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START AUDIO

0:00:01

Trevor: History of North Region Broadcasting. This is an interview with Robert Stead. It's interview number five.

It was in the summer of 1949 that I was sent up to Manchester, my first visit to the north of England, and I came up to be interviewed for a BBC post in the north region. And I was shown into this very nice office in Broadcasting House, Piccadilly, Manchester, and a rather florid gentleman, as I remember dressed in a worsted suit, called sort of Bradford cloth. He stuck two thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, and he beamed and he said, "Is there owt as we should know about thee?"

Well, this was Controller, the BBC in the north region. My mouth fell open. He laughed and he turned to his colleague and he said, "Well, Bob, we don't really talk like that in the north of England. Well, not all the time, do we?" And that was my first meeting with the gentleman I'm speaking to now, Robert Stead. Bob, how did you come into the BBC?

Robert: Well, I was in the navy and saw an advertisement for posts in the BBC and decided I would like to join. I had originally been a newspaper man in Leeds, or near Leeds, Morley, and loved

radio and took part in just one or two little occasions when we had broadcasts from Leeds.

I was a great admirer of the outside broadcasts that Victor Smythe did. First, I was a musical lover, and he used to go around the music halls, as you well know. And secondly, he did marvellously descriptive outside broadcasts. One I remember particularly from a mill in Elland, and he talked about the fairy lights from the mill seen all over the Pennines.

I fancied doing something like that, and so I applied.

Unfortunately, I then had to go to sea again and didn't hear anything for some months. And then I got a letter saying that if I was still interested in joining the BBC, there was a post of senior talks producer. Would I like to be interviewed for that? And I said yes.

Of course I came up, and there saw John Coatman, then of course John Salt, who was the programme director at the time and he was the leading light in the region. Yes, John Coatman was controller, but the brains of the outfit and all the enthusiasm that was generated for programmes about the north was John Salt.

You have to have a bit of luck at an appointment board.

Trevor: Oh, yes.

Robert: As you probably remember, and I had the luck to come from Morley. And John Salt's great antecedent, Sir Titus Salt, was born in Morley.

Trevor: Oh, Saltaire.

Robert: He was Saltaire. You're quite right. And John asked me about it, and I knew the place well, knew who lived in it, what its history was. And so I had a rapport straightaway with him, and as I say, it was just a bit of luck.

And I was told long afterwards by Olive Salt, who was originally Olive Shapley, the producer, and she was John's wife. And when he was going through all the applicants at home, as one had to when you were a programme director, he sort of stopped when he got to mine and said, "I rather like the sound of this chap Stead." And thank God he did, and I was appointed.

0:04:23

Trevor: Now you were appointed as senior talks producer.

Robert: Of two.

0:04:26

Trevor: Of two, yes. But of course you had a journalistic background, hadn't you?

Robert: Yes. I was the third generation to have edited our local paper in Morley. My father edited it until he died in '26. My grandfather before him edited it, and subsequently for your interest both my son and my grandson went into journalism.

But that was as far back as this went. My grandfather was- he went around flogging educational publications in Huddersfield, at one time, and then he started up our local paper in Morley in 1841. But I think what happened was that the business folded up because the advertisement tax took all the profit, and there was a tax on every advertisement at the time. But it folded up after a year or two and then restarted in 1871, and it's still running as part of the Yorkshire Post group in Leeds.

0:05:50

Trevor: Well, let us go back to that January in 1946. A young man, a young officer straight from the navy, what were your first impressions of the BBC in the north?

Robert: Well, again I had a similar impression that you had of John Coatman. My introduction when I was being given a briefing as to what my duties were supposed to be was that John, recalling the Dickensian Nicholas Nickleby, referred to the act that it didn't matter much about having experience. He said, "You remember Wackford Squeers, who said, 'Spell window, w i n d o w, go wash them.'" And he said, "That's what you do here. You get on with the job," and we had to.

0:06:49

Trevor: Who were your regional colleagues? You had at that time- of course there was the Leeds representative and the representative up in Newcastle. Could you tell me something about those?

Robert: Well, Philip Fox was an astonishing chap over in Leeds. He was a very dapper man; always wore double-breasted waistcoats.

Trevor: Unlike Mr Coatman.

Robert: Unlike Mr Coatman, who only wore a very slightly grubby waistcoat, as you said with his thumbs tucked into the pockets.

But Philip was a very dapper individual indeed. His father had been the town clerk of Leeds, Tom Fox, and I knew him through my journalist background. So Philip was glad to welcome us all over to Leeds, especially if you were Yorkshiremen.

0:07:41

Trevor: And in Newcastle?

Robert: Newcastle was JC Clarke, and he was the brother of DH Clarke, who'd also served in the north region and who became the very highly important appointments officer for the whole of the corporation. That was Douglas Clarke.

Trevor: Oh, yes, I remember. I remember Douglas Clarke, yes.

Robert: Sure you will. JC was a charming man, and of course these outposts had a marvellous time. They all had a character of their own, especially in Newcastle, which of course was an old

lying-in hospital. And Leeds was a Quaker meeting house before it became a broadcasting house, and so we were quite used to buying up and using old churches and chapels when eventually I took over as programme director and later on as controller. Nothing new about it at all, Trevor.

0:08:45

Trevor: No. Who were the Manchester headquarters staff when you arrived in '46?

Robert: Well, there was Morris Johnson, who was head of music, and of course music has been tremendously important in the BBC output from the north ever since broadcasting started. Morris was himself a colourful character.

Trevor: Indeed.

Robert: He used to write music, of course, a great deal of music for brass bands. And I remember his [Tarn Hows 0:09:13] publication, which was a lovely one.

Trevor: Yes, that was lovely. And he wrote the signature tune for us for Northern 'Children's Hour', 'Northern Lights'.

Robert: Great, so he did. Victor Smythe was a great character. We used to foregather every lunch time in the Oyster Bar round the corner for a beer and some sandwiches, and David

Southwood was his young assistant. He came out of the air force and he did a programme in those days called 'A Seat in the Circle' and helped Victor in various music core programmes that they produced.

Victor eventually went off to run the exhibition centre at the city hall in Manchester.

0:10:03

Trevor: And what about a variety department?

Robert: Oh, Bowker Andrews joined there, and he was a great character. He did things like 'Over the Garden Wall', the Norman Evans show. He did 'Variety Fanfare', in which of course he was taken by the hand and guided very firmly by Ronnie Taylor who produced the scripts and really did most of the production work.

Trevor: And wrote brilliant lyrics for the Kordites.

Robert: Absolutely. Yes, he did indeed.

Trevor: Yes. No announcements, but introductions sung by the Kordites.

Robert: Yes, that's quite right.

0:10:37

Trevor: And Philip Robinson, who'd been with us in overseas broadcasting during the war, you had him over in Leeds, was it?

Robert: Yes. He produced 'Have a Go' from over there with an assistant called Jack Dobson and later, of course, Barney Colehan took it over. And I saw a great deal of Wilfred and Mabel Pickles during those days, and admired him very much indeed. I thought he did a great job.

It was a programme, of course, of which John Salt had seen a similar edition in America where John was-

Trevor: New York rep?

Robert: The representative, let's say.

Trevor: Yes, yes. Oh, yes, the 'Whizz Bang Quiz'. Oliver told me about that, yes.

Robert: Is that what it was?

