

The Connected Histories of the BBC

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

File: LR003215 - TOM CHALMERS (1) (Interview 29).wav

Duration: 2:01:29

Date: 10/08/2017

Typist: 694

START AUDIO

0:00:00

Trevor: 17th October 1990. Interview for the BBC Archive. Part of this material for A History of North Regional Broadcasting, the interviewee being Tom Whiteman Chalmers. For North Regional Broadcasting History, it is interview number 29.

The BBC obtained its first licence to broadcast in the United Kingdom on 18th January 1923, despite the fact that the newspaper barons thought it would be a severe threat to their circulation figures, that cinemas and theatres would close, that conversation in the home would come to a shuddering halt. I'd like to begin talking about that all-important year, 1923, with Tom Chalmers.

He was only 10 years old when radio started, but by the end of his working life, he'd made a major contribution to radio, both in this country, and indeed, a major contribution abroad.

0:01:07

Tom, you had a practical interest from the time broadcasting began.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, that's correct. My father was the Technical Editor of a weekly journal called The Engineer, and so he was in touch with all the latest developments in all spheres of engineering, including electrical and broadcasting. So one of the first things

that he did when broadcasting started from 2LO was to get a crystal set, so that the family could share in the pleasures of listening, which we did.

That was very interesting, because we could not only get 2LO and, later on, 5GB, but we could listen on longwave, and occasionally get concerts from Paris. This was a very exciting thing to me.

Then, since I had a technical bent, my father decided to teach me how to make a set. It was a very simple matter: winding a solenoid on his lathe, and buying a crystal for 1s 6d, and a silver cat's whisker, which was about the most expensive item in the equipment. And lo and behold, if you put up a pole in the garden and had 100ft of wire on it, carefully earthed in case of lightning strikes, you could listen to a variety of stations.

This started me on my experimental trail, if you like. I started building valve sets, and even to this day, at the age of 77, I think I could still draw you a simple 3-valve circuit.

Now, we listened to most of the programmes we could. Children had quite a lot of leisure in those days. Children's Hour was one of our favourites. It wasn't Uncle Mac in those days; it was Uncle Caractacus and Uncle this, that and the other thing, and various regional aunties. The only one I remember being Kathleen Garscadden from Scotland.

But there were various competitions, and my sister and I – she was 2½ years younger than me – won one of the competitions. I haven't the faintest idea what it was about. The prize was a visit to number 2 Savoy Hill. So clad in our best clothes, we were taken up by my mother. We went into the studio, which, at that date, had one of these enormous Meat Safe microphones in it; a moving coil, magnetophone microphone, it

was called, I think, Marconi Round, in which the coil was stuck on a pad of cotton wool with Vaseline.

It sounds very amateurish, but it certainly worked. It gave very good quality, until the heat in the studio got so great that the coil dropped off. That was the end of the broadcast, until a new one was put on.

Anyhow, those were the conditions: heavily-draped studio, a Meat Safe microphone, and the aunties and uncles who were, of course, the announcers and senior staff. I cannot remember who conducted the Children's Hour in those days, in London, but I do remember seeing the announcer who came in afterwards, clad, of all things, in a pair of plus fours and spats. His name was John Sutthery. I was to meet him many, many years later, when he was Programme Director in Northern Ireland, and I was a new announcer.

0:04:50

Trevor: It was, then, your interest in radio and that visit to Children's Hour that set you on the path to wanting to become an announcer yourself?

Tom Chalmers: That was so. I'd always been fascinated by the announcers. Messrs Dodgson and Broadbent were the first two I can remember, even before the days of Stuart Hibberd. But Stuart was my favourite, especially when he once interjected in a discussion programme on birth control, which was a very explosive subject in those days. A voice from the background, which was Stuart's said, "I protest. I protest. This is most indecent." I thought this was absolutely splendid, not that I knew anything about birth control in those days.

But I thought the life of an announcer was the life of me. I used to imitate them, and I used to read out passages from the Radio Times into a sort of home-made broadcasting set-up, made out of headphones and an amplifier. My poor sister had to listen at the other end. I was already half trained as an announcer, even then. As you rightly say, it stimulated me, the whole experience of going to the studio and seeing it actually happen in front of my very eyes. I thought, "Well, I am going to be an announcer, come what may."

0:06:12

Trevor: You were at Bradfield, Berkshire, yes?

Tom Chalmers: I was at Bradfield; a charming school in those days – I don't know what it's like now – very rural, with a Greek theatre, life size, which had been excavated out of the chalk by a former headmaster, Dr [H P Grey]. I was in two Greek plays; one in a very humble role. That was my stage debut. Three years later, when the next play came along, The Antigone, by Euripides, I had a much better part – a speaking part. I was the son of Kreon, whose name, I think, was Haimon.

I didn't have very much to say, but it was quite a dramatic appearance, and I looked very nice, I thought. I was noticed by one of the critics, a critic for The Times, who was an Oxford don, called Cyril Bailey. It was a very laudatory notice, and it must have come to the attention of someone in the BBC.

After that, apart from going on making wireless sets, as they were still known – very far from being wireless – another fortunate event occurred, which was a turning point in my life. The preacher at chapel one evening, just before I was about to leave Bradfield, at the age of 18, I think, was one Dr Montague

J Rendall, who was not only a governor of the BBC, but had been headmaster of Winchester.

Now, Winchester was a sister college, as it were, of Bradfield, and we copied a lot of its customs. We were much later, of course. Winchester had been built centuries before, and Bradfield only in the 1850s or '60s. But we were orientated towards Winchester. Monty Rendall came down to preach to, as it were, the daughter college, and I happened to be prefect of chapel that evening.

