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File: LR003239 - RICHARD KELLY (Interview 26).mp3

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START AUDIO

Trevor: A history of North Regional broadcasting. Interview 26.
Richard Kelly.

In any history of North Regional broadcasting, the one name which for a period for some 40 years became synonymous with the BBC in the North East of England, and with Newcastle in particular, is that of Richard Kelly.

0:00:23 What, I wonder, brought this legend in his own lifetime into the BBC in the first place? And what had he done in a life before his introduction to the world of broadcasting? Dick, that is question number one for you.

Richard Kelly: Well, what had I done before I entered the BBC in 1946 incidentally? Well, I was born in Newcastle about 500 yards from the broadcasting centre here underneath the blue star which would have pleased my father. The insignia of Newcastle Breweries. That makes only two of us you might say.

Then I went to school in Newcastle and I went to university in Newcastle and subsequently in Paris. I did a very short spell of teaching until I was called up, conscripted into the army where I spent six years. I was just of the age to cop the longest spell and hated every minute of it.

I was put into the Pioneer Corps, the pick and shovel brigade, which you might think a rather peculiar assignment. I can only say that there were three reasons why recruits were sent into the Pioneer Corps. First of all, defective vision. Secondly, temperamental instability. Thirdly, political unreliability. I was the only one that got in under all three heads.

I tried to get out, not into any other regiment or corps, in fact, I applied to be transferred to the pits. I would rather have done that than stay in the army. Unfortunately, that was not on, evidently. It stayed with me for a long time, that feeling.

A subsequently did a feature programme on Bevin Boys. I wasn't a Bevin Boy, you see. Of all the numerous people we interviewed, I could only find one who would rather have been in the pits, down the mines, than in the army, than in the services. That rather surprised me given the extent of my detestation of it, which was lightened a bit when I was compulsory transferred.

I never volunteered for anything following the very good army rule, to the so-called Intelligence Corps where I was taught this outlandish language, Bulgarian, at the School of Slavonic Studies at London University for one year, along with three of four others. And joined what was called the Political Warfare Executive.

In later years, my young son once said to me, "What is political warfare, dad?" I said, "It is the sort where you don't get killed, son." Fortunately, I was, as it were, in the plain clothes division, which helped. Eventually I was demobilised in 1946 and immediately joined the BBC. There happened to be a vacancy.

In my student days I had done a bit of broadcasting on the subject of jazz music. I was a kind of premature DJ. It was

clear that all the BBC was looking for – I had done a bit of broadcasting, propaganda broadcasting in the army, but that was it. They wanted someone with a smattering of experience in broadcasting. They were looking for somebody also with a bit of education, so I filled the bill that way, so it looked respectable. That was it.

There didn't seem to be any other candidates. I suspect there was one who was the first choice who turned it down because he could make more money elsewhere. I was delighted to get the job, I really was. I thought this was terrific, joining the BBC.

I came to Newcastle as what was called a general programme producer. I stayed with the BBC until 1975 in various capacities. Then I reached retirement age and I began freelancing mainly for The Guardian, occasionally for other papers, and a bit of broadcasting, including Radio 3; think of that. That give you the picture to today.

Trevor: Well, I want to concentrate on the part that you have just sort of skipped over in five words; the time you actually spent with the BBC, Dick. You joined the BBC Centre working as with our colleagues in Leeds, to a headquarters in Manchester. The BBC in Newcastle had its own transmitters and therefore, I imagine, a little more autonomy.

0:07:05 What was New Bridge Street like when you joined? What were your first impressions of the firm when you thought, "Ah, I am now a member of the staff of the BBC."

Richard Kelly: Well, relief tinged with elation at having got, what was known at the time as a good job. You see, the alternative being teaching which I didn't despise incidentally, nor do I now.

Clearly, I was in a better role at the BBC than I would have been trying to teach French to unwilling students.

What was it like at the BBC? It was a very small station, New Bridge Street. There was a station director who in fact was an old soldier. A very amiable sort of chap who looked after the station generally but didn't have any specific knowledge in any field of broadcasting.

On the programme side, there was another producer for a time, but he quickly went. This was John Polwarth who left after, if I remember correctly, 18 months, a couple of years, to become a Canadian representative, or something like that. He was a very decent sort of a bloke; up to the eyes in BBC type respectability. He was very, very helpful. He was rather a difficult man to come to close terms with. He was very helpful after his fashion.

I remember, he always used to tell me what kudos attached to working for the BBC. Although I was not unaware of them in the literal meaning of the word kudos, I wondered what exactly he meant, you see. In due course he gave me an example. He said, "When you are going to the cinema, there is no need to stand in a queue as there invariably will be." He said, "Just walk in and present your card to the manager."

I had plenty of cards incidentally. On joining the BBC, you are presented with half a million – I am not exaggerating – half a million visiting cards in cursive script. The British Broadcasting Corporation, Mr Richard Kelly. Because they only recruited gentlemen at that period.