Trevor: Yes, it was called 'Whizz Bang Quiz'. And of course the north had a pre-war and a post-war and still has a very good reputation for the quality of its feature programmes.

Robert: First class. And Norman Swallow carried that on. Geoffrey Bridson had done some wonderful programmes. Geoffrey of course was thorn in London. Olive had done quite a lot, Olive Shapley. Joan Littlewood, and even Laurence Gilliam who was part of the wartime force, which was moved up to Manchester from London, and he later became head of features.

0:12:11

Trevor: And then on the drama side, based, of course, in Leeds.

Robert: Yes. Dick Gregson was the man there. He was an extraordinary character. I had known him when he was both a playwright and a producer of a travelling company of actors in and around Yorkshire. I remember one of the first plays he ever produced was called \_\_\_ [0:12:39] and I remember doing it in my own local amateur dramatic society.

Trevor: Lovely title.

Robert: It was indeed. Dick Gregson had the idea of doing what he called three-deckers. This was the main theme, which tackled large scale novels of such writers as JB Priestley, Winifred Holtby, Walpole, and did those as three-deckers and they were notable successes. London loved those.

Trevor: Sort of part one this week, so it ran for three weeks.

Robert: That's it. There were some very good original plays that he did too, like those of RC Scriven, who was a Yorkshire writer. His nickname was Rats, and there was one called 'The Single Taper'. Quite a few of the plays that they did were enormously human in the sense that one of these plays by Scriven concerned itself with an eye operation that he had and the whole feelings that he had during the time that he was wide awake and yet being operated on. It's a remarkable piece of work.

Rex Tucker was his assistant. He did a few plays too, and of course long afterwards we came onto a rich scene of drama which Alfred Bradley and Alan Ayckbourn produced.

0:14:24

Trevor: Now one of the great areas that I remember in the north was Northern 'Children's Hour'.

Robert: So you should.

Trevor: In that area, yes.

Robert: You ran it.

Trevor: Because to me- well, I took over. I took over from, I think, a very brilliant woman. The sort of 'Children's Hour' that she was running was so totally different from the type of 'Children's Hour' that I'd been used to listening to as a boy in London. And

then suddenly I came north and I came to meet [Nan Macdonald.

Now, her 'Children's Hour', as I say, it was so different. It seemed to be a miniature broadcasting service in its own.

Robert: It was.

Trevor: And a firm lady, yes, very firm.

Robert: Strong.

Trevor: Strong.

Robert: Difficult, but extremely competent, and I thought quite a brilliant producer. She, as you say, ran something that was almost a service of its own, and in nothing that ever went out there would she allow people to talk down to the children. She wouldn't talk down to them and nobody else had to either. None of this soppy 'goodnight children everywhere' muckaluck stuff. It was direct, good communication and people had to learn to use it and like it.

Trevor: And yet, you see, that was one side of Nan, and the other side, for the very young children, she started 'Nursery Sing Song', which ran for so many years, as I recall having done the programme with Violet Carson and others of that ilk.

Now, I think the north region owes a tremendous debt to Nan Macdonald for the work that she did for so many years, and as far I'm concerned for the standards that she set in broadcasting.

Robert: Yes. So many of the staff used to broadcast for her and loved doing it. She was so thoroughly professional, and I remember doing a series of talks in life in the navy for her and talks about local government in which I'd been interested in.

Trevor: I remember that series.

Robert: Do you?

Trevor: It was called 'At the Town Hall'.

Robert: 'At the Town Hall', yes. It was. They were great fun doing them, and of course Nan, like everybody else, suffered from the fact that money was very short and so practically all these staff who were doing these jobs for her did them with a ticket on the top of the script which said, "SNF."

Trevor: Staff no fee.

Robert: Staff no fee.

Trevor: Yes. I was rather amazed because in my time, early days with Nan, sometimes it was a 'thank you', and I often think today. I remember Julie Andrews came in to do 'Young Artist' for us and Nan paid her 10 shillings and 6 pence. I think Julie's fees went up a little in later years.

Robert: I'm sure they did, right.

0:17:42

Trevor: And of course, right, 'Children's Hour'. Then a tremendous coverage in the north regional output on sport. Who was running that when you were appointed?

Robert: Alan Clarke was quite outstandingly the best soccer commentator in the country, and he was acknowledged to be so by everybody, London and everywhere. Alan Dixon used to help, and of course we not only had all this splendid football to go at. Racing was extremely good from Haydock, from the Grand National. And of course annually, the whole enterprise used to move across to the Isle of Man to do the motorcycle TT races, and we had great times there.

0:18:37

Trevor: You mentioned racing. The very first programme that you sent me to do was the Doncaster yearling sales as a general programmes producer, and I went up with Philip Robinson and with Philip's wife who really knew form. She was a very clever lady when it came to putting bets on.

Robert: She was.

Trevor: I'd never put a bet on in my life, and I know at the end of the day- Mr Perkins was the clerk to the course at Doncaster and I didn't really know what to do. And he gave me a ticket to the silver enclosure, and I thought, "I mustn't show my ignorance, but where do you go to somebody and say, 'Here's ten bob,' or whatnot?" Anyway, Mr Perkins said, "Well, you just go to the tote and do this, that and the other," and I did.

And he gave me- he said, "Now, this is winner and first place," and I thought, "I'm not quite sure what first place means, but anyway." I put two bob on the number he'd given me for winner, two bob first place, and Mr Perkins was right. I got the winner and the first place, and I was so excited about this bob that I turned round and I walked straight into- hit my head on a post and literally sort of saw stars. And I looked up and rubbed my eyes and it said, "Exit." So I thought, "Four." Then I looked at the next sign and it said, "Race cards." I counted that up, nine, so I thought, "Right, now, it's four to win, nine first place," and it happened. That's the only time I ever bet.

At the end of the day though, I caught up with Philip, and he was looking rather glum. And he said, "Well, it hasn't been a very good day," and I said, "We've got some rather nice recordings, Philip, of the yearling sales taking place." He said, "No," he said, "I don't mean that." He said, "I mean on the tote." I said, "Well, you and your wife come and have a meal with me on the way home." I said, "Because I have done rather well." It's thanks to you for sending me there.

Robert: Excellent. What a good story.

0:20:34

Trevor: What about the recorded programmes department? Whom had you there?

Robert: I had Eric Jolly there and Charles Farmer and Stanley Williamson, and they did a splendid service of actuality features.

0:20:50

Trevor: The voice of the north, I think to many of us, of course was that of Tom Naisby.

Robert: Yes. I think when Tom was first appointed- I believe it was John Salt told me this, that everybody thought that being an announcer was such an easy job and would say, "Going to work to only talk to north countrymen," and a north countryman was obviously the chap that they needed. And he had, I think, over 2,000 applicants' letters to sift through before he got his shortlist, and before, very cleverly, he appointed Tom Naisby.

0:21:31

Trevor: And with Tom, you had Philip Dobson?

Robert: Philip Dobson, a man called [Humphrey Donner 0:21:37], who was a straight man with a southern accent.

Trevor: A little later, of course, you had Stanley Williamson because he left recorded programmes, didn't he, and did announcing for the region.

Robert: Yes he did.

Trevor: And a little later still, Roger Moffat.

Robert: Roger Moffat. Now there was a character for you. He eventually made quite a name for himself on a sort of variety show. I remember by that time I was head of programmes, and I had a visit from Mr Moffat's father, who- I don't think he would have minded his son having a criminal record, but he didn't want him to become a member of the BBC permanent staff. He made it quite plain that under no circumstances was I to employ him.