One of the prefect's duties, as well as stopping boys from eating things during prayers, was to accompany the preacher to supper at the headmaster's house, which I did. How, he may well have read The Times notice and knew about me, but I certainly left him in no doubt, because I talked to him about broadcasting and announcing and how much I wanted to join the BBC.

He must have mentioned this. In fact, he did. He said he would mention it to Reith, which he must have done pretty soon, because I got a letter summoning me to number two Savoy Hill to meet the great man. I was feeling very nervous indeed, because this was the first interview of this sort I'd ever been to. It was in a big room in Savoy Hill, I think, on the corner of the building; one window looking out onto Embankment Gardens, and the other onto the Thames.

Reith was sitting with his back to the light – the old technique – and also, right underneath the portrait of him, which had recently been painted by Oswald Birley. This was really too much for me; rather frightening. He had his scarred profile towards me, which was evening more frightening. There he sat, like this giant eagle, towering, even sitting down, and I sat opposite him.

He didn't help me very much by saying, "And why do you want to join the BBC? Why?" I couldn't tell him why I wanted to join the BBC. I'd never really worked it out, except I knew, deep in my heart, that it was something that I must do. It was the only thing I wanted to do in life. I wanted to become an announcer. He said to me, "Well, you haven't done anything in life. You're 18," or whatever it was. "You've got to show us you can do something before you can join the BBC. Go away and do something. Come back and tell us when you've done it. Show us the proof, and then we'll consider you for a job."

Then he asked me, in a very kindly fashion, what my father was proposing I should do, and I said, "Well, become an engineer, like himself, only in the electrical department of the Post Office." This didn't seem at all a good idea to Reith, and I can see, now, why. There was a ___ [0:11:08] reason, because the BBC and Post Office were always at daggers drawn.

So Reith, I think, must have had a talk with my father, who had, incidentally, been in Glasgow, and, I think, at the same works as Reith when they were both apprentices at the North British Locomotive Works. So there was another bond there.

Anyhow, it was settled that I should study engineering, and go to King's College London, which was the only place I could get in with my matriculation, as it was, and take an engineering degree. And then go back to the BBC and say, "Here I am. Here's my certificate. Now, what about a job?"

Well, it wasn't quite as simple as that. I had some difficulty in changing to an entirely new discipline, because I'd been a classical scholar at Bradfield, learning science, and particularly heavy engineering, as this was. Nothing about electronics at King's.

I spent four years, instead of the usual three, a lot of which was due to the fact that I was indulging my musical tastes, and became the organ scholar, which added a very useful £50. Which was a lot of money, in those days, to the family exchequer. Which meant that I had to play five days a week for the theological faculty at prayer.

My immediate superior in the hierarchy, the chaplain, was a certain Eric S Abbott, who later became the Dean of Westminster and confidante and confessor of members of the royal family. He was a wonderful man, to whom I owe a very great deal.

So I spent rather too much time playing the organ and doing amateur dramatics, and things like that, and conducting the Musical Society choir. I didn't spend as much attention as I should to my studies. However, I did scrape through, and I got a BSc, even including a second in mathematics, which amazes me still.

Armed with that, I did go back to the BBC just before the results were announced, and said, "Well, I've done it. I'm just waiting for the results now. Is there anything on the [tappy 0:13:36]?" I was interviewed both as an announcer and as a balancer control man. They said, "But all this depends on you getting your final results."

I did get my final results, and I was immediately summoned to Broadcasting House, but this time, not for either of those two jobs, but as one of the administrative trainees. They were just being recruited by the BBC to form a cadre of future senior staff: the stars, the controllers, the directors of the future. I was accepted for that, to my delight and surprise, at the magnificent salary of £260 a year.

0:14:26

Trevor: And having got at least one foot in the door by now, Tom, what were your first impressions of the BBC, seeing it from the inside?

Tom Chalmers: Well, my first impression was a very painful one, because as you know, the corridors of Broadcasting House, in those days, had one-way doors. And within five minutes of getting into the BBC and making my way to the announcers' room, I walked straight into a glass door the wrong way, and badly cut my forehead. My entry into the announcers' room, and the BBC, for that matter, was with a face streaming with blood. So that wasn't a very auspicious entry.

But that apart, it was an incredibly sort of middle-class club-like atmosphere. Everybody knew everybody else. With a staff of only 2,500, I think it was, in 1936, and certainly not more than 3,000, it was possible to know anybody who mattered, everywhere, even in the regions. And it was very cosy.

I can give you some idea of the cosiness of Broadcasting House in those days. Afternoon tea was brought round on a trolley, with real china. "Indian or China, Sir? Fuller's cake, Sir? Fuller's walnut cake? 6d extra." Things were rather on that style in those days.

Everything was incredibly leisurely, compared to later days, including the programmes. The announcers would just stroll into the studio and say their piece, walk away again, and that was that. Producers, it seemed to me, there were none, in the accepted sense. Programmes were made by somebody and put together on paper, and the artists were got, but they might be rehearsed during the daytime, and then they were left to get on with it by themselves in the evening, I suppose. They were professional enough to know their stuff.

Talks were in light case; they were rehearsed, probably, with a microphone in the daytime, and then the announcer was left to get on with the job in the evening. He would meet the speaker downstairs, give him a drink, if he needed one, and take him up to the studio, give him a balance test, and see that he kept to the script. Now, everything was live, don't forget, in those days, and scripts were written; they were not improvised.

