very well.

Then we went back to Sheffield, and I couldn't believe this was the same medium. In London, production teams enormously well-supported, studio managers, reporters, editing machines by the yard, technology, and a smoothness and a professionalism that I couldn't believe. The fact that World at One got on the air at all I found astonishing, and I was full of admiration for that.

As we went into [local radio 0:27:34] I said, "How on earth do we replicate that? Are we supposed to? Are we going to operate in a quite different style, at a different level? Are expectations of us different?" Well, they had to be. It was an entirely different animal altogether. It was cheap, it was cheerful. I think it was quite professional. It certainly wasn't professional to start with. Operating the desk and trying to get in and out of junctions on the network- And in those days, as you know, we carried a lot of material from London, getting into the World at One, and hitting weather forecast at the right time, making sure you didn't crash the pips. This was a nightmare for youngsters like me, whilst trying to remember what you were going to say two seconds later.

It was a quite different world of broadcasting, and I'm not sure the BBC itself knew what on earth it had done until it heard it, and there were some, having heard it, they didn't like it.

Interviewer: I hadn't thought of this aspect. I mean, there you were, you've come from journalism, now you're not just the reporter, you're the typesetter, and indeed you're the printer all in one?

0:28:39

Michael Green: Exactly that. And you're quite often the interviewer. You drive the desk, and an interviewee is sitting three or four feet away from you, and I remember one bloke, he simply dried in the middle of an interview. He found it impossible to say anything. And you couldn't go over, put your hand on him and say, "Are you alright?" All the tricks that you can get up to. You simply sort of crash along in a happy-go-lucky sort of way. It was a very happy-go-lucky form of broadcasting.

Interviewer: Back to Jim Reeves.

Michael Green: Indeed, it was, yes. "If in doubt, spin a Jim Reeves record," I always used to say.

0:29:14

Interviewer: Now, your first impressions of coming to network radio in Manchester, Michael?

Michael Green: Well, in a way we're back to the first impressions of the BBC in London, which were a very brief glimpse. But of course, coming back to join your team in Manchester was to come

back fully-fledged, if you like, having gone through the training period in local radio, and again observing an extraordinary professionalism, I think the thing that struck me first and foremost, in talking to colleagues who'd made enormous numbers of programmes, knew the shortcuts, knew the contacts and so forth.

Also, operationally, going into a studio and not having to hack tape necessarily all the time oneself. There were highly experienced studio managers who helped you along with that. And the polish on programmes, the support you had, both intellectually and operationally, was astonishing. It was a real- One wouldn't have imagined that you'd only gone 35 miles over the Pennines; this was again, back to a quite different world of radio, and enormously stimulating, and on the other hand quite frightening. Because there is a momentum in local radio; slots have to be filled, standards, although I think they improved a lot, were not always at the highest, simply because one was against time. In network broadcasting, there was some time; there was time to think of an idea, to develop it.

On the other hand, you had to get it right. I mean, time gives you a licence, but it's a dangerous licence, it's a two-edged one. And, therefore, the quality control, the monitoring, the reviewing, the discussing of output, slightly formidable, and, as I say, a world one had to adjust to, and that was quite difficult.

The expectations of colleagues rose extraordinarily, you know, people would say, "Well, actually not terribly good, you could have done it better this way," and yet very supportive.

Whereas, in local radio, it was much more of a scrum. Nobody actually had much time to listen to their colleague's work, because they were worrying about the next five minutes.

0:31:37

Interviewer: I see from the Radio Times that within a very short time of your joining us, you're credited as a producer of A Word in Edgeways. Your introductory edition including Elizabeth, [Countess Blanchford 0:31:48], Sir John Newsom, Maurice Temple Smith, and of course Brian Redhead.

Michael Green: Well, Brian was an enormous ally. I was tremendously lucky to have worked with one of the most distinguished radio practitioners of our generation. At that time, he was Editor of the Manchester Evening News, he was later to become the northern presenter of Today, the Today programme in London, and one of the anchor-men of Radio 4 throughout the '70s, '80s and beyond.

So I was with a real professional, and what astonished me was that they actually paid me to do this programme, because here it was, 40 editions a year, on a Saturday night, a conversation, free-ranging – what was Brown's phrase? "Unrehearsed intellectual adventure," was how he put it, wasn't it?

Interviewer: Yes.