Trevor: Oh, yes, Mr Moffat. He as a pottery manufacturer.

Robert: Was he?

Trevor: Down at Bovey Tracey, as I recall, yes.

Robert: They live next door to the royals in London somewhere, and I think there was a strong connection there and had probably got big-headed ideas from that.

But Roger was a great broadcaster. He communicated extremely well, and youngsters got on famously with him and he made a great hit of some programmes.

Trevor: Well, he introduced the very first 'Pinky and Perky' series we did, because those all came from Manchester. And of course 'Make Way for Music'. When that started, that was breaking very new territory, to have a young man sort of saying to the orchestra, "Good lord, do they pay you for the way you play?" And the cameras shooting off the walls, no scenery and things like that. Roger handled that quite brilliantly, didn't he?

Robert: He did, yes.

0:23:34

Trevor: Yes. Now the region itself, of course, is, by comparison to the BBC regions, the north is a very large one.

Robert: It was very large in those days. I mean, it has been chopped about since, but in those days we did a tremendous amount of travel to get from programme to programme. I remember the region spread right the way from Berwick up in the north, Berwick-on-Tweed, right down to Stanford at the foot of Lincolnshire, across to the Dee at Chester and way up to Carlisle.

I remember in that winter of '47, I'd only been a member of the staff a year and I was racing over to the east coast and there was a shocking snowstorm and snowfall. And I found myself, instead of on the road to Bridlington, driving through snow seven and eight feet high on either side of the road. And I landed up, very dangerously, on Flamborough Head.

One of our complaints always was that because we were such a big region, we were more starved of money than anybody else. We contributed, in fact, one-third of the total revenue for the license fee which ran the broadcasting service, and we didn't get a sixth of the money.

Trevor: The money ploughed back? No.

Robert: Ploughed back in order to do programmes. But it really was an enormous region. We had transmitters to cover it, which were at Moorside Edge on the Pennines, opposite a famous pub, I remember, a very famous pub.

0:25:44

Trevor: This is how we found our way to the transmitter, wasn't it, via \_\_\_[0:25:47].

Robert: That's it, we did. And then there was one up at Stagshaw, near Newcastle. That was shared with Northern Ireland, its output, and we had a great job every six months deciding which programmes we could take and which we could let Northern Ireland listen to with any safety.

There was one at Skelton, near Penrith in Cumberland, and then there was the Ottringham transmitter near Hull, and both of those carried the Empire and overseas programmes.

There were also transmitters within the region broadcasting the Third Programme, and the north region at that time, of course, was providing programme output, mainly for the regional and the national services and also for the Light Programme and the Third Programme. We enlarged our studio capacity by setting up small, unattended studios. You had a key, you walked in, pulled a switch, the light came on, the microphone was live. And your contributors could answer back to Manchester or Leeds or wherever you were directing the programme from, and this was a big extension to our facilities. We had those in Liverpool, in Carlisle, in Lincoln.

Trevor: Yes, I remember the Lincoln studio. You had to call at a shop to get the key.

Robert: I think that was about the list of them, wasn't it?

0:27:37

Trevor: A programme at that time, well certainly from 1949, that I used to listen to quite regularly- because it seemed to reflect the north of England so well. It seemed to reflect the fact that you had very large cities. You had shipyards. You had a third of the country's agricultural land, textiles, shipbuilding, mining, deep sea fishing, and all this was brought together in that splendid series, 'The North Countryman'.

Robert: It was a good programme. I inherited it when I arrived in '46, and it had been going then I think about three months. That's all, but I thought it was excellent, and we managed to get such character into that programme. It was mainly comprised of about three or four pieces of about five minutes length, beautifully descriptive often, and I enjoyed it very much.

Trevor: It was a very colourful regional magazine, wasn't it?

Robert: It was.

0:28:43

Trevor: Yes. I've noticed there's an article in the 'Radio Times' for the week including Friday, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1946. And that deals with a series entitled 'Public Inquiry', and the article says, "Hand microphones will be passed among the audience. Experiments to determine the shape of the broadcast have been taking place for some time, and two weeks ago the first public inquiry was recorded as a guide to the producer, Bob Stead. It'll be Stead's first big programme since he was demobbed from the navy and joined the BBC." This was quite an undertaking, wasn't it?

Robert: It was, and it was one of the things that I had mentioned quite warmly to John Salt when he was asking me what sort of programmes I thought I would like to do. And what I was particularly anxious to do was to make sure that we brought the public to the public, that people were allowed to broadcast and broadcast free. And this was the very first time in BBC

history that a live broadcast from a public occasion was allowed to be broadcast, and they all behaved themselves very well. Well, nearly always.

The first one we had, I remember, was from Manchester Central Library. John Nicholson, he was the principal of University College Hull and he was the chairman. He was a little bird-like man who used to always sit with his head on one side, but he was a damn good chairman and a marvellously accurate, quick summing up, which is what his forte was.

I remember one, should councillors be paid? That was done from Lincoln, and I remember one of the chaps who wanted to speak said as his qualification that he'd stood for the council for three occasions and they'd never been elected. And the voice from immediately behind him came, "And they never bloody well will lad either."

And so we did get fun out of them, but, I mean, it was nothing worse than that. I can't imagine what some hooligans might try to do today.

Trevor:

No.

Robert:

We started a second series the year after, and there we had a live audience again expressing its views and asking its questions. But we had an MC. Ray Lakeland I remember took the chair sometime, and I did sometimes myself. And there was a very notable character called Harry Ray, a schoolmaster who had had a very distinguished war record. He was one of the, oh, spy commandos in France for many years, spoke absolutely perfect French, came from Bradford.

And this audience, which was controlled by the chairman at the meeting, was in discussion with a team back in the studio and it was later known as the Round Table. I enjoyed those programmes enormously, and I think they were a great success.

My big disappointment was that it was never taken over as a national programme, as I think it should have been. Instead, that became 'Any Questions?', and 'Any Questions?' beat it for the place on the national air, and of course that one is still running.

0:32:37

Trevor: Were there any incidents- because it was live broadcasting, were there any difficulties at any times where trouble was sort of looming up?

Robert: Yes. Well, occasionally, but the most serious bit of trouble we ever got concerned itself with a programme from Macclesfield, which concerned itself with politics and Barbara Castle was taking part in it. And the discussion turned for a time onto the question of the polls which newspapers used, and unhappily Barbara Castle, with typical redheaded-

Trevor: Fervour.

Robert: Charging in where angels feared to, saying, "Well, of course, everybody knows that the Daily Express polls are all rigged," and so I wasn't a bit surprised the day after to receive a claim for damages for libel from the Daily Express.

0:33:41

Trevor: Is this why in the records, looking back, there seems to be a gap in the series from almost that point until a few months later?

Robert: I suspect it is. I suspect that what happened was that London, deciding that they were going to have to foot this libel bill, probably put a bit of a clamp down on it for a time. And then we got out of the trouble and we started again. It's a good series, and I think it went on until it was taken over by another series called 'Let's Talk It Over'.

0:34:20

Trevor: I was impressed very much by the current affairs strand that went on in Northern 'Children's Hour' for young listeners, things like commonwealth affairs, a series of talks which John Coatman gave whilst he was controlling the north 'London Letter' series by the north's former news editor Bob Reed.