Hence, the custom of wearing black ties and stiff shirts at night. It was nothing whatever to do with this business that people keep on talking about, that the BBC made its announcers read the news with stiff shirts on. It was nothing to do with reading the news; you just happened to be front of house. Like every front of house in those days – cinema, theatre, music hall, or wherever – you wore a dinner jacket.

The announcer was the BBC at night, because there was nobody else there. So naturally, he donned the uniform of the day. We got 3s 6d a week for starching our linen. That's right.

0:17:50

Trevor: You mention the fact that you were, in the end, taken on as an administrative trainee on the first ever BBC training course.

Tom Chalmers: Yes. Well, recruitment had been regularised as a result of a number of incidents and scandals about recruitment in the past. Recruitment, in the early days, was a case of sort of enlightened nepotism. You knew somebody in the golf club, or you had a cousin who had a nice speaking voice, or something like that, and you could usually get them a job. There were no qualifications laid down.

Well, this led to problems: a lot of unsuitable people were appointed. Various enquiries – the Ullswater Enquiry, I can

remember, was one – I think they began to insist that some proper system of recruitment and of training was instituted in the BBC. This was one of the first fruits, under a man called [W Singen Pimm 0:18:57], who was Director of Staff Administration. He persuaded Reith of the need of bringing up a cadre of young people who would be the giants of the future.

The idea took root and reached fruition in 1936, with the first staff training course. No room for it in Broadcasting House, which was overcrowded before they even went into it. So premises were got in Duchess Street. They were to be bombed during the war, very soon after.

Needless to say, they weren't ready for us, and the first sessions of training took place in the Langham Hotel, which was still a hotel. I think there were about 20 of us from various walks of life, all under the charge of General [Beadle 0:19:57] as the Head of Staff Training. In fact, the place became known amongst the staff, irreverently, as St Beadle's.

His number two was an ex-North Region man, who we understood had blotted his copybook somewhat, in Manchester, by being a bit of a rebel; a bit of a leftie, as they would have said, perhaps, in those days. Certainly, unorthodox in many of his opinions and attitudes, but who was a very live wire indeed. But he'd made the north, I think, a bit too hot for himself, and so he was shunted down to London, where he'd obviously be quite safe teaching the young ladies and gentlemen of St Beadle's.

0:20:41

Trevor: Rather strange, in a way, because you're referring, of course, to Archie Harding, aren't you, Tom?

Tom Chalmers: Archie Harding, yes.

Trevor: Archie Harding, of course, was shunted out of London by Reith, who thought, "What a dangerous man he was." So he sent him to Siberia – Siberia being Manchester – where, of course, Harding got together with a lot of, as you say, left-wing people, and they did these splendid features.

Tom Chalmers: These splendid features, yes. Geoffrey Bridson, of course.

Trevor: Yes, but now, you met Archie back in London.

Tom Chalmers: Now, I met Archie back in London, that's right, where he didn't seem entirely happy. But he settled down. Not for long, because the war was imminent. It was only three years, I think, before war broke out. But he settled down with this motley collection of people, his first trainees.

The EiC, by the way, was a very splendid man called Bruce Purslow, who was later to figure in my life when he was EiC Wood Norton, the BBC's so-called secret hideout in the country, near Evesham. Also on the staff was a very good light music producer called Gordon McConnell, whose speciality was musical comedy.

And our balance man, as far as I can remember, a man who taught us all about production methods, was Rex Haworth. So that was the staff. Now, I'll try, if you like, to remember who some of the trainees were.

Trevor: Well, you had some rather splendid fellow students, I believe, on that very first course.

Tom Chalmers: We had some splendid, and being the BBC, some quite remarkable ones, and one or two eccentrics and loonies. The loony, really, who comes to my mind first of all, was a woman called Mary Trevelyan, who'd got in because I think her father was a don at Oxford. One of the historical Trevelyans; always writing histories about something. She was a very sensible lady who wore sensible clothes and sensible shoes, and she electrified the Control Room in Birmingham when she went there.

We were all taken on a tour of a regional station, you see, and Birmingham was the nearest one. She stood, regarding the scene of plugs and wires and valves and telephones, and all that sort of thing, the whole control scene. With arms akimbo, she turned to the EiC and said, "[Tomer 0:23:09], does all this work by electricity?" The EiC's reply is not recorded. But she knew so little about it all, so she didn't last very long, I gather, in talks.

Then, keeping with the women, there was the splendid and dear, never to be forgotten, Nan Macdonald, who later became, of course, Head of Children's Hour in Manchester, the North Region.

Trevor: Yes, a lady I knew very well.

Tom Chalmers: I'm sure. She was a stalwart of Children's Hour, and what splendid programmes she did; quite different from any other

Children's Hour in the BBC. That was very good, and she was a lovely person.

Then there was Evelyn Gibbs, a lady of more, shall we say, scholarly bent. She was a graduate of Newnham, I think, but I can't quite remember her college. She was much more scholarly, and she was destined for talks in London, where she duly went. I met her, quite for what reason, I can't remember, but out in Uganda. She was doing some mission out there about broadcasting instruction, I think.

I don't think there were any more women. But there was Guy Burgess, the celebrated traitor. He was amongst our numbers, and he had got in, I'm not quite sure how. Only his spy controller could tell us how. But Guy was, of course, not an Oxford man; he was a Cambridge man. He was at Trinity. One of a trinity of spies, indeed. Blunt was also out of Trinity, I think, and certainly, somebody else.