Michael Green: And I could book any three people I wished in the land, and BBC would pay their rail fare and give them something to eat and we'd go in the studio, and we could discuss anything I decided. I mean, what a licence? And again, slightly awesome, when you take this on, you look at a blank sheet of paper and

think, “Good God, who do I book? And what do they talk about?”

That was one of the most- Again, a very exhilarating time of my BBC life, in partnership with Brian, who got me out of several holes, and I think I got him into several as well. But we enjoyed our partnership; I certainly enjoyed it, I hope he did, and during that time I think I created some programmes that I was very proud of, and I still am proud of, some conversations of the kind that one rarely heard in broadcasting, and that you could only actually hear on radio.

0:33:36

Interviewer:

Not only did you create some memorable programmes, you seemed to have a remarkable nose for finding or inviting the right people in and encouraging them on the programme, exercising them at the art of being a broadcaster. And you did myself, and indeed the listeners of Radio 4, Michael, a great service in the 1970s when I was invited by one of your predecessors Tony Whitby, then Controller of Radio 4, to see if we could revive Round Britain Quiz.

You suggested I should try out Anthony Quinton, then President of Trinity College, Oxford, and another academic, Louis Allen of Durham University, both of whom were very quickly taken on board.

Michael Green:

Indeed. Both, I think, had come into my ken via A Word in Edgeways, and it was precisely that, that was the joy of the programme: you could ring up distinguished people like Tony Quentin and say, “Do you mind getting on a pretty rickety old train from Oxford to Manchester? Would you like to be here by

12:30 and then I'll throw you out at 4 o'clock." And he'd say yes. "I'd love to come to the Athens of the north," he used to say, pretending Manchester had laid claim to that title as well.

And of course, having brought them into that format, we got to know them, and you began to know their capabilities as broadcasters and so on, and they became the raw material for many other things that we all did in Manchester, not least yourself with Round Britain Quiz, Transatlantic Quiz, and so forth.

Again, in terms of the programme making that we did overseas, that eventually we were allowed to go beyond these shores and bump into all sorts of people around Europe in particular and elsewhere, who were the stuff of documentaries and analyses and so on, who you drew into other programmes.

I think one of the joys of working in Manchester at that time was how each of our endeavours supported the other. There was a sense of reinforcing, a self-reinforcing going on. It was a tremendous time, an expanding and enjoyable time.

0:35:43

Interviewer: Three more of your people that come to mind, when we did Round Europe: Henry [Apir 0:35:47], who'd assisted Harold Wilson in getting the Open University going; the splendid Hilde Spiel of Austria; and [Predu Schwartz] of Spain.

Michael Green: Yes. What was extraordinary, and I think the thing that really changed things for producers working in Manchester was a recognition in London by the mid-1970s that we didn't all wear cloth caps and have whippets, and that we could actually

speaking other languages and it wasn't entirely necessary to go via Heathrow to reach other parts.

Thanks actually I think to the positive discrimination shown by two people in particular, by George Fisher, who was Head of Talks and Documentaries in London at that time, and by Ian McIntyre who was a predecessor of mine at Radio 4 for a time, and then went on to run Radio 3. By [Stephen Hurst] – particularly by Stephen, and by others, who spotted that there was some talent in Manchester, that we did actually know how to put a programme together, and encouraged us and offered us opportunities, particularly making programmes in Europe.

I made a weekend of programmes about Austria, for Stephen. You yourself made programmes about the north, you and David Hatch.

Interviewer: Oh, the Northern Weekend, yes. And your Austrian Weekend, yes, when we took over Radio 3.

Michael Green: Absolutely, and that was a breakout for the north region that I doubted ever happened before, and in a way I think was a real turning point in the relationship between regional production and the network centre. Suddenly, producers became their own men and women, because, as I say, acts of positive discrimination from key and enlightened people in the middle.

Interviewer: What did, undoubtedly, advantage us, was the fact that as a result of broadcasting in the '70s of course, the regions were given direct access to heads of output departments in London. I mean, before, I had never gone to see George Fisher, and I'd certainly never been to see a channel controller.

Michael Green: No, no.

0:38:09

Interviewer: But now suddenly, we have this access?

Michael Green: Yes, it really was a turning point, wasn't it? And I suspect we were more privileged than many of our colleagues in Broadcasting House in London.

I think one of the interesting things to recall is that whereas in the first two or three years of the time I was in Manchester we had been able to offer documentaries and other programmes for Radio 4 in principle, and to some extent for Radio 3, but Radio 4 mainly. When the long running series took a break. when one's colleagues in London decided that they'd had enough, at the end of June, and went to Tuscany or wherever-

Interviewer: The B team could come in.