And when I first took over from Nan Macdonald for a short spell before the next organiser was appointed, we had a series by Harry Ray, whom you've mentioned, Bob, already. And I thought, "Well, doesn't seem the sort of material they're doing." It is for young people, but I thought, "Does it contain a slight bias, political bias?" Was this just myself, or was the north following a sort of pre-war trend?

Robert: I don't know whether it was the pre-war trend or not, but I think definitely there was a liberal attitude to the whole of the

programme staff, in a way. And I think programmes were slightly tinged that way, but there were so many checks and balances anyway that it was not a question of the BBC being read.

0:35:45

Trevor: I think I had a slight London 'Children's Hour' outlook and that accounts for it. Now, you sowed, if you don't mind me using that word, several programme seeds. But one in particular which has proved to be everlasting, or so it seems today because that seed that was sown way back in 1947 when you thought up the original idea is going today and doubtless by the time we celebrate some other anniversary of the BBC. Now, I want you to tell me about it because it was your baby, it was your idea.

Robert: Once again, I was anxious that we should get the people involved, and so I had myself been a president of an allotment society and I knew how interested allotment societies in finding things out. And so what I did was to take a programme which ICI had run as an example, and switch it around because there the questions were handed up to a panel on the platform and they were read out by the panel. I wanted people to hear the people asking their own questions and discussing the answers with the panel.

And so the first title I discovered as a possibility was 'How Does Your Garden Grow?' Eventually I didn't like that much and I switched that over to its subtitle, which was 'Gardeners' Question Time' and it's been called that ever since. And of course, thank goodness it's still running. I'm very proud of that one obviously.

0:37:38

Trevor: Now, the team members in your original programme, looking back again at the 'Radio Times', I see April 9<sup>th</sup> 1947 at the Broad Oak Hotel.

Robert: That's [Bill Sarbut's 0:37:48], and dear Bill, it was at his suggestion that we went to Ashton-under-Lyne, which of course was his home. He found this excellent pub for us, and we had- the place was absolutely smoke-laden, I remember so well. We had the park superintendent from Bolton. There was FW Sansome, who was a botanist at Manchester University, a man with the longest, dirtiest fingernails I've ever seen. I think he used to dig his garden with his fingernails.

He eventually was succeeded by Alan Gemmell, who had joined the department, and when Sansome went off to Africa, Gemmell took over and he was an absolute star.

Trevor: Yes, Dr Gemmell who became Professor Alan Gemmell. Yes.

Robert: That's it. He was a great character.

0:38:49

Trevor: You of course were chairman yourself for quite a time.

Robert: Yes, for many- for quite a few years, yes. And I remember the first one, one of the problems I had to face at the Broad Oak

Hotel was that half the audience there, I'm sure, thought it was going to be 'Have a Go', which was the great theme programme for the north at that time. And one chap stood up and he wanted to play his trumpet, and so naturally enough I rolled with laughter and let him, and everybody enjoyed themes enormously.

The only chap who didn't enjoy himself after it was R Stead because I found myself with about two and a quarter hours of recording. It was recorded on acetate discs, which took about four minutes of playing time. And so I had this enormous stack of discs to edit down to the first programme, which I think was 45 minutes long.

Trevor: 'Gardeners' Question Time' with musical accompaniment. That is something I'd like to have heard.

Robert: Yes, it was absolutely great.

0:39:56

Trevor: You were still chairman, I believe, Bob, weren't you, when you took over the post of head of north regional programmes in March 1948.

Robert: Yes.

Trevor: But it was a regional programme Northern Ireland listeners often heard on 261 [meters 0:40:10], 'Gardeners' Question Time'. But then in September 1957, it became heard nationally

on the BBCM service, and that's been on the national service as it were, now Radio 4, ever since.

Robert: Yes. The long gap between efforts to get it on the national programme were thwarted because although he was a dear old man, Mr Middleton was still bumbling away ponderously talking every Sunday about gardening. And it really wasn't until he died that anybody else got a chance at getting on the national air about gardening.

0:40:52

Trevor: Well, can we, as it were, remain with our wellingtons well and truly on, because I'd like to turn to another important source of north regional programming, and that is farming.

Robert: Yes. There was a very good farmers' half-hour. That was a regular series, but Brian was very innovative.

Trevor: This is Brian Branston?

Robert: Brian Branston. He rang the changes quite well. He did a drama documentary series called 'Taking Time Off', which was a study in farming economy. And writing in the 'Radio Times' at that time, he said, "We're devoting four programmes to show how profit and production were increased on Mr Ted Drake's farm because we want to convince British farmers that there's something in work simplification, a branch of study in which agriculture in the United States has made great strides."

Well, Ted Drake was a great character, and Brian Branston wrote, with his help, a programme, which was really, I think, the forerunner of 'The Archers'. It was a drama series set in a kitchen of a farm, and all the talk was on farming matters and farming characters and it was very good. But unfortunately, it was eventually overtaken, as I said, by 'The Archers'.

I still see Ted Drake. He's still alive. I see him in a pub called 'The George' at Thirlby, way up in the Yorkshire Dales, not far from Hawes. Next village is Askrigg actually, and he's still larger than life. His farm is up on the hill behind Thirlby, and a great character, both he and his wife Nora. She took part occasionally in the programmes too.

0:42:57

Trevor: Yes. You had the lighter side. It wasn't the Light Programme. It was the North of England Home Service with that memorable series 'Club Night' featuring Dave Morris. Wasn't that your idea?

Robert: It was. I had known of working men's club life across in Yorkshire for years and years. It was a very firm ingredient of life in mill towns in Yorkshire.

People who were on the committees of these and people who organised the concerts that they had each weekend were extremely interesting, and it struck me that it would be a very good idea to translate that to radio.

And so we did. We found 'Club Night', and Dave Morris was recruited to do it. He was, of course, as blind as a bat, couldn't read scripts except those with letters about an inch high, and he only came into his own when the lights went out and

nobody else could read the script and he had memorised it as he did quite brilliantly.

0:44:12

Trevor: Yes. I remember the occasion- I think in about 1950, Donald Stephenson who was then controller, he wrote to London and said, "We must have more staff," and Alick Hayes came up at that time, didn't he Bob, to produce, 1950.

Robert: Yes he did. Interesting chap, Hayes. He was the one who did 'Just William' on the air. Came of a Cheshire family. They'd lived at Birtles Hall and they were in the textile trade, and Alec was- he wasn't a bad producer. He was a bit of a poser. I remember-

0:44:51

Trevor: Yes. We had a nickname for him, Turkish Towelling. He said to me one day, "Why did you always call me- you lot call me Turkish Towelling." And we said, "Well Alec, it's a question of flannel." But he was a very good writer. I mean, he wrote some very good serials for us for Northern 'Children's Hour'. He wrote 'At the Willows'. Do you remember? With music. Young Brian Trueman about a northern family.

Robert: Really good.

Trevor: It's a lovely series, a lovely series.

Robert: Later on, of course, I mean, he went back to his original life, which was that of an actor. And I remember seeing him in a

pub at Mobberley in Cheshire where he was taking a bit part in the Granada thing, and the whole production was centred on the church. And Alick was there dressed in clerical garb, ruling the pub, the roost, as ever.

Trevor: Well, he had a good background. He worked with Sir Alexander Korda before the war. And I remember him telling me that he was- well, he claimed to me, and I think this is true. He was one of the first two producers to produce for this new medium that the BBC had gone into, that medium being television.