But there was a recruitment agency run by the USSR in Cambridge. Although one can hazard a guess as to who it might have been who recruited Guy and sent him in the direction of the BBC, it would only be a guess, and it's not worth mentioning. But there he was, amazing us all by his knowledge of the world and the splendid names he bandied about; names of French politicians and British politicians. He seemed to know them all on intimate terms.

The only one of his friends I ever met was at a party, about which I will tell you later on. That was Tom Driberg, who had just contested a seat somewhere in Essex. Anyhow, Guy Burgess was destined to be a talks producer. He didn't get on very well with the rest of the staff, because to put it bluntly, personal hygiene was not his strong point. He smelt very strongly of nicotine and lack of washing.

He also had a disconcerting habit, during lectures, of taking a lump of plasticine out of his jacket pocket and modelling it into various shapes of mannequins. What he did with them afterwards, I don't know; stuck pins in them, I expect. So his fingernails were always filthy dirty.

But there was no doubt about his brilliance, his humour and his [fund of 0:26:38] stories, and we admired him, perhaps, in a grudging sort of way. But there was no doubt in our minds that he was going to be one of the top men in the talks department, which was quite used to eccentrics. And he did know people. He talked familiarly about Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West, and he knew them. So much is apparent from books about him.

Who else was there? Well, there was Eric Crozier, who later became one of Ben Britten's librettists. I think he wrote the libretto for *Albert Herring*.

Eric Warr, W-A-R-R, who'd just given up the post of conductor of the British Women's Symphony Orchestra, which sounds a fearsome organisation. If anybody could have conducted them, Eric could, with a combination of charm and firmness, which he was to exercise later, as Assistant Head of Music in the music department. He was a charming person with a talented wife.

But we were quite a collection of different talents. We all had to show programmes at the end of our course. I can remember Archie Harding coming in during a drama rehearsal. Archie had just, obviously, come back from the pub outside. He didn't like what he heard, and swept everybody off the controls with one sweep of his mighty arms, and sat down at the controls himself, and took over. That was Archie. Of course, we loved him for that.

Later on in my BBC career, when Archie's career and mine came very close, when he was Assistant Head of Drama and I was Controller of The Light Programme, I got to know him and like him enormously. But we didn't altogether see eye to eye when I was a trainee, because I took great exception, as a musician, if I may call myself such, to the BBC's habit of using well-known pieces of classical music as mood music or incidental music to plays and features. Especially rather dreamy poetry and mood programmes, compiled by two rather precious creates called C Denis Freeman and Mary Hope Allen.

They would come along the corridors of Broadcasting House, trailing bits of Sibelius behind them, and other things which I had no place whatever. Because Sibelius might mean something to me, and something to them, and something to somebody else; something quite different. I thought that to use well-known bits of music was quite wrong, and that music should be composed specially, as indeed it was in some of Val's productions, and as was being done, in the wider world, by Britten, for the Post Office Film Unit.

Anyhow, Archie and I clashed over that, and I vented my opinions, and they went down rather badly. In my final report, Archie went so far as to say, 'Chalmers should never be put in any position where he has any control over music.' Music output, I suppose he meant. Which, in view of what happened later, was ironical. It could well have been one of the reasons why, when we were all called before the boss, the Headmaster Beadle, for our final postings, I got sent to Northern Ireland.

"Devil's Island," said Burgess to me. He said, "That really is a dreadful place." Then he told me, as he told everybody else who was being sent to outposts, exactly what they would find there: who had been sleeping with who, and all that kind of

thing, and who was not on speaking terms. In the case of Northern Ireland, he was absolutely dead right, and I believe he was in the case of other regions too. His intelligence, as far as the rest of the BBC was concerned, was absolutely phenomenal, which doubtless, of course, he got his Soviet contacts.

Anyway, Burgess told us all this in a pub near to Broadcasting House, which was unfortunately bombed a few years later. When the course had concluded, he invited all the trainees to a party at his flat in Sloane Street. Well, I got there rather late, because I was announcing a programme that evening, and I had to take a taxi. So when I said to the driver, "As quick as you can, will you, please, to number-" whatever it was; 100-and-something Sloane Street, the driver looked at me and said, "Righto, Sir. Hold tight for Sodomy Hall." So Burgess's reputation was obviously known elsewhere.

So that's about all I can remember about Burgess. I didn't meet him later on. Although I was in London and he was in London, I was in quite a different section of the BBC, at 200 Oxford Street. He was in talks, for a brief while, before he went to join MI5, I think.

0:32:06

Trevor: Now, tell me about your arrival at the BBC in Belfast. When was that? 1937?

Tom Chalmers: It was 1st January 1937, I think. It was a cold and windy and blowy day, and the sea crossing from Stranraer had been absolutely appalling, and I was as sick as anything. I staggered onto the quayside, and nobody from Broadcasting House was there to meet me. I made my way, in a cold, unheated train, to Belfast Station, and there, had to find my

own way to Broadcasting House in Hall Street, where I was greeted by the Commissionaire, who was brandishing a pistol.

This turned out, however, to be quite harmless. It was only a water pistol, and it was used to frighten the IRA, in case they should come that way. His name was [Stroud 0:32:56], I remember; a very unheroic man, but a charming one. So that was my rather frightening, and my rather surprising entrance into Broadcasting House, Belfast. Which was an old converted linen warehouse, which was abounded, in the summer time, with fleas, which would bite you as you sat, reading the news.