Michael Green: The B team could come in and regional lads were allowed to come and show what they were made of.

Well, it was a good window to get through, because it did allow us to do one or two reasonable programmes, and eventually people said, "Well, actually, these are not entirely duff, these programmes, maybe these lads have got something to offer, maybe we should give them more space?" And that's really how it evolved. It was putting a toe in the water, being allowed to put a toe in the water, not falling over, demonstrating that

we weren't concentrated entirely on slag heaps and dog tracks, that we could think about other things, and lift our eyes a little beyond the horizon, that allowed us in. And once we'd been allowed in, we piled in, and began to make a bit of a reputation, I think.

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

It was during David's time as the Network Editor that I think we managed to prize Today away from London, and for a period it was coming from Manchester. But one of the principal current affair landmarks during David's period, and of course, entirely through you, was the start of File on 4, the first network journalism to be made outside head office.

0:40:08

Michael, what did you have to do in order to launch that very important strand from Manchester? Apart from already having proved your own worth to the Channel Controllers and others. Did you have a lot of hurdles to get over?

Michael Green: A tremendous number. Again, it was largely as a result of the fact that I'd worked with Ian McIntyre on Analysis. I'd done, by this time I suppose, three years on Analysis, either in Manchester or down on attachment in London. Ian and I had made a number of programmes, and when we sitting in foreign parts having a late night drink, he would say to me, "Well, what do you want to do when you've finished with Analysis and so forth?" I said, "What I'd really like to do is to create a sister programme to Analysis, which was rooted in documentary journalism, which was a reporters' programme." Radio had no equivalent of Panorama, of World in Action, and so forth, and one never got the whiff of dust in your nostrils when you listened to the radio. You had no idea of location and people

being there and telling you a story and coming back and so forth. And, "If only we could do that."

Well, lo and behold, Ian, about a year, 18 months later, became Controller of Radio 4, and rang me up one day and said, "You know what you were always wittering on about in the pubs of Vienna," or wherever it was, "About doing such a programme?" and I said, "Yes." "Well, do it." And I said, "Fine."

He did this in opposition to the view of the news and current affairs department in London, who, supported by Douglas Muggerridge and others at the most senior level of the corporation believed that journalism of this kind simply couldn't be made outside London, it was impossible. Douglas' famous phrase about, "You've got to via Heathrow to get anywhere, Michael, haven't you?" Until I reminded him of this small airport called Ringway, which did entirely well, thank you, and avoided the queues and the stacking.

But there was a lot of opposition, and Ian had to close a programme in London, News Desk it was called, and recoup the resources and the money associated with that programme, in order to finance File on 4. It was a very brave thing for him to have done. It was one of his least popular acts. But its impact on Manchester, you couldn't have imagined, because it really put the journalistic seeds down into Manchester in a way they'd never been before.

I hired staff. I hunted for producers all around the land, and reporters and so forth, and we got underway. It was a very nerve-wracking time, not least because to launch a new programme of this kind is something I'd never done before, and again, you start to write your own style, and your own script and so forth, as one had done in local radio. But also because you knew there was a huge political antagonism

towards it. There were many people in this building who wanted us to fall over, and fall over badly.

Well, largely as a result of having found a very talented team of people to sit alongside me and to help me, we didn't fall over, and with enormous encouragement from David and yourself in Manchester – from all Manchester, I think everybody rooted for us, I had that real sense anyway – we came up with some good stories, and the programme was launched. And the critics seemed to enjoy it, and the listeners seemed to enjoy it, and people began to say, "Well, there was a gap in radio's portmanteau of current affairs programmes, and this, I think, fills it," they said.

And despite all, we set sale, and have never looked back.

Interviewer: Well that very important first date in the history of the fortunes of north regional broadcasting was October 1977, File on 4 presented by Peter Oppenheimer with Steve Bradshaw and David Henshaw as your reporters.

Michael Green: Yes.

Interviewer: Now, Michael, I'd like to turn to 1978 in this history of north regional broadcasting. David leaves for London, becomes the head of radio in the light entertainment department, and its wisdom, the BBC appoints you as his successor.

0:44:32 One of your tasks, sometime after you'd got your feet under the table, as it were, as the new Network Editor, was to preside over the long-awaited opening of the BBC Northern Orchestra's first, first custom-built music studio, in the final

phase of New Broadcasting House Manchester that was Studio 7.