Robert: Yes.

0:46:05

Trevor: I'd like to get back to radio though, or to stay with radio for a little longer. It was in 1951 that you had that splendid series launched, 'The 51 Society'.

Robert: That emerged from what we called a talks weekend. I gathered the whole of the programme staff on talks together in a pub out at Grassington called the Wilson Arms, and we stayed here for a couple of nights. And out of it, quite a few programme ideas emerged. The special one that emerged was 'The 51 Society', and I thought that was an enormous success.

Graham Miller handled it for most of the time that I remember it, and it was a great sadness to me at the end that it didn't translate as I'd hoped it would to television because it would

have been a great success today. It was almost a Robin Day vehicle, and he would have been damn good at it.

0:47:12

Trevor: Yes, yes. Strangely, listening to what you've been telling me, so many of these ideas, programmes from the north, seem to be sort of originated or stem from or nurtured by pubs. Have they featured fairly largely in your broadcasting life?

Robert: They have, yes, so much so that when I first was appointed head of programmes, I heard it said in London by the then director of the home service, who became Sir Lindsay Wellington. He said, "I wonder if that chap Stead is alright. They tell me he goes into pubs." London producers and London heads of programmes, of course, went into clubs and not pubs.

So eventually I conformed many years later and became a member of the Savile Club with Lindsay Wellington, Laurence Gilliam, Frank Gillard, all the American visitors who used to come over, and it was a damn good club too. We had a lot of fun. Gilbert Hardy was another member.

0:48:25

Trevor: With only, what is it, two years of joining the BBC, first as senior talks producer, you came in as that, you became head of programmes in the largest of the regions. How did others, long-serving staff members like Edward Wilkinson, who was pre-war staff in the north and currently the assistant head of programmes, how did they take your promotion?

Robert:

Well, not too easily, but I had been very close to John Salt. John Salt was unfortunately ill, taken ill after I'd been with him about 18 months, 2 years, and eventually died very sadly. He had brought me along to help him out and to work with him, and so I wasn't surprised when I was promoted to be head of programmes. I was delighted to be because it was part of my long-term ambition, which was to be controller of the north.

But the chaps took it pretty well, and after all there was an amazing amount of loyalty. And when John Salt said that I was to be the man to follow him, they all fell in behind him.

0:49:53

Trevor:

Well, you were an experienced journalist. You'd now had practical experience of both devising and producing some notable series. What areas of north regional broadcasting in radio did you consider were in need of attention when you became head of programmes?

Robert:

I was particularly anxious that the strand of documentaries and of news programmes in which I had a special professional interest should be increased, should be strengthened if at all possible. And I was also such a lover of the music hall and variety that I wanted to see entertainment programmes strengthened too.

Unfortunately, of course, we weren't on a very strong wicket there because things were beginning to be centred more closely in London. The variety and the music hall was dying. It was being taken over by clubs.

Trevor: Hence your 'Club Night' series, yes.

Robert: Hence the 'Club Night' series. But the resources were not there unfortunately to carry on as much of that kind of programming as I would have liked to have seen.

0:51:14

Trevor: Well, in the history of north regional broadcasting, and I'm sure the same applied to all the other regions Bob, there seems to have been a constant battle for resources, studio refurbishment, new equipment for both studio and outside broadcasts. In other words, money. What was the position when you took over with money? I mean, you said earlier on that, of course, the north was providing one-third of the license money. Were you always short of funds in the early '50s and later on?

Robert: Always. It was a constant battle, and of course eventually they became short themselves in London. So then came the time when people began to look at the possibility of building central and national programmes out of regional contributions. And so it was a matter of intense competition to get one's programmes from the region onto the national air so that the money was forthcoming for them.

0:52:23

Trevor: At what point did the region begin to insist on a custom-build centre for the north of England?

Robert: They'd already insisted on it years before I arrived in the region. There were plans afoot during the war, and when I came, quite clear plans for new headquarters were being drawn up. When I came back eventually as controller, we had a site, which was at Platt Fields in South Manchester, on the Oxford Road.

0:53:01

Trevor: You said when you came back. What were your reasons for deciding to give up being head of programmes in the largest and, I think, the most successful of the regions to take up a post of the BBC's Australian and New Zealand representative? That was in 1953.

Robert: That was 1953. To be honest, I was a little disappointed in the controller who'd been appointed, Donald Stephenson. I thought that he was an interesting chap. He had a wonderful record in overseas broadcasting, and he knew a lot about Arabs and he, in fact, spoke Arabic very well. But he had, I thought, no real contact with the north countrymen, even though his family originally came from Manchester. He'd been away from it far too long.

I myself didn't really expect to become controller at that time, but I wanted to be controller eventually. I knew that one needed broader experience than pure experience in Manchester ever to get that job. So it was an ambition to

eventually return to Manchester, which took me abroad to get experience in the overseas service and in London.

A very difficult, a very trying time occurred when we were all getting steamed up to do broadcasting from the Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956. It was, of course, at the time of the Suez Crisis. I had with me, visiting Australia for a conference and to attend the games, Sir Ian Jacob, our director-general. And of course, Anthony Eden was urging a course of action from the media and their attitude towards the war or potential activities there, which the BBC really did not like.

And so I was sat there handling messages which were coming from the acting director-general, Beresford Clark in charge of overseas services, and the director-general. And absolutely fascinated with the very tough line they took, telling Eden really that they weren't going to agree at all with his propositions.

Trevor: The BBC was not there to be used.

Robert: Exactly.

0:55:53

Trevor: You returned to us as controller north region, Bob, in March 1958. Now, by that time many of us were now housed across the city of Manchester in Peter House. We were still using the old Piccadilly studios, but we were also beginning to find our feet in providing studio-based television programmes from a news room in the old studio building, and now from two TV studios in the converted chapel at Dickenson Road.

Was it the challenge, the fact that television was now beginning to take off, which encouraged you to apply for the top BBC job in the north?

Robert: Well, you didn't actually apply for a job as important and as high as controller in the BBC at the north. You were selected. My only interview when it was suggested that I might be one of those considered, and I was one of three I now know, was with the chairman of the governors, Lord Rochdale, who saw three people suggested to him by the board of management. And it was he who took the final decision.

0:57:08

Trevor: Are you at liberty to mention the other two unsuccessful candidates?

Robert: Yes, I know they were the editor of news, Donald Edwards, and Dennis Morris, who had been my opposite number in midland region as head of programmes there.

0:57:23

Trevor: Yes, I remember. I remember Dennis, yes. Had the BBC given its regional controllers any greater powers by the time you took over from Tom Chalmers? I mean, had you, for example, a seat on the board of management as a controller?

Robert: No, not a seat on the board of management. As a controller, you had direct access at any time you wanted it to the director-

general and of course to the various other directors, but you didn't have a seat on the board to management.

There was also a system known as the regional controller in residence, which had one regional controller in turn, as in an office in London we were supposed to spend a month at a time there.

Trevor: Yes, I remember that.

Robert: And you were there, again, to be called on by the board of management if you were so required.

Trevor: You were that much closer to the power of the throne, as it were.

Robert: Very much closer.

0:58:22

Trevor: Yes, yes. What did you consider to be the main job in hand, now that you headed the north regional team?

Robert: Well, they needed encouragement tremendously. I felt that this was one of the things that I'd been able to do when I was head of programmes. I wanted to do it even more forcefully when I was the controller. I wanted to get better resources for the region and better premises for the region. And eventually we

got them, but it was a hell of a struggle and it had taken half a lifetime to get them.