Anyway, I did this according to John's instructions once. The next time I went to the pictures with my girlfriend, I presented my card to the manager which tremendously impressed my girlfriend but acutely embarrassed me, I might say. I didn't do it

again, though the temptation when you saw the length of the queue in those days, late '40s, early '50s, was very great.

[Break in Audio 0:10:40

Serviced everything from Lift Up Your Hearts to Jazz Club. I wasn't encouraged to initiate anything. I was often smartly told that this was not my function. Light entertainment was based in Manchester and OBs and sport were based in Manchester. So that when, of a Saturday evening I was holding the hand of some sports reporter who was reporting a Rugby Union match at Gosforth, it transpired that there were more players than spectators at this sport.

I wrote to the head of sport suggesting that instead of covering the Rugby Union at Gosforth with an attendance of 15 or 20, that we cover soccer at St James' Park Gallowgate, Newcastle United where there were attendances at that time of 50,000. I got a sharp rap on the knuckles about that. "Sport," he wrote back, "Is my province. And keep your nose out of it." In no uncertain terms.

So, we continued to cover Rugby Union instead of soccer where I am sure we could have got running commentary for radio if we had tried. However, that was out.

Other departments similarly; we used to get visiting producers you see, including representatives of that vastly overrated clique in London features under Laurence Gilliam. I remember at one time, there was this fellow came up, [D G Brightson 0:12:25], I think his name was. He was producing a programme called Johnny Miner, for God's sake. The patronising tone of it.

There was no straight to mic stuff, everything had to be scripted. This ___ used to go out to visit the BBC's miner. The BBC had a miner and it had a farmer that you always went to

because you trained them to say what you expected them to say. He got his piece and so on. This was part of this appalling feature, as I thought. At that time, I didn't know where to go from there.

You must remember all the time that I really was very happy at the BBC. In view of the later ructions, this might strike you as odd. I was very happy. I didn't want to upset the apple cart.

[Break in Audio 0:13:25]

It went on like that. I went to the training school. Actually, I did quite well there. There was one famous BBC reporter who used to do royalty and all that. The [dwyer 0:13:41] of the BBC. Godfrey-

Trevor: Godfrey Talbot.

Richard Kelly: Godfrey Talbot, yes. He recommended me for a foreign correspondent job. Alas, it didn't materialise, but there we are.

Trevor: Well, I think the region, certainly North Region, were thankful you didn't get that post. Dick, as a Geordie born and bred, perhaps it isn't surprising that the BBC and the North East in its wisdom, very soon put you in charge of a programme which began during the war years, on the 21st May 1942 to be precise. It was broadcast in those wartime days at only irregular intervals with Esther McCracken introducing the various items. John Polwarth, whom we mentioned, the producer. Until April 1947.

0:14:24 From May of that year, you and John are billed as joint producers. From December 1947, The Radio Times gives the

name of Richard Kelly as the producer of Wot Cheor Geordie. That particular addition, number 27, came I am told, from Seaburn Hall, Sunderland?

Richard Kelly: Well, I don't remember. What I do remember is this; Wot Cheor Geordie started not under John, but under Cecil McGivern. Who wanted to do a Tyneside variety show, and turned to his secretary and said, "What do we call it?" She said, "Wot Cheor Geordie."

At that time, both Wot Cheor Geordie and its related programmes like Barn Dance, were all done from the studio. When I did take over, I did two things immediately. I took the programme out of the studio at a stroke. Secondly, I cleared out all the Jesmond Geordies.

The Jesmond Geordie was a phenomenon which perhaps needs a little explanation. Just briefly, it was the sort of the person who spoke what he or she conceived to be standard English, which very often wasn't. But who, affected to put on the Geordie accent, you see. In other words, to burlesque and ham it.

That was out. Totally out. I think that this, which removed the patronising aspect of it straight away, I think this was one of the biggest reasons for the success of Wot Cheor Geordie. Which, as I say, has become a legend. It went on for years and years and years.

The most difficult person to remove was Esther McCracken. Everybody was uncomfortable with her, but such was her reputation that she took a bit of shifting, I will tell you. I eventually succeeded.

That was it. We eventually began to develop – scour the clubs and the pubs and discover comedians and encourage singing groups and encourage composers too. Wherever we went to, whether it was Sunderland, or Ashington, or anywhere else, we would have number especially composed by two octogenarians, as a matter of fact. Who wrote some wonderful songs like The Ha'penny Woods at Bedlington. A lovely, ironic touch to it. Not the sort of thing that was current at the time where the pattern was to apostrophise Northumberland and its beauties and so forth and so on. How marvellous place this is. Paradise on Earth and all that codswallop.

We really managed to get a storyline into some of the songs. These two chaps, they really were marvellous. Absolutely marvellous.