It wasn't a very large staff. The largest part of the staff was the orchestra, of about 47 players, which Belfast didn't really justify, because the number of licences paid bore no relation to the expenses outlaid by the BBC, which had to subsidise it heavily.

The orchestra was there for quite another reason, which was the poorness of the landline communications, and the fact that there was a rough sea journey between the mainland and Belfast. So people weren't tempted, very much, to go over, for the sake of their health.

The landline from London, which supplied the bulk of the programme, came via Glasgow, and it was a very dicey route. It ran alongside, for part of the way, underground, some tramlines. Because the trams were very old-fashioned and used the conductor rails for earth return, very soon, the lead covering of the cable was eaten away by electrolysis. That meant that the water got into the BBC's cable, or the Post Office's cable, and you began to hear, over the radio, the conversations of Glasgow citizens.

If you know anything about Glasgow citizens, they were quite surprising. The moment we heard one or two key words

beginning with F over the radio, the announcer rushed up to Studio Five and got a pile of discs to put on, until such time as the cable could be repaired. Of course, the BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra came into its own, and was subdivided into various smaller combinations, like the Harp Trio and the Flute Trio, or the Military Band Section. They had to perform valiantly, until the emergency was over.

0:35:20

Trevor: Who was the Head of Music in Northern Ireland?

Tom Chalmers: The Head of Music, like most of the rest of the staff, was not an Ulsterman. He was E Godfrey Brown. A very able musician, but he did have a habit of conducting with his head down and his rear in the air. He presented a rather curious sight that way: bottom high and head down, waving the stick above his head.

His second in command, typical of the BBC, was a charming person called Peter Montgomery. He was one of the top ten families of Northern Ireland, and he got his job, I think, because of that; because of his charm and his connection with the Montgomery family from Fivemiletown. Peter was a sensitive musician. Sensitive is the operative word, I think. He didn't know very much about music, but had, we were told, had a course in conducting.

Really, the orchestra didn't know where they were with him, and his concerts weren't very good. But it was typical that he should have been appointed to an important a post as that without any real academic qualifications. But he was very nice, and an asset to the staff. He was one of George Marshall's appointees, the Head of the Station.

0:36:36

Trevor: George Marshall being the Head of Station, was he?

Tom Chalmers: The Head of Station. He was Controller, Northern Ireland. George had been one of Reith's bright boys in the early days. He'd been the first Station Director in Newcastle, and had opened the station from the back of a lorry in a courtyard on Christmas Day in 1924, I think. He was a craggy man with a craggy voice and a craggy personality. Not, I found, an endearing person at all. He had a grating voice, but he was quite prepared to be friendly, after a fashion.

0:37:16

Trevor: Did he know much about Ulster?

Tom Chalmers: I don't think he knew anything about Ulster; he was a Scotsman. The staff was mainly, as I said in the case of Godfrey Brown, expatriates, and so they weren't Ulstermen. The chief Ulsterman there was Harry McMullan, Assistant Head of Programmes, without whom I don't think the place would have functioned.

Harry McMullan was well connected, and he'd taken the wise precaution of marrying a rich wife. So they lived in some estate at the end of the Malone Road, which was a place where anybody who was anybody lived. He supplied the deficiencies of John Sutthery, my old Children's Hour announcer, who'd appeared in spats and plus fours.

Sutthery didn't really make very much sense. He was at the end of his BBC career, and knew it, and really didn't try awfully hard. This was, I'm afraid, reflected in the programmes.

The Ulster content of the programmes was left to the two Ulstermen, Harry McMullan and an OB Assistant called [Freddie Colme 0:38:28]. The other one being Raymond Glendenning, who was most certainly not Ulster. We'll come to him later.

But Harry was responsible, I think, for bringing one of the most extraordinary people we'd ever had on the staff in Belfast: Denis Johnston, the playwright from Dublin. Denis Johnston, who wrote an epic, fit to stand beside the Bridson March of the '45. Denis's was called Lilliburlero. It was the story of the Siege of Londonderry, an explosive subject if ever there was one. But Denis managed it, and it gave the BBC enormous credit in Ulster.

So Harry, really, was the person who ran the programme output, such as it was. Freddie Colme did the music OBs, including organ recitals. I remember one extraordinary recital I had to announce from the First Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Street. The organist was blind. His name was Albert C Taylor. There was this blind man, very fat, playing away, wearing a bowler hat.

Raymond Glendenning ran sports OBs, and of course, he was already laying the foundation stone of his later magnificent career in London. He was very, very good indeed.

Unfortunately, he was sent on a course in London during part of the time I was there, and I had to take over from him, totally unfitted, as I was. I wasn't interested in sport, and they had to get various other people to do the commentaries. But I had to do feature OBs, and I must confess, I wasn't very good at it. I was very glad indeed when Raymond came back.

What I did enjoy doing, though, enormously, was helping out in Children's Hour, which always needed people to play the odd voice or do effects, or something like that. Children's Hour was

under a very remarkable woman called Ursula Eason. She was a hale and hearty and bonny person, full of energy and life; a lovely, lovely extroverted, outgoing person.

She was the most fertile person, in the artistic sense, on the station. She was commissioning writers, actors and actresses. I can remember one actor who later became well-known over in London, Allan McClelland. She had to work much more on her own, I think, than other Children's Hour organisers, simply because of this awful telephone cable business. She was frequently cut off from the mainland, and she couldn't take programmes from London, so she had to have a ready supply of scripts.

She encouraged me to do things like the Professor Branestawm stories, and also, Larry the Lamb, which is slavishly copied from Uncle Mac.