0:59:03

Trevor: To that stage, yes. Well, we are now about to celebrate the- what will it be? The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BBC, and on that date I hope you and I will be guests and we'll be at some lovely celebration, Bob, as we continue to sit on the side-lines, as it were, in retirement. I don't think you've retired, and we're going to talk about that a little later.

But we both recall the BBC's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the dinner which the city of Manchester gave to us at the town hall. That was in November 1962. Do you remember a little item that the 'Manchester Guardian' used on the day of our dinner, the celebratory-?

Robert: No.

Trevor: Well, they referred to the late Lord Reith. He was our guest, as you recall, and I think you gave us a rather nice reception. I think it was across at the Midland Hotel, and we brought to the attention of Lord Reith the fact that he was late and I remember him saying, "The only thing that was late was the train."

But at the dinner itself, older man RE Thomas. He's since been knighted, I believe, hasn't he?

Robert: Yes, he has.

Trevor: Older man Thomas was the Lord Mayor of Manchester, and he said, and I quote, "We know there have had to be delays in the building of a new headquarters in Manchester. But we are happy to be associated in this project and to know that a new centre for television and radio is now soon to be built near the centre of the city and not at Platt Court." Those are the words he used. He was talking about the BBC's old Platt Fields site, I think, wasn't he?

Robert: Right, yes. This was perhaps one of the mistakes I made, and for which I've therefore responsibility, although it seemed at that time inevitable that I had to take the decision. The city didn't want the BBC to go to the Platt Fields site. It wanted it for its own purposes, and it was spending millions and millions on acquiring a vast site in the middle of the city where we should have premises adjoining the university, the computer centre, the polytechnic. It was to be a complete cultural site, and the BBC, quite rightly, was going to be sat in that in a very important position.

That was attractive. But what it did mean was that there was going to be a hell of a delay, and we'd had delays enough already. I mean, I remember coming back from Australia and taking on the job of controller and being told at that time that we were- you know, a building was imminent for the BBC.

But what happened then was there were various accidents. The midland region were threatened with eviction from their premises and they had no home to go to, and so they were put above Manchester on the priority list for building. And when I came to look at the plans for the Platt Court site, I was staggered to find that we were only going to be allowed to

build single-storey buildings and that, in fact, its position was regarded as being a security risk.

And so this was the combination of circumstances which meant that I accepted the inevitable delay in building the site where we now stand in Oxford Road, and a damn fine site it is. But it did mean that there were about another 15 years to go before it was built.

One of the concerns that I had about the way the BBC was prepared to finance operations was that instead of doing what a normal chap would do who wanted to buy his house- he would take out a mortgage and he would pay for it over a lot of years. The BBC turned aside from borrowing, and in fact they had considerable borrowing powers given to them from the government. But instead tried to finance everything out of income, out of income, which was license money.

As a result of which, they starved themselves and now the BBC is paying for it. It ought to have had the sense to pay for it over many years at low interest, which it could have got from the government. And would have, I think, been able to do a great deal more development, both in buildings and in programme developments and the rest of it if they had adopted that attitude.

1:04:32

Trevor: It's interesting now in the 1990s to observe what is going on with what is still called New Broadcasting House in Manchester. That building, opened by the prime minister in 1976, is now being rebuilt, I mean on a very big scale.

Do you feel that, had the original plan gone through, which was a much more grandiose plan- and that was done, of

course, not by the BBC architects as is New Broadcasting House. That was an outside firm. Do you think that, had the BBC been a little bolder and taken up the borrowing powers you've mentioned, that they could have gone ahead with the original scheme and that in the long run it would have probably turned out to be cheaper?

Robert:

I'm sure they could. At the start, when it was Grenfell-Baines and his building design partnership, who did the first class designs for a splendid broadcasting house, excellent studios, good facilities, and it was going to cost about a million and a half. Eventually, of course, after all of the years of delay because governments couldn't provide the BBC with more money, the BBC didn't have enough to carry on with, it took 10 or 15 years. And by that time, of course, broadcasting house cost 10 times as much.

One of the things I hoped to see before I retired, as I did in '69, was a start on the new broadcasting house. But in the year or two before, we had tremendous troubles, and quite big efforts were made by London to put a spoke in the wheel of the whole operation. In fact, it came to a serious meeting at one time between the town clerk of Manchester and the Lord Mayor. And on the side of the BBC, the director-general and the chairman of governors even.

And happily, Manchester stuck to its guns, said that the BBC had committed itself far too far for any pulling back on the progress of the new broadcasting house in the educational site along Oxford Road. And on that occasion, we managed to win.

But there was a great deal of outside interest in this matter, and I know I was accused at one time of leaking information about the problems that we were facing. I never did, but

certainly the Manchester newspapers did get hold of the story. However they did it, I don't know. It may well have been from town hall as far as I know, but we were so concerned about it, and I was accused of having leaked, that I remember one morning people going to the lengths of scouring my office for a bugging device that they thought some reporter had left and placed beneath my desk.

1:08:12

Trevor: They'd done a Bob-gate on you. (Laughter) Just for the record, because this is something I've always wondered, and I speak as a southerner. Who in London in your experience, Bob, was waving a flag for regional broadcasting and north regional broadcasting in particular?

Robert: That's a good question. A lot of people pay lip service to regional broadcasting. They were glad enough to have good contributions, but they were always becoming more and more over-centralised in London. The regions were having their noses pushed out. They had to have a speciality like the west region's natural history programmes or the midland region's farming programmes in order to achieve regular places on the air.

Our specialities in the north were supposed to be industry and light entertainment.

Trevor: Which they did exceptionally well.

Robert: They did exceptionally well for a time, but industrial programmes were never popular. And so they were fading, and light entertainment, London wanted to grab it all back to itself, and did in some part in radio but definitely in television. They wanted to rule the roost and did so.

1:10:00

Trevor: Going back three years to 1960 and to the Pilkington Committee report, here the BBC appeared to reaffirm its faith in regional broadcasting. Did such an affirmation make any difference to the north at all? Was it all words or was there some action?

Robert: I think it was all words. The Pilkington Committee really was almost a non-event. I mean, you wouldn't expect Harry Pilkington, good North Country industrialist that he was, not to voice his appreciation of what the north contributed, and he did so. And he voiced the same sort of appreciation of whatever other region there was that he happened to be visiting at the time.

I attended and I spoke at the Pilkington Committee in London, but it didn't make a lot of difference, I don't think. It didn't bring any dramatic changes, and it didn't do anything about the shortages.

1:11:02

Trevor: No, no. When we celebrated that 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, that 1963, at that time the BBC was preparing for its second television channel, BBC2, the introduction of colour. We'd been in black

and white until then. And to an extension of broadcasting hours. Was the region given any additional moneys and facilities for such an expansion?

Robert: Apart from additional technical provisions, no, and certainly no more money as I remember it. It is a long time ago, but I don't think we were given any more money for programmes.

What had happened by that time, of course, Trevor, was that the BBC national regions, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, had- through having governors, national governors, through having national councils in each of those countries, they had managed to push their political aim so far that they were acquiring a hell of a lot more money than the English regions, and the English regions were beginning to have to take a back space.

We were priced out of so many things, and it was largely because the national regions had to have their cut first.

1:12:41

Trevor: Was it the growth and expansion which caused working relationships on a more personal basis to suffer, which I think they did, Bob?