0:17:35

Trevor:

You got it going under you from, I see there were 9 programmes in 1948, and by 1951, 24 editions going out. To begin with I imagine Dick, it was only heard on the Newcastle transmitter. But certainly, when I joined the region, it was going out throughout the whole of the North of England relayed by Moorside Edge.

Richard Kelly:

Yes. I think it was – by the time I had taken it out of the studio it was carried over the whole of the region. It was an immense success, you know. It only cost a fraction of the light entertainment shows put on by Manchester but attracted an equivalent audience. Even those living in Derbyshire and Lincolnshire in the south of the region use to tune into it saying that they thoroughly enjoyed it, even though they didn't

understand a word. Which I don't quite understand actually, but anyway.

Trevor: (Laughter) Perhaps it was something to do with that Geordie accent. We had got away from the Jesmond Geordies and we were getting down to the real McCoy.

0:18:39 Wot Cheor Geordie, Dick, ran until 1958. 12th August, the last Wot Cheor Geordie coming from the BBCs VHF exhibition at the City Hall in Newcastle. I was interested to see – because I remember they featured the Barry Sisters, the Consett Citizens Choir and that voice also that I remember, Archie Hunter, introducing items.

Richard Kelly: We tried a number of people but finally settle on a man called Bill Scott. He did more than anyone else. He was also the caller on Barn Dance. Barn Dance continued to run more or less alongside Wot Cheor Geordie and actually outlived it. We did one television broadcast of Barn Dance which was my one and only venture into television on the production side. I got an excellent director from Manchester, I must say, Derek Burrell-Davis.

I got half a television unit from Manchester and half a television unit from Glasgow. These two were put together to do this Barn Dance from the North East. It went like a bomb. There was terrific acclaim for it in the newspapers. Peter Black of the Daily Mail said, "This is what we want rather than this imported American stuff." It was so successful. That was the last I ever heard of television.

Trevor: Well, thanks to you at Barn Dance, my predecessor [Gwen Payne 0:20:18] who took it on to Children's Hour, we carried on radio versions and then I took over television, children's television versions of the programme. Then we handed it over to adult viewing. As I recall, in the early days of Dickenson Road, I remember seeing this young fair-haired lad in an open shirt and dungarees introducing the programme. He was the called. His name is Brian Redhead. It did become a very successful programme in terms of television.

0:20:52 To revert to your arrival, Dick, at the BBC in Newcastle, you discovered both sides of the microphone. You were actually doing interviews and broadcasting yourself, as well as producing?

Richard Kelly: Not if I could help it. I have never been either camera-struck or mic-struck. As I remember it, I would certainly do an interview if it was absolutely necessary. So far as I know, I could find myself just saying, "This is the North of England Home Service," and let the rest get on with it.

I did quite a lot of things as a general programme assistant, and later described as a general programme producer. No increase in salary. I reported football matches, for instance, when Gateshead defeated Liverpool in the FA Cup.

0:21:48

Trevor: Well, your topicality series, the start of 1948, Bringing it Home. Covering such things as salvage collection, juvenile delinquency, fish, catering, transport, social insurance. I see that you did an occasional series in the North East including Newcastle Storytellers Club with yourself billed as secretary.

Then you don the proverbial top hat and tails for Up and Doing featuring voices and personalities in the North East variety. You did a terrific range of programmes as a GPA from here.

Richard Kelly: They must have been rubbish. That is why I have forgotten them.

0:22:23

Trevor: (Laughter) What about A Date With Yesterday? That was a fairly long-running series of yours.

Richard Kelly: Again, it was a way of employing the Northern Variety Orchestra. The only thing I remember about Date With Yesterday was that Czech conductor – what is his name?

0:22:42

Trevor: [Willhem Towsky 0:22:44]?

Richard Kelly: Willhem Towsky, yes. We were doing a number called On Moonlight Bay. The trumpet player, the first trumpet, repeatedly came on too loud. After several requests, was still coming in fortissimo. Whereupon Willhem went over to him and said, "Moonlight, not club night." He toned it down a bit.

Which reminded me of an incident when we were recording with the Cowpen and Crofton Miners' Welfare Band. We were recording a signature tune for Voice of the People. It was

based on a folk tune called Adam Buckham. The final eight bars were introduced by a glissando on the trombone.

The conductor wasn't happy with the tone of this. He said, "Look," he said. "I want nice horn notes, like horse droppings. Not (blows raspberry) like cow shit." And it worked.

0:24:15

Trevor: You have rather sort of dismissed your ___[0:24:18], that particular talent. Yet, you were one of the judges for the very successful Top Town series which Barney Callaghan did.

Richard Kelly: Yes, I got into a loud of trouble about that from James Gibb, the celebrated concert pianist and formerly a friend of mine, in my youth.

Trevor: Who was with us in forces broadcasting in Hamburg, was James.