Trevor: Each region, of course, doing its own version of the Toytown stories.

Tom Chalmers: I expect so, yes.

Trevor: Yes, I didn't realise that until later years.

Tom Chalmers: Is that so?

Trevor: Mmm.

Tom Chalmers: I didn't know.

Trevor: Yes, in Manchester, it was Doris Gamble who was Larry the Lamb.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, good gracious me.

0:41:46

Trevor: Ursula Eason you've mentioned Tom, of course. She was our excellent Assistant Head of Children's Television when I was working in that department. She was working number two to Freda Lingstrom. And of course, during the war, Ursula, very wisely, I think, the BBC appointed her as Head of Programmes in Ulster, didn't they?

Tom Chalmers: Yes, they did indeed. She stayed there. She and George Marshall, and of course, a couple of engineers, were the only people on the staff. Ulster produced practically nothing, except a programme which nobody wanted. But George Marshall insisted, during the war, in having a programme addressed not to Irishmen, but to Ulstermen.

The programme people in London wanted programmes addressed to Irishmen in the fighting forces, of whom there were a great number, but not only Ulstermen. But George strongly refused to do that. This was all part of George's very stick-in-the-mud attitude, derived from his membership of the Ulster Club, of which he was a pillar. He was very, very diehard, although not an Ulsterman himself.

It was left to Ursula to produce this programme, which she must have sweated blood over, and knew, in her heart, that it

wasn't what was wanted. But she was a very good producer, and if anybody could get results, it was Ursula. She upheld the station, and started off a programme which later became very famous: David Curry's Irish Rhythms. She deserves all credit for keeping the BBC flag flying in Belfast, under very difficult circumstances, during and after the war.

0:43:34

Trevor: I get the impression from what you've said that you found everything regarding programmes slightly amateurish in its approach and ideas of timing.

Tom Chalmers: Well, that was so. It was not only in Belfast that that was the case; it was all over the BBC. Programmes just started and ended more or less on the programme scheduled time, but there was no set time for a half hour programme. If it overran a few seconds, well, you could usually win it from the next programme. This was alright until you had to, so to speak, go to over to London for, shall we say, the news or Covent Garden, or if Covent Garden overran, and that kind of thing. Then you had problems.

But as a rule, they were amicably settled by some kind announcer from London getting on the phone. He didn't have to, but he very often did. He said, "Look, we're terribly sorry, but Covent Garden is going to overrun by 10 minutes tonight. You'll just have to fill in until we're ready." So there was a lot of very amateur work.

I remember that talks, for instance, were only very loosely times, and had lots of optional paragraphs for cutting or inserting at the end of it, as the case may be. It was amateurish in that sense. It was only the discipline of war, I

think, that taught us that programmes were a commodity which could be quantified, like anything else.

0:45:13

Trevor: You returned, at the outbreak of war, to London, I believe, and to work- Was it with the Empire Service, Tom?

Tom Chalmers: Yes, at the outbreak of war, I was put onto a boat and told to report to Broadcasting House, where I found a lot of regional colleagues: [Aidan Thompson 0:45:30] from Scotland, I think, and [John Selby], who'd been in Manchester. Or was it Birmingham? I can't remember.

Trevor: Birmingham, I think.

Tom Chalmers: Birmingham. Ah, yes. No doubt there was somebody from Manchester. But a lot of regional people had been gathered to augment the Empire Programme staff. How old-fashioned that does seem, the Empire Programme. The Empire Programme was, of course, in a way, as unprofessional as the rest of the BBC, partly because it relied on BBC programmes for a lot of its output, and they were badly timed. So symphony concerts had to be faded in the middle of the last half of the final movement, and that sort of thing, which must have infuriated listeners.

Don't forget, too, of course, that all programmes were still live on the domestic services. The Empire Service, however, did use magnetophon tape, which was high-speed steel tape machine; a lethal machine which ran at hundreds of revolutions per minute.

Trevor: Giving out blue sparks at night time.

Tom Chalmers: Blue sparks, and if the tape broke and flew out of its reel, of course, it could cut and severely injure anybody standing by, so one gave it a clear berth.

Trevor: We were given goggles. I used to edit when the machine broke down, at 200 Oxford Street, when you were Head of Presentation, and I joined as a junior engineer. One of my jobs was, of course, to weld the tape when it broke. But it was the Empire Service that was putting out recorded programmes at that time.

Tom Chalmers: It was putting out mostly recorded programmes, because it did have its own resources. It had a 25-piece orchestra, known as the Empire Orchestra, conducted by a former Manchester man, Eric Fogg and his assistant, Clifton Helliwell. They would play live at all sorts of times: 2:00 in the morning, I remember announcing one concert from the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House.

But yes, most of the output was recorded. There were, in the beginning, I think, 6 transmissions; transmissions 1 to 6, which wasn't a very easy thing to announce over the air. It's not very romantic. Later on, they became 4 named transmissions, Pacific, Eastern, African and North American, roughly as the shadow of darkness swept round the Earth.

Talking about these recorded programmes reminds me that the BBC was, by the time I went to London, established in its

wartime hideout at Wood Norton in Evesham, where for greater safety, all these magnetic recorders, [Blatnaphones 0:48:28] they were called in those days. Mr Blatna having been a music hall comedian who used the primitive machine on stage to amuse his audiences with. These Blatnaphone machines were down in Wood Norton, 120 miles away, and we were up in London.