Robert: I think they did too. Things had become very diffused. There wasn't the direct contact that one wanted to have with the production staff. The main dealings that were held were between the heads of the, say, light entertainment department in London and light entertainment in Manchester where the

outside broadcast chaps in London really controlled the output of the regions, all the regions outside broadcasts.

And therefore, there was neither the direct contact in that sense made, nor was there any sort of direct power that you could exercise over them. This was what I think caused it all to become diffused and never so attractively personal as it used to be.

Trevor: It was the end of regional broadcasting as we knew it.

Robert: It was really.

1:13:50

Trevor: Yes. What were your own working relationships like with Hugh Greene as director-general and with the BBC board of management? How did you view them at that time?

Robert: It's very interesting to reflect on the different attitudes which directors-general had. I served under four, and admired them all for different aspects of their leadership.

The very first one that I served under was Sir William Haley, and he of course as a former newspaper man and a prominent Mancunian for many years was always a welcome visitor at Broadcasting House in Manchester. He used to turn up at weekends for board meetings of the Guardian and Evening News. He used to stay until he went home on the sleeper at night, and I had the pleasure of lots of chats with him in the late evening of a Saturday during that time.

I think he did a brilliant job in opening up discussion programmes, in opening up the air to absolutely first class news coverage which developed from that time.

The other directors-general I served under were Sir Ian Jacob, who was a delightful man and a very good boss. Hugh Greene, who was another opener out of broadcasting. He did a tremendous job, I think, in raising the facility of people to let fresh air into broadcasting, I think, was his idea, and he did.

And finally Charles Curran, who was in the later part of my controllership. I didn't see a great deal of him, but he did us the honour of accepting a recommendation that Northern Symphony Orchestra should be allowed to live at a time when it was at grave danger of being sacked.

1:16:26

Trevor:

You've referred, Bob, to Sir Hugh Greene. One immediately thinks of him in terms of 'That Was the Week That Was'. There were reports of people saying, "What is the director-general of the BBC doing sort of interesting himself in the programme output?" That is not an unreasonable role, is it, for a director-general to play?

Robert:

Not at all, and I'm sure Hugh did a lot when he was going around the regions, which he enjoyed doing, in influencing programme output and the feeling of the ethos of programmes of the need for freedom, more and more freedom. But eventually, of course, he was shrewd enough to know that when politics were going to get in the way of 'That Was the Week That Was', he stopped it.

Trevor: The only- I mean, the thing I remember Hugh Greene for was- do you remember all that kafuffle we had? The Daily Mail rang me one bank holiday Monday and said, why wouldn't I let Sooty have a girlfriend? The Mail started it. It was in every national newspaper within the 24 hours. It was discussed on 'The Eamonn Andrews Show' on ITV. It was discussed in 'Any Questions?', would you believe?

When Hugh Greene came with the board of governors to a meeting in Manchester, he said to me, "You know, Hill, you're quite wrong. You should have let Sooty have a girlfriend." I felt suitably chased, and then do you remember we had our member for Wales, our governor for Wales? Now, I can't remember her name, but she was a lady with rather a loud voice.

Robert: It was Megan Lloyd George, wasn't it?

Trevor: No, it wasn't Megan Lloyd George, but she sprung to my defence and she said in a very loud voice, and I shall never forget this phrase. She said, "We can't have sex with Sooty."

Robert: How marvellous. Oh, lovely.

1:18:38

Trevor: Now, what about- we've talked about Hugh Greene. What about Charles Hill? I met him only on a very few occasions. I was a junior BBC engineer in wartime London when Charles Hill did, as Dr Hill, some of his celebrated Radio Doctor programmes. And then many years later, Bob, as the BBC

chairman- he'd just been appointed chairman, put there by Harold Wilson. He talked to us at Uplands, the BBC staff college. And I remember very clearly he said, "Of course, the trouble with you in the BBC is that you're very arrogant." Did he have a point?

Robert:

I'm not sure that I would agree with the word 'arrogant'. Depends of course how you define it, but there was no doubt at all that the BBC staff top to bottom almost were pretty self-satisfied. They felt self-sufficient. They were very proud of their craft. They didn't enjoy being criticised too much or being interfered with in whatever they were doing.

Later on, I found that Hill was a pretty good chap to work for and he did us one or two rather good turns. For example, going back to the business of the Manchester headquarters, there was a big drive to cut expenditure. Another crisis had happened over our finances, and Charles Hill and Hugh Greene came up to Manchester to talk to the Lord Mayor and to the town clerk, George Ogden, who became Sir George later on, about this. And they were proposing that the whole scheme should be abandoned, certainly for quite a long time. This was the scheme in the centre of Manchester.

The lord mayor and the town clerk, whom I had briefed before, firmly said no. Hugh Greene wanted to go on battling, and Charles Hill took him one side and said, "We've lost this argument. Let's get out," and they did.

1:21:21

Trevor:

Can I ask you to name some of those who most impressed you during your time with the BBC?

Robert: Well, in the early days, of course John Salt was quite outstanding.

Trevor: He was a much loved man, wasn't he?

Robert: He was indeed. Direct, good, had a good sense of humour, even when he was very sick. When I was in the overseas service, I was tremendously impressed by Jamie Clark, who was a very fine leader of that service.

The two chaps in the home service who impressed me were Lindsay Wellington and Dick Marriott. Lindsay was very powerful, and he was a bit of an autocrat. He was a bit of an arrogant one, as Hill might have described him.

There were some very fine programme chaps who had taken high places, like Huw Wheldon, but he was so far Londonised that it was extraordinary for a Welshman. I remember at a board meeting in London it was quoted to me that he'd described Stead as that Manchester megalomaniac.

Trevor: May I tell you just a- Huw Wheldon, as you know, when we were doing 'All Your Own'. I mean, 'All Your Own' really stemmed from a programme that Olive Shapley started. 'Your Own Ideas', it was called. 'Children's Hour', sort of around, what, 1936 Olive started 'Your Own Ideas', and then from that we had 'Young Artists' and each region did its 'Young Artists' programme.

When television started, we had 'All Your Own', and at the time I remember Cliff Michelmore, who'd been with us in

Hamburg in Forces broadcasting. Cliff was the programme editor. And when it came into the north region, I would produce the programme, and of course Huw was in Television talks, but he introduced the 'All Your Own' programme.

He would arrive and I'd give him a list of the acts and notes on introductions and everything, and Huw never had any money on him. He never had any cigarettes. He'd sort of tap his- and say, "Oh dear, I've left my cigarettes behind." Smoked in those days, you know? I'd take him round to the local pub and buy him his lunch, you see? He was marvellous with the young people introducing the programme, but he would get carried away in the length of his introductions.

And we always- naturally we kept the best act until last, and I had a particularly fine young pianist, one of Fanny Waterman's pupils. And I thought, "This boy is brilliant, and he's really going to put- I mean, this edition of 'All Your Own' from the north of England is going to stand out."

Huw would look at the palm of his hand when he was talking, not at the camera, and he'd be saying, "Well, do you really think that so-and-so or is so-and-so or is so-and-so," and he'd go on. And I was sitting in the gallery and I said, "Oh God, why doesn't he stop? There's not going to be much time." When the boy eventually started to play the piano, I turned to Cliff Michelmores and I said, "Oh dear." I said, "Stand by, captions, and turn them full speed please, because I want as much as the pianist and very little of the credits. Stand by."