Richard Kelly: Was he? Yes. It was his family that originated Gibbs' toothpaste, "Protects those ivory towers." Jimmy was prevailed upon to take part in a Top Town. But the piano provided was not only grossly out of tune, but in need of repair in several sections. Never the less, he had to go ahead with it, recording at that particular time. I don't think Jimmy has ever forgiven me for that. However, it is a long time since I saw him. Perhaps he has forgotten it now.

0:25:23

Trevor: Dick, did you manage to get the sort of programmes that you wanted to do onto the air? Or were you bound by a management structure which often made that difficult?

Richard Kelly: The management structure made it very difficult. You have mentioned that one had a good deal of freedom in broadcasting. Particularly at a station like Newcastle which was well away from the regional centre. Well, up to a point. You had freedom, but you didn't have the resources, you see. What good was your freedom in that sort of situation?

Again, you see, if you wanted to do a feature, you were usually prevailed upon to pass it to features department, Manchester. Never the less, I did manage to do some features.

The problem was you see, that the structure of the BBC where the resources came to the centre in London and then an allocation was made to the region. Then, if there was anything left, places like Newcastle got it. It was a kind of colonial system where the centre operated, had its satraps in various parts of the country. It was, I think, not a good system, however.

0:27:02

Trevor: Did you ever, as it were, short circuit Manchester and make contact with London? Go to see the heads of the output departments?

Richard Kelly: Well, I went to see light entertainment heads. I saw light entertainment heads now and again; much good did it do me. There was a lot of corruption in BBC light entertainment at that

time. For instance, I said I had a band come up to Newcastle and I was servicing it, for some reason or another. The band leader came up to me and he said, "Can you get us on Music While You Work?" I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Look, if you can, you can have the fee." He said, "I usually give it to X in London." I knew well what was going on.

I didn't have much contact with them, no. It wasn't my scene really. One does what one has to do. If I was a general programme producer, then obviously a certain amount of light entertainment. Though, Manchester monopolised what was left of it.

Trevor:

You will recall those famous programme review boards, Dick, held in Manchester in the 1940s. We assembled in the boardroom at Piccadilly. Later in Peter House, whilst the BBC made up its mind about a proper headquarters building for the North Region.

Then our head, or assistant head of programmes of the day, Bob Stead, Ted Wilkinson, David Porter, Brian Cave, Graham Miller, would go through the list of recent programmes. In my experience, if the producer of the programme talked about having to be present, those of us who were cowards were either guarded in our comment about a bit of bad radio or said nothing.

0:28:54

As I very clearly recall, these review boards were often made only bearable by the presence of a chap from Newcastle who could be relied upon to say things none of us would dare to say. Did you work at being something of a rebel? Or did that come easy as far as you and the BBC's North Regional management were concerned?

Richard Kelly:

Well, I didn't work at being a rebel. You have got to remember that we travelled down from Newcastle arriving for the so-called programme board at 2 o'clock. Often, we had to walk out of the programme board in order to catch the 6 o'clock train back. It went on and on and on interminably about everything. Including, believe it or not, the toilet paper.

One had to stir it up a bit. What better way than to introduce a bit of candour in to the negotiation. After all, if you criticised anybody, they weren't going to lose their jobs. Such was the security at that time anyway in the BBC, that I, for my part felt, "Well, if I can't speak out and say what I think in a job like this, I never will." In fact, one of the things I liked about the job was the freedom to speak out.

Mind you, it wasn't all criticism. I stood up for people who might have produced bad programmes but in my opinion, it wasn't their fault. It was the remit they were given by programme chiefs; all of whom seemed to be absurdly ill-equipped to head programme output.

In one of these programme boards, I was sometimes accused of being too critical, but there were occasions when I did stand up for people who I thought were not getting a fair deal. There was one occasion when the programme under discussion was a television programme called Points North. The members of staff present were very critical of Brian Redhead and saying, "Oh, he was quite wrong for this sort of – too bumptious," and one thing and another. So, the slandering of Redhead went on.

Finally, I said, "Look, the truth of the matter is, that it is only Redhead, with all his bumptiousness, that keeps the programme alive. Without him it would die. It would be totally flat. There is no editorial flare displayed in the programme whatsoever. Such liveliness as it has got, it due to Redhead."

Do you remember that occasion when, oh it had gone on very drearily, this programme board? Finally, it came around to my turn. "I notice the lavatory paper in the loos has been changed. Is there some reason why we have abandoned the tried and trusted Bronco brand?"

Trevor: With the BBC's name stamped on it.

Richard Kelly: Whoever was chairing the board turned to the admin bloke and said, "Mills, will you look into it." The following week the Bronco brand was back. It is no doubt, you see, some enterprising salesman had come to the BBC, the [waller 0:32:36] in charge of stores, given him the Masonic handshake and got his brand of loo paper in, instead of the Bronco brand. Something like that.