So when the announcer had made his announcement in the studio in London, Studio Four A for Four B, an engineer on the sixth floor of Broadcasting House cranked a telephone, which rang in the Wood Norton Control Room. Somebody gave a signal to the engineer on the Blactaphone machines to start it up. No level had been given, so sometimes, the transmitters must have been knocked off the air, or they were so soft that you couldn't hear them, and the quality was appalling. It was nothing like the quality of even a mediocre disc. Sometimes it was good, and sometimes it was bad.

The use of the Blatnaphone gradually came to a stop. It had to, because the steel came from somewhere in Sweden, which was later overrun by the Nazis, and there were no more tapes. So disc recording was invented.

But getting a programme on tape from Wood Norton was a really fraught business, which sometimes took many seconds – 20 seconds, I remember we counted once – before it actually came up on the air. This wasn't good broadcasting at all.

0:50:03

Trevor:

No. I know, fortunately, and indeed, for both radio and television presentation, as it is today in this country, a young man, then in his, what early 30s, were you, at that time?

Tom Chalmers: Yes.

0:50:21

Trevor: You were at hand. Also, I've heard you tell me about Leslie Stokes. Tell me about him, Tom, because you two did quite a bit of pioneering work together in regard to presentation.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, we did. One of the things that Leslie Stokes and I, the system we devised, put an end to. It was during the review of the fleet at Spithead in, when was it? 1936. The commentators were Tommy Woodroffe and John Snagge and somebody else. They'd made the mistake of putting Tommy Woodroffe back on his old ship, which was the grandstand for the radio review of the fleet as it steamed past the monarch in review order.

Now, Tommy, back on his old ship, had been taken straight down to the wardroom and been filled with too much gin. Although the effect of it wasn't noticeable in the wardroom, it was when he came on deck and tried to give his commentary, which became world famous, all about, "The fleet's lit up, and it's disappeared," and all that sort of thing. It really was a very shameful episode, and he lost his job over it.

But unfortunately, there was no announcer on duty in Broadcasting House. Or rather, there was one, but he couldn't be found, because he was out at the nearest pub. The Engineer in Charge had no power whatever to take a broadcast off the air; it could only be done by an announcer. So this dreadful thing was allowed to go on, much to the delight, of course, of the population of Great Britain. It became one of the BBC's cause célèbre or broadcasts célèbre.

This set everybody thinking how such a thing could be avoided again. So apart from stopping an announcer going out to a pub whilst on duty, they didn't do anything. But certain people higher up, including [Roland Wynne 0:52:15], the Assistant Chief Engineer, an absolutely splendid man, to whom the BBC owes a terrific lot- He was one of the Marconi pioneers. He started thinking about this, in electrical terms, as to what they could do to get broadcasting under control.

Because until then, broadcasting went from the studio, wherever it might be, or the region, straight up to Control Room on the top floor of Broadcasting House, and thence out to the transmitters. There was no way, at any point, where it could be interrupted, without bringing in another studio and finding the announcer.

So that was the situation when war broke out, except in the Empire Service, where there was one studio especially dedicated – Studio Four A, I think it was – to making the announcements. But in no sense was it what we used to call a continuity studio.

Now, you mentioned Leslie Stokes. Leslie Stokes had joined the staff shortly before the war as an Empire announcer. He was an actor; not a very successful one, so I was told, but he was also a playwright. He'd written a play, with his brother, Sewell Stokes, about Oscar Wilde, which achieved some notoriety by its club performances. Because Oscar Wilde was not a name one played about with if you wanted large audiences in a theatre.

So Leslie was imbued with stage tradition. As I said, he wasn't a very good announcer, but he did care very much about the quality of what he went out. He'd got a very good programme sense.

He was on duty with me one evening, because we usually worked in pairs in case of bombing. He said to me, "This is extraordinary. This could never happen in the theatre." He was referring to programmes ending with five minutes to spare, or overrunning, or not starting on time, or the wrong tape being put on in Wood Norton.

He said, "This could not happen in the theatre. The theatre wouldn't remain open. Everybody would have a prompter, and there would be a stage manager, and an assistant stage manager with their lists of props, where everything should be. Everybody would know where things were. If somebody forgot their lines, they would be prompted.

"I don't see why we can't do something like this for broadcasting, so that everybody who is concerned along the chain," as we would say nowadays, "from studio to transmitter knows exactly what is happening, when it is happening, why it is happening, and more importantly, what is being said." Because censorship was imposed at that time, and you could not deviate from an approved and stamped script.

So we put our heads together. It was his idea in the first place. He said, "Why don't we make a list of the evening's transmission with everything in it?" But he left it to me to work this out in technical terms, because I was a technical person, and he most certainly wasn't.

So we got it all down on paper, exact to the second, for reasons that we'll come to later. Many copies were made of this: what the announcer was to say at such and such a time, which acted as a cue to, shall we say, Wood Norton, or to a regional studio, or even somebody in another studio. This all went down on paper, and once it was down, it was law and you could not deviate from it, except by permission of the Presentation Assistant on duty.

It also prescribed what the announcer should say, because many of them, by that time, were untrained and weren't imbued with BBC knowhow and tradition. So they had to stick to what had been written for them by a Presentation Assistant. This became known as the Operation Schedule. It was very tentative at first, and couldn't take its full effect, because the Control Room was still on the top of Broadcasting House, until it moved down to the basement when bombs started falling. And we were still on the fourth floor of Broadcasting House, four floors lower down, and communication was only by telephone.