I didn't know that Huw had left the studio floor at Dickenson Road. He'd come up to the gallery, and he was sitting down at the back of the gallery. I never saw him, but I turned to Cliff and said, "Oh dear, if only that Welsh windbag had belted up earlier, we could have heard more of the pianist." And suddenly this voice, and it was Huw, he said to me, "Hold your

credit. You worked very hard on this programme.” I thought, “My God, Hill, that’s the end of you.” Because within only a matter of months, he was appointed as our director of the television service. But what a wonderful man. What a wonderful man.

Robert: Oh, absolutely first class, and I was tremendously fond of him. But he was a bit power-crazy. Paul Fox was another great man. Loved him when he was on outside broadcast, and of course I shared my love of news programmes with him too and I’m delighted to see Paul back with the BBC.

1:25:50

Trevor: May we touch on the BBC and local broadcasting, Bob? I know you have some very definite views on this particular subject.

Robert: Yes I have, but what disappoints me about local broadcasting is that it was never properly funded. I go back to the old business of the lack of resources, and local broadcasting, if it ever was to get off the ground as the board of management imagined, it was going to cost far more than was available in the coffers.

I was a member of the Marriott committee, which was the very first committee appointed to decide whether the BBC should do local broadcasting or not. And I was put on it because, a, I had local newspaper experience, and, b, I’d spent four or five years in Australia where local broadcasting was everywhere.

That committee was a very high-powered committee. It had Marriott from the top branch of the home service. It had the head of audience research. It had the head of light entertainment. It had the head of engineering. Dennis Morris, my mate from the midland region was the representative programme director.

And we unanimously decided that, yes, local broadcasting was the thing that should go ahead, but that it had to be financed as the local newspaper was financed by commerce. We should take advertising. There should be half an hour advertising magazines, say twice or three times a day, entirely separate from the programmes, and this was the recommendation which was made firmly and unanimously by the committee.

Frank Gillard was a member of that committee too. He eventually backed away from the idea of doing commercial television, and he was made the chap in charge of it. Because the BBC was so rigid about sticking to the license fee as the only form of finance that the BBC could stomach. It was arrogant in that sense certainly.

1:28:16

Trevor: Didn't Sheffield Council themselves contribute a certain amount to the running of the station to begin with?

Robert: They did indeed, and other towns up and down the country expressed themselves willing to do so, and in fact in some cases did so.

But that again was offering- in my view, it was offering an influence on programmes to people who are prepared to pay

for them, which could only have a rather dull influence on the programming. Local broadcasting got off to a poor start because of that, and I think they do their best, but they're so very badly shackled.

1:29:07

Trevor: Huw Wheldon used to say, "We only make the best programmes, you know, when we are constrained." He said, "We have to be in a rather small cell," was the word he used. "We have to be slightly shackled," and he said, "We have to have that fervour to rid ourselves of those shackles in order to bring out the best of us." And I suppose in a way he had a point.

I suppose in a way some of- certainly from the programme-makers point of view, if you had limits and constraints, you thought, "Well, sod it. I'm going to break free of these, and it's going to succeed." And I suppose we did put that much more effort into whatever we were doing.

Robert: This was very true of early days of broadcasting of radio, and it probably was of television too.

1:29:56

Trevor: I touched on staff encouragement. Were you responsible for Michael Barton's very successful career in local radio?

Robert: I certainly recommended him very strongly for the very first programme job in local broadcasting that we had in the region,

which was in Sheffield. But, of course, so very shortly after local radio started, it was taken out of the region's hands entirely and left as a totally separate strand in broadcasting with a London-central boss again.

Trevor: Yes, who eventually, of course, became Michael Barton. He became the controller.

Robert: He did.

1:30:41

Trevor: Bob, as head of programmes and then as controller of north regional broadcasting, do you now regret- you've mentioned Platt Fields. Do you regret any other decisions that you had to take during your time in office? I was thinking of things like when we had to get rid of the Northern Dance Orchestra.

Robert: Oh, that was a decision absolutely forced on us. It came from the decision to cut back quite considerably on the orchestral resources on the whole corporation, and the threat, the major threat, was to the Northern Orchestra. Now, this was one of the best orchestras in the country without any doubt and is now a damn sight better than any other in the BBC, better than the BBC Symphony Orchestra by a yard and a half.

And I remember- I think Charles Curran was the director-general at the time, and I remember having to tackle him over this, and it followed an advisory council meeting that we had in Newcastle. At the pub, we talked and talked into the night, and it was four o'clock in the morning when I was walking across

the grounds of this hotel that I finally got him to agree that if we got rid of the Northern Dance Orchestra we could keep the Northern Orchestra.

Now, getting rid of the Northern Dance Orchestra, although it was an embarrassment because they were a hell of a fine orchestra, at least they were mostly-

Trevor: Reemployed.

Robert: Players that you could-

Trevor: As session men.

Robert: That's it. You could employ them as a group at any time you wanted in whatever numbers you wanted them. And so I accepted that one, but I was sad to see the orchestra go.

1:32:50

Trevor: What, during the course of your BBC career, gave you the most pleasure? Firstly, can I ask you as a producer? And then in the role of the controller.

Robert: Yes. As a producer, I took a great delight in ensuring that we had these public participation programmes. Those were what gave me the greatest satisfaction, the public inquiries, 'Gardeners' Question Time', and it was nice to see that some

of them lived for a good time and some of them seem to be going to live forever.

As a controller, I had a cracking good team. With one exception, they were very good-tempered. They were full of innovation. They had ideas. They were local and they were extremely good, and so it was a great pleasure to lead a team like that as I did for some years.

1:34:01

Trevor: Well, you haven't exactly retired now, have you? I mean, you reached the age of 60 some time ago, and like myself you become a BBC pensioner. But you haven't retired, have you?

Robert: Oh yes.

1:34:12

Trevor: You have? Well, why do I keep saying your name in print?

Robert: Well, I was bored after I'd retired, and so I wanted to find something to do. I'd been advised by Charles Hill, Lord Hill, when he gave me a farewell luncheon, that amongst the things that you should do if you are going to have a successful retirement, a, you had to make sure that you read the newspaper before you went to bed every night. You had to make sure, since you had been important, that you had one or two occupations which kept you important so that you were still, in a way, doing a bit of leadership.

We were encouraged to take on some charitable effort, but at the same time, if you were well-advised, you would take one on that got yourself paid, so the one balanced the other.

And so I followed this out and I took on running a settlement for paraplegics as an unpaid job. And when I was asked to contribute the 'Cheshire Life' magazine and the whole series of 'County Life' magazines in the north by its editor-in-chief, because I had a career in newspapers before, I thought I'd have a shot at it. And I did and I've been doing it ever since. I'm still doing it at 80.

1:35:49

Trevor: Does the number 29392 ring a bell?

Robert: It does, but what it is I don't know. It tinkles away in my mind, but-

Trevor: Well, may I tell you what it is?

Robert: Yes please.

Trevor: We've done a bit of research. It's your old BBC staff number.

Robert: Is it really?

Trevor:

Yes. You were 29392. I joined in 1942. I was 21022. Bob, as you now prepare to fly out to visit one of your sons, I hope you'll find time to visit the BBC offices in Australia and New Zealand once again. I'm sure you'll find some changes there, but I'm also sure that you're going to find further material which will doubtless appear in print under the name of Robert Stead.

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