Michael Green: Yes, having taken over from David, it was a hard act to follow, it always is – I've followed him twice now, it doesn't get any easier.

What was interesting to observe was that you could live in the building in Broadcasting House in Manchester, and be almost unaware that there was an orchestra on the books, because they had their life and their being down at Milton Hall in Deansgate. And apart from the public performances of the Master Concerts in the Free Trade Hall and so forth, and of course their broadcasting, I think the bulk of people in Manchester were scarcely aware of the presence of the orchestra, and it had clearly been a long-cherished ambition to build an extension to Broadcasting House, to open a music studio.

The transformation I think to the orchestra's fortunes, on the back of that move into the building itself, was almost palpable. I mean, two things happened in fairly rapid succession. One was an expansion of the orchestra, and the other was the re-titling of the orchestra.

Edward Downes who had already been two or three years Principal Conductor at that time, made the point very forcibly to me that for as long as the orchestra retained the radio tag and also the regional tag – in other words, 'the BBC Northern', their prospects internationally and as a recording orchestra and so forth, were limited. And if we could break out of that and actually enhance it to full symphonic strength, we might really turn a corner.

So quite a lot of my first couple of years in the job was a) learning about the management of an orchestra, and what an extraordinary resource and symbol of the BBC's presence in the north, and fighting for its enhancement and its advancement.

Happily, supported by Robert [Poncebee 0:46:57], the Controller of Music in London at that time, both issues were resolved relatively quickly, one could scarcely believe it, it was perhaps beginner's luck. I was particularly keen about the change of title, because it led, I think, then on in the '80s to touring. Agents then began to take notice, "What is this phenomenon of the BBC Philharmonic?" They'd forgotten that it was a regional orchestra. Okay, it was a BBC orchestra, but the Philharmonic gave it a cache that suddenly got it through certain doors that had hitherto been closed, and the orchestra began to tour in Europe very successfully in the early '80s, '82 and '83 I think, going into many and important cities. The whole spirit of the thing – because there were 10 additional players, up to a compliment, I think it was of 89 then – gave it a sense of pride and of belonging to the BBC.

That was reciprocated I think by members of the BBC in Manchester. They came in through the front door every morning, one could go in and listen to them rehearse, they gave small chamber concerts at lunchtime for the members of staff. It really became part of the building in a way that it had never been before.

Interviewer: Interesting, because of course, this hadn't occurred to me, but they were in isolation at the Milton, but you see, in the '50s, particularly in the 1950s in Manchester, the orchestra were much more a part of our general output. I mean, I and other

[producers 0:48:26], we use them regularly for feature programmes. I mean, they did incidental music to plays.

But then, unfortunately, it wasn't entirely a monetary consideration, the Musicians' Union clamped down very heavily on what we used to term 'schedule D recordings', and for a fee, a modest sort of six guineas per player, [Dennis Roylance 0:48:48] and others would issue contracts to the orchestra, and we were allowed to use them for three hours. We took all rights, and of course then their work could be heard abroad via the radio transcription service.

But when that came to an end, yes, I mean, then the isolation started.

Michael Green: Yes, I'm sure it wasn't simply a physical isolation, was it?

Interviewer: No, no.

Michael Green: No, you're quite right. Those contractual constraints I think really did some damage to the orchestra for quite some years, and it's taken a long time to come out of that, and for them to be again regarded as part of the fabric.

Interviewer: Well, the BBC Philharmonic, very much a jewel in Manchester's broadcasting crown, not so fortunate, though, Michael, with what had started life as the Northern Variety Orchestra in the late 1940s and '50s, I used to announce this for the light programme. Ray Martin, who'd been with us in \_\_\_\_ [0:49:41] broadcasting the conductor. One called Jimmy Young, as our resident vocalist, I wonder what happened to

him? And a very young lad, an arranger named Alan Ainsworth. Well, the orchestra, Alan, alas, both no more.

0:49:58

How is it we lost the battle to retain what had then become the BBC Northern Radio Orchestra?

Michael Green:

When I took over in 1978 I wondered what the role of the orchestra was. It no longer had its own showcase, and I think that was a reflection of the increasing centralising tendencies on Radio 1 and 2, particularly. There wasn't, particularly on Radio 2 at that time, the same open-mindedness as there was on Radio 3 and 4, about programmes made outside London.