0:32:45

Trevor: When it was stamped, it was like the ashtrays. You remember those beautiful buckets we had? The brass buckets, the big ones in the studios? Those were stolen. The BBC ashtrays were stolen because they had BBC stamped on. The loo paper was stolen, Dick, because it had BBC stamped on it.

In light entertainment in London they lost it by the crate because people would go back, particularly American artists saying, "Gee, it is great." Sammy Davis Jr. In fact, for Bill Cotton, instead of a fee, he took back a load of BBC loo paper. That is true.

Richard Kelly: In my song and dance days when I was doing dance bands among other things, I had some great times mind you, with a company of people called the song pluggers. Who went around BBC producers, trying to induce them to have their numbers played in order to increase the sales of sheet music and later, gramophone records.

Trevor: Hamilton Kennedy, was one.

Richard Kelly: The top man in BBC light entertainment, Bill Cotton Jr.

Trevor: Bill Cotton Jr.

Richard Kelly: I don't want to give you the impression that I was fed up in the North of England. Obviously if I was fed up I – well, I had a little alternative, let's me fair. I had applied for a number of jobs but without success.

0:34:09

Trevor: We have been talking about relationships. Where, I think, we were particularly well served, but I would like your views on this, were by the programme engineers, the recording engineers, the outside broadcasting teams.

Richard Kelly: Well, I don't think so. I think that BBC engineering was a real backwards outfit. They resisted every innovation, principally the use of the Midget tape recorder. The Germans were using

the Midget tape recorder in the Western Desert, you know, at what time Frank Gillard and company were still recording on discs.

I remember the opposition of engineers and programme operators, whatever they call them, to the use of the Midget tape recorder. I had a terrible time at Newcastle with these machines. The EMI machine, the portable tape recorder. Portable in the sense that it wasn't actually screwed to the floor.

When I reported it, one of the programme boards, the difficulties we were having with the EMI machine and, "Why couldn't our engineers get down to it and do something about it in conjunction with EMI? And get something that was reliable and worked?" Up came the voice of engineering, "Why don't you use the recording car?" The problem was, they wanted the jobs that attached to the recording car. I sympathised with them. But in an organisation like the BBC, they could have been deployed elsewhere. I wouldn't see anybody out of a job.

Trevor:

No. I was thinking not the head of engineering North Region, or the managers, I was thinking of actually the colleagues who went around with us. They didn't make the decisions, they did what they were told to do in engineering. Of course, in engineering, I speak as having started in engineering in the BBC, we didn't enjoy the freedom of expression, let me put it that way, that those of you did who were programme makers. There was a difference. That attitude, that unbending attitude of people like Basil Vernon, drove me mad. The arguments we had over refurbishing of studios and things like that.

You have mentioned the EMI recorder. Let me come on to a programme that you are always associated with. Before you

tell me, it wasn't, it is a highly successful programme.

Successful for two reasons; the fact that you were doing it and you brought an expertise to it. And, you had the use of the Midget recorder. You really went out and about.

0:37:21

This started on December 20th, 1957, I see from the Radio Times. I see for the first time the title, Voice of the People.

Richard Kelly:

Yes, Voice of the People, it was called. Then at the behest of controller North Region, it was called Voice of the North. Voice of the People being considered to demagogue. This, I think, was a major innovation. I am not saying that it was the first programme that used interviews and vox pops on a Midget tape recorder, but it was the first programme to use it systematically, five days a week.

Oddly enough, it started as a regular programme on the same day as Today. I can't quote you dates, but I have that in the back of my mind. It started on the same day as Today.

Anyway, Voice of the People and Today ran concurrently.

Whilst the rustle of scripts was still heard regularly in Today, Voice of the People was going out and doing interviews with people in their own habitat.

Very often, later when Today cottoned on to this, they would use two, three, even four items from the previous night's Voice of the People. Which we used to try and persuade them to do because the interviewers got an extra fee.

Can I tell you how all this started, which is quite clear in my mind? It was about the late '50s. Television had become widespread in the North East which was the last area to be covered. It was, of course, a great attraction. I was still doing radio light entertainment. In particular, a programme called

Meet the Jolly Boys, which was centred on working men's clubs.

The comedian in question on this occasion seemed to me to be doing a very good act. They sat there with their pints of Fed in front of them, as much as to say, "Make us laugh. We have left the telly for this." This poor chap – when you are listening to him doing his act at the [OB point 0:39:56], your heart bleeds for him as well if you are any sort of producer. You get a great sympathy for him.

At the end of it I said, I thought to myself, "This is terrible. There must be easier ways of earning a living than this." The following morning, I got hold of this Midget tape recorder which had been lying on the premises for months. I determined to find out whether it could be used effectively because you were dissuaded from using them. Positively dissuaded by the engineering people.

At the time, there had been a number of cases of vandalism and delinquency in Newcastle. Including particularly, a part of the town not far from Broadcasting House, where these delinquents had been hanging dead cats on the door knockers of old age pensioners. I got into my motor, went up the hill, stopped at this old people's estate and with the Midget tape recorder girded on my back, I started to knock on doors.