What I discovered was that the NRO was simply making inserts, recording inserts for things like the Jimmy Young Show and other daytime sequences, and they seemed to be being taken on sufferance, frankly. We were paying for the orchestra, so we might as well use them, but frankly we'd rather put on a record and do something else.

Immediately, I got the sense that if the BBC ever got to the point of wanting to review the number of house orchestras it had on the books, this was going to be a struggle. Therefore, in the review that Aubrey Singer, then Managing Director Radio, instituted, shortly after he took over, into the establishment of house orchestras, I felt this was going to be a hard one to hang onto.

My real battle at the time was two-fold: one, the complete lack of involvement of anyone in the regions in the debate about which orchestra should stay and which shouldn't. And that was an appalling state of affairs. It was entirely managed and thought through by London heads, who clearly were preserving their own corner, and if there was a problem, 200 miles away, then that was someone else's problem.

The end result, as one might have anticipated, without being paranoid, was that the orchestras that were to go were the light orchestras rather than the symphony, and that the light orchestras to go were those outside London, which ours was one.

Although I understood the reason for doing that, I must say it was a very, very sad day indeed when I went down to the Playhouse and announced to the orchestra that they were being disbanded.

0:52:25

Interviewer: As the Network Editor, Michael, a title which later became Head of Network Radio for the region, there was a revival of Manchester's past tradition of regular feature programmes.

Michael Green: Yes, I think the revival followed the demise of the Today programme in Manchester. I think those two things are not unconnected. David [Hatch] had been very keen to establish Manchester's presence on a daily basis on Radio 4, and I think it was a smashing ambition.

I took the view that although the programme had indeed raised the profile of the centre, that it became clear that the editorial difficulties of running a bi-centre daily programme like Today were getting more and more difficult, and one of the first things I did was to go along with a London viewer to agree with colleagues in London, not least with Colin Adams, who was then with Today and who later came to edit File on 4 with me, that really there wasn't a great deal of future in this.

However, as a result of that closure, posts became available and I began, with you and with others, to contemplate what it was that could re-establish Manchester's programme-making

reputation, and we decided that features it had to be. By great good fortune, we found people like Peter Everett, who had been with the Today programme in Manchester, like Alistair Wilson, who came up from London from the archive department here, to establish a core of young producers whose work, I think for about three or four years, was not matched anywhere else in radio. Series like the American Way of Laughs, the Profession of Intelligence, Alistair Wilson's series with Ray Gosling, stunning stuff, which went on winning awards, Sony and elsewhere, year after year, and were widely noticed by the newspapers and by the critics.

Suddenly, people became aware that that, alongside File on 4 under Colin Adams' baton, really seemed to make Manchester a place where good work was being done. We began to add other younger producers to that mix, and to say to ourselves really that the centre of feature-making outside London ought to be in Manchester, we ought to be the second city, and quite often second city first, in this respect.

Then, really alongside that, looking at what else Manchester could develop – and these were expanding times, we were fortunate that the BBC seemed to have money to put into centres like Manchester. Alongside that, a sense that with the new drama studio in New Broadcasting House, we should exploit that further, and to develop the drama-making capacity from the region. And whereas at one time there had only been two producers, [Alpha Bradley 0:55:30] Tony Cliff working with us, I managed by good luck and a bit of devious methods of one kind or another, to increase the number of producers to four, so that the studio was much more fully used.

Again, we seemed to have a very regular and front-rank presence on the air, and largely as a result, I think, of the work of Robert Cooper, who eventually came across to us full-time

from Northern Ireland, and who led the charge, along with Alfred, and Kay Patrick, who'd come up from London as well, on the network, and Manchester again suddenly won, I think across a period of two or three years, a reputation for fine drama as well.

So those two strands seemed to create a core of activity, around which other things could grow, and I think anchored us to the future of broadcasting. I think I felt it was a very important time to be seen to be imaginative, to be flexible, to be trying things that others weren't trying, and to be distinctive.

0:56:46

Interviewer: As far as I'm concerned – and I'm biased, as you know, Michael, about this – 1964 was a very bad year for the north region, which, until that time had been a leader in children's programmes, both in children's [R 0:56:56] and in BBC children's television.

The demise of children's R is something which I know, in later years, haunted many a past Controller of Radio, but not, I suspect, you. On the 31<sup>st</sup> March 1986, almost 22 years to the day since Children's Hour was killed off, you were responsible for the first of a series of programmes for children under 12 with the launch of Cat's Whiskers.

Michael Green: It was an important re-launch, wasn't it, of programmes for children? It arose again through David Hatch's initiative, as Controller of Radio 4, who had been bombarded, particularly by a drama producer called Caroline Smith who had a passion, had a mission for re-launching children's programmes, and eventually I think David said, "Oh God I can't take this anymore, this bombardment anymore, just go and do it," and Caroline did it. And in my final months in Manchester, Cat's

Whiskers was launched, and became a very important new element in the Radio 4 mix.

In some respects, I think Cat's Whiskers paved the way for the developments on Radio 5, having demonstrated that children would turn to speech radio – coaxed by their parents, admittedly, but once they'd got the taste, they'd enjoy it and stay with it. And Radio 5 has been able to take that much, much further.

So, good pioneering work was done by Caroline in Manchester.

Interviewer: I'm glad to hear that channel controllers are bombarded. You talk about Caroline bombarding David. I remember of course it was [Irene Thomas 0:58:33] bombarding Tony Whitby saying, "Can't we bring back Around Britain Quiz?" that got that going again.

0:58:39 Now, you are a channel controller, are you bombarded?

Michael Green: Oh yes, regularly, by all sorts of interest groups and pressure groups. I mean, the problem is that you're constantly trying to squeeze the proverbial [quart into the pint pot 0:58:56]; there isn't enough air time to do everything we would wish, nor, sadly, the finances.

I think it's worth noting that for economic reasons, for financial reasons, a great deal of what goes out on radio has to be repeated in order to generate enough income to attract talented people and so on, and also one repeats programmes because one has to recognise that people are out in the daytime and want another opportunity to listen to things. But it does tend to mean that the airtime is reduced. I'm constantly

asked why don't I do programmes for this group and that group, and, "Can we have it on at 10 o'clock in the morning, please?"

People are very possessive about radio; they want their own world reflected on air. Bombardment is the order of the day.

Interviewer: You took over as Controller, you've mentioned you've followed David now twice, a hard act to follow, first Network Editor and then as Controller Radio 4.

0:59:52 How did you view, when you took over, Michael, your new assignment? And what did you consider required to be done for the benefit of Radio 4's patronage?

Michael Green: Well, I think the problem for the network was more to do with perception and image than of reality. I mean, the truth is that the network had been changing quite a lot during the '70s and early '80s, programmes were changing, though not as much as I think some people would have wished. The tone of the network was changing, the texture of it, the feel.

But the general view, if you were to go out into the streets and say, "Radio 4?" People would say, rather stuffy, middle-aged, people wearing brown suits, it's for solicitors, "It's for my father, or my grandfather, it's not for me." I think whilst trying to develop new programme strands, to try and catch the contemporary world as widely as one can, the task has equally been to say to people, "Look, this is what we are, this is what we represent these days, we're not stuffy. We are for you."

And one of the really amazing things about recent years, and the thing that actually brings me to work with a smile in the morning, is that a whole new generation of younger people

have found the network and are enjoying it. I mean, the old view that when the home service listeners finally went to their maker, so to would Radio 4, happily, has been disproved. That young people in their twenties – not much before that, but their mid-twenties – once they decide that they need a life policy, and a mortgage, and they need to put their mother in law somewhere, and so on, and begin to be citizens, they discover this network which seems to offer them a great deal of that, and a few jokes as well, and it's a rather nice place, and they read nice poetry, and all these other extraordinary things that we do.

And people are coming to it, because it is still in a Tower of Babel, and that tower will grow higher – or whatever Towers of Babel do – as more new services come on stream, but still we are a distinctive voice in the mix. As you go along the dial, people say, "Ah, that's Radio 4." Therefore, the balancing act is to try and retain all of those associations, retain that quality, the standards of excellence I hope still persist, whilst at the same time being seen to be part of today, of the '90s, and being a channel which is for as many people as possible.

I've stopped using a turnstile. I think getting into Radio 4 was like getting into the football match when I used to go to Oakwell ground at Barnsley at the age of seven, you know those tiny little turnstiles, it was a bit like that getting into Radio 4. We've opened the gates a bit, and there are risks in that, adopting a different tone, a more informal style, a greater range of textures and so forth in the programmes we make. That's all risky business, because it disaffects some people. But as long as people are coming in at the bottom and saying, "That's for me as well, can I have a share in that?" that's fine.