The wisdom of the time was that people, when confronted by a microphone, would shut up like clam. Well, they didn't. They talked freely, both entertainingly and movingly. I came back to the studio and I formed two conclusions. Firstly, that I wasn't God's gift as an interviewer, but that this technique did work, and that a programme could be founded on it.

I scoured the pubs of Newcastle and found my reporters. The most famous of them ultimately, was Harold Williamson. We

put together a programme which we called Voice of the People, which is what it was. In the first programme there were three items. One was about a gambling school outside a club in Country Durham. The second was about rugby versus soccer I think, in schools or something like that. The third was the subject of abortion.

This was the first-time abortion had ever been handled in the BBC, in terms of actually talking to a woman who had had an abortion. This really made them sit up and take notice. Particularly when a review appeared in the Manchester Guardian, as it then was, which was the paper that did the thinking for the North Regional chiefs who did any thinking at all.

Ultimately, we got this with a good deal of trouble, we got it onto a nightly basis. We went, and we did a whole lot of items. Some of them comic, some of them tragic, some of them light, some of them serious. Harold Williamson did a wonderful interview with the sister of a woman called Jenny Thompson who had worked for 30 years I think, as a cleaner - never absent, never late - at [Biro 0:43:28]. At a big flour mill in Newcastle. When she got TB, the endemic disease of the North East at the time, she was a fortnight in hospital and got a weeks' wages. Harold did a most moving interview with her family.

We did evictions. On the lighter side, we did people sounding off against the newly emerging pop music. We did the first ever interview on Freemasonry in which a Freemason spoke. He ultimately regretted it, but never the less. The interview is still in archives.

We did an interview with the people of North Shields about Dr Hastings Banda of Malawi, who was a GP there and in what high regard they held him. We interviewed a safe breaker on

his technique. We covered the North East institutions like the wash houses, you know.

I think if I were to be asked what the general theme was, it was man's inhumanity to man. We covered evictions and poverty and all that, but in a way which people didn't really get fed up with it – in an arresting sort of way – because it was the voice of the people. It was people expressing themselves; the people at the sticky end.

There was one, you might call it a spin-off. I would not claim that Voice of the People was the first one to use the vox pop technique. It was the first one to use it systematically. One thing which definitely was a first which derived from Voice of the People was the consumer programme. We began to do consumer items within Voice of the People, you see.

Trevor: One I have here is a new type of hair restorer.

Richard Kelly: A new type of hair restorer, I have no doubt. We did bread, for instance. One slogan for bread was, "Bakers eat it." We did an item proving that bakers wouldn't touch it. We took dog meat, "Pal meat for dogs prolongs active life." We went to a lady breeder in Gosforth. We said, "Does it prolong the active life of your dogs?" She said, "No, it makes their hair drop out"

When Harold had done it he said, "I think you better come and hear this before it goes out." I heard this lady. I said, "Well, what would she be like in the dock Harold?" He said, "Oh, good. Good witness." I said, "Put it out then." We got a mountain of complaints from Petfoods of Melton Mowbray, but they never sued.

We always mentioned names, you see. It was not done at the time. I used to get memos from Graham Miller, the head of programmes, "Did I hear a brand name mentioned in your programme last night?" This is what you had to cope with, you see. Never did they realise that consumerism was an up and coming thing.

When I applied for the resources to go ahead with a national consumer programme, because I had had good relations with the Consumer's Association and all that, I was referred. I was just referred to some London ragbag of a programme, ___[0:47:38] or you know, the ridiculous names that were used to cover this deadbeat sort of thing.

There were a young couple in bed, for instance. The electric blanket took fire and they leapt out of the conjugal bed, you see. We mentioned the name of the electric blanket. We were sharing a wavelength with Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland rang up and said, "I have had a complaint from such and such a firm of manufacturers. They say we used your brand name last night. (Laughter) Of course I told them that must be wrong because that never happened on the BBC." I had to tell them that it did happen on this occasion.

As we are just at the end of national condom week, which has received blanket coverage in the media, will you allow me to point out that more than 30 years ago, I did a half hour feature on condoms. Their manufacture, their distribution, their popularity. The feature which was based on certain remarks at some Anglican conference and included contributions on that level, as well as certain more basic ones, let me admit. The completed, recorded programme was banned by the head of programmes.

We approached Boots the chemist in Nottingham for a contribution. I got a letter back from them saying that they were

sorry, they were unable to accept the invitation because it was one of the principals of their founder, Jesse Boot, that mention should not be made of contraceptives in his stores. If you walk into a Boots store now, not only are condoms on sale, but you can get three packets special offer for the price of two. So much for the principals of Jesse Boot when confronted with naked commercialism.

Our efforts to get a consumer programme going then were frustrated by the leadership. Now, of course, every channel, every television channel, every radio wavelength has got its consumer programme. It may be cheap, but I don't think that is the main reason for its popularity. I think it is popular because people want to hear commodities subjected to assessment and criticism. They want the names mentioned. They don't want somebody pussyfooting around it.

0:50:44

Trevor: Dick, what sort of a boss were you to those younger producers working under you? I know two of them, Gillian Hush, John Mapplebeck; both of whom, I must say, light up at the mention of Dick Kelly. Were you an easy boss? Were you a hard boss?

Richard Kelly: Oh, I think terrifying. No, not with them. I pick good people. There was a free exchange of ideas among us, you see. They knew that I wanted them to speak their minds, the very reverse of a programme board, I might say. We were a very good team. I have never known such loyalty in any unit, as I got from the people who worked with me. You notice I say, "With me," not, "For me." With me on Voice of the People. Harold Williamson and David Bean, Alex Glasgow and a number of other very good people as well.

0:52:09

Trevor: Do you look back at that period as being the highlight of your BBC work?

Richard Kelly: I think it was the most original, yes. I think it was the most positive contribution. The BBC used to send trainees up to Newcastle, you know, to see how the other half lived. People like Peter Hill and Melvin Bragg. I must say, I got on very well with all the trainees. I get on well with anybody, it was when I stepped out of Newcastle that I didn't get on with the people. In Manchester, anywhere except Manchester really cast a blight on Manchester which I used to detest. It is a smashing place now, on my more recent visit to it.

0:53:13

Trevor: What made you decide to turn from network radio, Dick, to local radio?

Richard Kelly: Trevor, I have never made a decision in my life. Perhaps I should correct that. I have made thousands of decisions. I have never had a choice of career in my life. The reason I went to local radio was that regional broadcasting was closing down, there was no more from Newcastle, not even a studio.

When I do my occasional pieces for Radio 4 I have to go to Manchester to do it. I don't mind. As I say, it is a different place now from what it is then. Or perhaps the ambiance has changed.

0:54:16

Trevor: You can't come into this new broadcasting house here at Fenham and do down the line to Manchester? You physically have to go there, do you?

Richard Kelly: Well, I have to go there when there is no producer here. I suppose it is technically possible to put it through to Manchester. Anyway, I never really had any choice. Regional broadcasting had finished. I was then faced either with redundancy – I remember the redundancy terms then were not what the redundancy terms are now, otherwise I might have grabbed at them. Possibly a transfer to Manchester, which I wasn't terribly keen on. Thirdly, one of the local radio stations, not necessarily as manager.

However, when it came to the point, the list of candidates for the managership of Radio Newcastle was so appalling that there was no choice really but to put me there. At least I was literate. So, into it I went. I was obliged to appoint staff, permanent staff, at very short notice. Well, a right shower I got, and I take my share of the blame for them.

It was supposed to be one of the better stations. Newcastle and Nottingham were supposed to be the best, in fact. From what I heard when I did the rounds of local radio stations in 1975, they probably were the best. I had some very naïve ideas of management. For instance, I believed in the principal of a decent day's work for a decent day's pay. That wasn't it at all. I found myself involved in all sorts of labour relations problems.

I would come in of a morning. I would call the secretary in and I would say, "Well, love, what is the state of the anti-social working hours allowance dispute this morning?" I was engaged really in a labour relations tussle with the news editor almost as a full-time job. A terrible waste of resources, I thought. As long drawn out as it was in network radio, but in network radio at least you had other things to support you. Whereas in local radio if you were in dispute with somebody, you simply had to work with them. There was no alternative. You were a small unit, you see.

There were some decent people. Mostly from outside of journalism. The BBC is infatuated with journalism, even now. I recruited quite a lot of people from teaching. I used to advertise in the Times educational supplement. Those that I got from teaching were much better than the journalists.

The funny thing about the journalists; they didn't like getting their hands dirty. Going out on an interview where you had to knock on doors in the lower depths of Gallowgate, let's say. Oh no, they didn't like that. They liked sitting in the office writing the story, mostly in an illiterate fashion.

I make no bones at this late stage about saying I was a bloody good radio producer. I could command audiences. I wasn't interested in minority programmes, I could command real audiences.

0:58:41

Trevor: How did you resolve the labour problems, Dick?

Richard Kelly: Well, I had the wit to appoint a very good number two as programme organiser. He was very good at organisation and

one thing and another. After a particularly hectic morning he came into me and he said, "Take a seat in the armchair over there. I will pour you a gin and tonic. Sup it up and think of your pension. I will look after the shower for you."

0:59:23

Trevor: You were going to tell me his name?

Richard Kelly: Ted Gorton.

Trevor: One of course, of our band of very good programme engineers as a young man in Manchester.

Richard Kelly: I looked upon the station initially as a continuation of the sort of thing we were doing with Voice of the People on the one side, talk, and Wot Cheor Geordie, light entertainment on the other, you see. Which, in fact, were both local programmes. They both operated within 50 miles of Newcastle on Tyne.