1:03:14

Interviewer: You mention risks, I'd use the word risqué, when I look at some of the comedy output, I'm jolly glad it's there, very different from what I knew in the days of the home service.  
(Laughter)

Michael Green: Yes, I think listeners to the home service scarcely recognise some of what they hear these days. But again, as you're saying, a network like this, that doesn't have to please advertisers, I think that is quite an important consideration, can afford to take risks, can afford occasionally to be risqué, if you like, and can afford to do my music on the one hand, and Radio Active on the other, and weekending, and Quote Unquote. It's the diversity. I think what one hopes to be able to do is to offer some things for all conditions of men and women who are listening, and of all ages, but to say to them, "Look, if there are things that you don't like, I'm sorry, come back tomorrow, because I'm sure there will be something that you will enjoy."

Interviewer: Today is Wednesday January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1991. Some nine hours ago the United Nations Pause for Goodwill in the Gulf expired. Today could see the launch of an attack against Iraq; 47 years ago, in a BBC studio not very far away from this room, I played a recording, it was one done by General Eisenhower, he was announcing D-Day. "People of Western Europe, today our forces have landed on the Normandy beaches."  
  
That evening, those of us who were working on radio Newsreel were given written instructions concerning the broadcasting of war news from D-Day onwards.

1:05:03

Michael, what instructions have your news and current affairs staff been given for the handling of news now, here on January 16<sup>th</sup>.

Michael Green:

Well, I don't think the instructions have varied very much over the period of 47 years. I mean, in essence the instructions are to do with sensitivity, a recognition that a good deal of information will be denied to us immediately. There is a voracious appetite now for news and information, as I suspect there was then. The instructions basically are to do with conveying truth, being sensitive to feelings, to attitudes, to avoid at all costs, jingoism, to be alert to propaganda, to put information in context, particularly outside news and current affairs, almost to eschew comment upon hostilities, because it is so difficult and so fraught, and words can be misinterpreted.

I've spent the last week or so going through with the heads of light entertainment and drama in particular the schedule that we're currently broadcasting, because although if, as now looks very likely, hostilities do start, although many of our listeners will want two things, they will want up to date, accurate, truthful, moderate, sober news and information and commentary, they will want all that, and they will want it all round the clock, and we will do that for them.

They will also, I think, want a degree of normality in our broadcasting as well. I remind people that things like [Hit Master 1:07:03] sustained people in the last war, that the lighter side of life will sustain them in this next bout of hostilities, if it happens, but we shall need to tread very carefully, and very softly. I shall be looking at scripts. I've decided that Weekending, the weekly satirical programme will continue, as it did for the first time in the last general election – it had previously come off the air, I said it must go on – but I

insist on seeing the script before it goes into the studio, and that is highly unusual. I don't insist on seeing scripts in the normal course of events, but in this case I will.

And one is simply saying to everybody to proceed cautiously, to be aware of the sensitivities of listeners, and things that last week might have seemed entirely innocuous or harmless, may well not be this week.

1:07:59

Interviewer: You'll be using your own past experience as a political journalist?

Michael Green: Yes. We have decided that on the first and probably second day of hostilities, the long wave and the FM frequency will be together, because I think, because of the very large footprint that long wave has, both right through the UK and into many parts of western Europe as well, that a very large audience will turn to radio – this is an interesting phenomenon, isn't it, how people come back to radio in times of stress like this? – will turn to radio, and I therefore want it to be as widely available as possible.

After a couple of days, I have proposed that we should try to revert to some normality on long wave, but to run a rolling news service on FM, because in this war, unlike the Falklands, the number of sources of information will be enormous – Moscow, the Pentagon, the State Department, Tel Aviv, Jeddah, you name it, not least the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office in London. And I want Radio 4 to have the flexibility to go to wherever news and information is being imparted, for press briefings and statements.

Of course, we could go to the House of Commons as you couldn't in 1944, but in an odd way, because there is such a diversity of sources of information, because there is CNN and satellite broadcasting, the burden on the journalist in this building is the greater. He's no longer in a cocoon; he can no longer create his own agenda, he has to be aware of what others are doing, and what others are saying. But coverage of an event like this simply calls for the greatest sensitivity, for words to be looked at twice and three times before they go on the air, to avoid melodrama. It should, and I'm sure will, bring out the best in the BBC, its talent, I think for reporting accurately and objectively and impartially, simply getting it right.

END AUDIO

[www.uktranscription.com](http://www.uktranscription.com)