In pursuit of that policy, I started a programme called It's a Bargain. For It's a Bargain, the radio car would go out into a shopping centre in the town. The interviewer would stop shoppers and ask them what the bargains were, where they thought the best value was, what they thought about this shop, that shop and the other shop. What was the best thing to buy in the fruit and veg line today? Questions like that.

This would go out live, so we had no editorial control over it, which we didn't want, of course. Needless to say, there were a few complaints about this from shopkeepers. Our reply to the

shopkeepers was, “You come in and say your piece in defence of your position. Or we will send somebody around if you wish.” This was the sort of programme I thought it was, if you like, a consumer programme, but a really down to earth one, I think you will admit. It meant really somebody who wasn’t afraid to mix it you see, with ordinary people. Always the people who did it were the non-journalists. Always.

1:01:37

Trevor: You left when, Dick? The staff? 19...?

Richard Kelly: 1975.

1:01:46

Trevor: But in the 1980s you returned to Radio 4, to a series of features produced by Gillian Hush. One I remember, because you set out to do a little family detective work in tracing the curious career of Inspector Kelly, and he happened to be your father?

Richard Kelly: Yes.

1:02:04

Trevor: Tell me about that.

Richard Kelly: Well, I don't know why you want to hear the content of a particular programme, Trevor.

Trevor: To me, it is a Kelly idea for radio.

Richard Kelly: Well, alright. My father came from out of the First World War bemedaled and full of gas. He got a job ironically, with the gas company in Newcastle as a labourer. From being a labourer, he became a lamp-lighter which paid a little more money, because they were not lit automatically, the lamps at that period. From being a lamp-lighter, he became a storekeeper which was another step up. From being a storekeeper, he reached the dizzy heights of streetlighting inspector for the west end of Newcastle.

Then one night – they still talk about it – the lights went out in Cowgate, which is a run-down council housing estate in the west end of Newcastle. The call went out for Dick, you see, “Send for Inspector Kelly.” Posses of lamp-lighters, ladders at the ready, tore around Cowgate and the west end of Newcastle in a search for Dick. Eventually, they found him flat on his face outside the Old Arms. That was the end of Inspector Kelly as commander of the western district street lighting.

From there, having worked his way up from labourer, to lamp-lighter, to storekeeper, to inspector, he worked his way down again from inspector, to storekeeper, to lamp-lighter to labourer. It was a career structure unprecedented in the history of the gas industry.

1:04:35

Trevor: Yet you ask me, why should you tell me that story? Are you going to do some more features, are you, for us? Or for them?

Richard Kelly: Well, I don't do many, you know. I am doing very little now. I had a long spell with The Guardian, you know. I wrote over 100 features for The Guardian alone in those ten years. Which don't amount to an awful lot really; not a full-time job, you understand. I only work when it is raining. When the sun is shining, I indulge my latter-day passion of walking the countryside.

1:05:11

Trevor: As Wilfred Pickles used to say – I think it is a lovely turn of phrase, “So and so hasn't lost his sparkle.” Finally, and without fear or favour, I am reliably informed that you, Richard Kelly, are unique as regards BBC staff. There came a time when you were ordered out of your own BBC annual interview.

Richard Kelly: Really? I wish I could recall this. I don't doubt that it happened.

Trevor: Well, the person who told me this was our revered controller at the time, Robert Stead esquire. He said, “If you are going to talk to dick,” and he burst out laughing, he said, “Ask him about his annual interview.”

Richard Kelly: Yes, I can't remember it, but I had many an up and a downer with Stead. Oh dear.

1:06:08

Trevor: His version is that you were really laying down the law and telling them in a Dick Kelly manner just what you thought of things. According to Bob he said, "So I said to Dick, 'I really see no purpose in continuing this interview, Dick. I suggest you leave.'" He said, "Dick picked up his hat and said, 'Thank you very much, I will,'" and went. (Laughter)

Richard Kelly: Yes, okay. What I do remember is an interview with a controller called Stephenson. It was after one of these dreadful programme boards, and he came up to me and he said, "Can I see you in my office afterwards?" I said, "Oh well, this is it." I gripped the arms of the chair with my knuckles showing white, waiting for what I thought was coming.

Stephenson sat down, and he said, "In view of your recent programme achievements, I have a very great pleasure in asking you to accept this cheque as a token of our appreciation." I took the cheque. I mouthed the words, "Thank you very much," but no sound came out. Eventually when I did recover my voice I said, "You haven't got a small whisky as well, have you?" (Laughter)

Trevor: Well I can say without fear of contradiction that from the time I arrived in the north in 1949, until the time you left, broadcasting in the region wouldn't have been the same for your colleagues. And of far more importance, for several generations of listeners, had you Dick Kelly, decided to stick to teaching.

END AUDIO

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