But it was the step in the right direction. Control Room got a copy of the Op Schedule. So did Recorded Programmes, who had their own reproducing room for discs. So did the Control Room, and they could phone the cues down to Wood Norton. The machine operator himself didn't have to have a cranked telephone; he just listened, on headphones, to London, and when he heard the words, whatever it was, the final words of the announcement, he started up his machine. That was that.

That was the background of a sort of continuity. But real continuity didn't come until Broadcasting House was bombed. We were evacuated, or at least most of the staff were evacuated to Wood Norton, to Abbey Manor, which was a satellite station of Wood Norton, only a mile-and-a-half away, which had its own Control Room and two of its own studios. Since the studio was adjacent to the Control Room, we could work out a better kind of continuity, in which the announcer was in direct contact with the engineer, and could direct him in what to do, and could even do the fades him or herself.

Now, in this, Roland Wynne comes in, because when I explained my idea to him down at Wood Norton- Because I was the advance party, and I had plenty of time, before the

main body came down, to play around with the equipment in the Control Room and see that it could be done. Roland Wynne came along with Bruce Purslow, and listened to my suggestion, and said, "Well, this is just what we've been saying for years.

"We must put, somewhere in the chain, between programme and transmitter," what he called, "a deliberate bottleneck. An electrical bottleneck, where two chaps could sit: one an engineer, one an announcer, and if anything goes wrong, the announcer can chip in. Or if a programme is too long, he can fade out the programme, etc." And that is how continuity really started.

We used exactly the same Operation Schedule, and it was all very ingeniously worked out. Roland Wynne, I remember him saying to Bruce, "Bruce, do you agree we'll do it?" and Bruce said, "Yes, we'll do it." That was how it all started, under the capable hands of Bruce Purslow, for whom I could do no wrong, and his excellent assistant, John Mitchell. They gave us what we wanted, and they instructed the Control Room in Wood Norton how to work this, and everybody along the chain collaborated.

Because what Bruce said operationally, in the BBC, was law in those days. He, after all, was charged with the control of the most sensitive part of the whole BBC's network, which was Wood Norton.

0:59:57

Trevor: Mmm. You mentioned that the original Empire Service had been transformed both in structure at the beginning of the war, and, I think, in content. Was it by Tony [Rendall 1:00:07]?

Tom Chalmers: That is so, yes. He was assistant, normally, to J B Clark, who was still the Controller. Clark, of course, was a Manchester man. Tony had seen that the existing programme structure was not geared to the war effort, to propaganda. He had radically changed the whole thing, and as he said, "Transformed poor old J B's Empire Programme into something quite different."

In fact, it wasn't long before we dropped the title, Empire, which, even by that time was feeling a bit old-fashioned. He had instituted, when he got the transmitters, which took some little time- There was a massive programme of transmitter augmentation, enough to run two parallel networks, mainly, but not entirely, in the English language.

Red Network, Red for Empire, I suppose, was what you might call the old Commonwealth Network: The Pacific Service, the Eastern Service, the African Service, and the North American Service, which included, of course Canada. Green was the embryo of the World Service, as it later became. It was transformed, later, into the General Overseas Service and General Forces Programme, and finally, but not in my day, the World Service.

But it was the North American Service of the BBC which brought home to us the importance of tight timings in our programme schedules. Particularly during the bombing of London, in September 1940, when the American networks were avid to relay any and every kind of programme they could from London which depicted our sufferings under the bombing. Expecting, as they did, to hear of the demise of the British Empire and the flight of the government from London. Which, of course, they didn't hear.

But because time was money on the American networks, we didn't dare to overrun, or otherwise they would have dropped

the relays and put their own commentators in, like Ed Murrow, who did a marvellous job. So we'd learned, then, how to time our programmes so as to give their networks a chance to opt in and opt out by means of network breaks, and that sort of thing.

Now, the emergency set-up at Wood Norton or Abbey Manor was only temporary, until proper premises could be constructed for the services, again, in London. Because it was felt wrong for the news to be divorced from London, as indeed it was at Wood Norton.

So premises were made ready in the basement of the department store of Peter Robinson in 200 Oxford Street, right in the heart of London, and heavily reinforced floors, with the tube trains rumbling only a few feet below us. Those took some time to be got ready, but eventually it happened, and the Red and Green Networks in there.

1:03:35

Trevor:

And that, I'm pleased to say, is the first time that I met you. You were Head of Overseas Presentation. At the time, I remember particularly, because the wartime soap opera was being broadcast. Front Line Family, written by Alan Melville, was on the air from [red] continuity. The Junior Programme Engineers, myself included, were there in the studio to play the 78 gramophone records for the announcer on duty, should a programme break down. Or we were going to give a gramophone recital.

We were also there to play the recently introduced American-made Presto 17" long play acetate recordings, on which talks, features, and things like Front Line Family, or the Robinson Family, as it became, were recorded.

The incident – and I could not forget this incident, Tom – was during the transmission of one of the recordings, because they lasted quarter of an hour. This was the time when the announcer could leave the continuity studio. He could then run up two floors to London sewage level, in order to visit the toilet, or to go and record- A Programme Assistant was putting out the BBC 78 acetate recordings for the bank of the TD7 machines, which were also in the studio.

Part of the engineer's job, of course, was to keep the place tidy, in case they had a presentation, and important people came round on visits to see how their service was going. I looked around, and I thought, "I must tidy this studio up while the announcer is out."

I took the pick-up off the record that was being transmitted. I put it in its cover. I had it under my arm. I was going from the studio, through to the control cubicle when I saw our Head of Presentation standing there, and you said, "What's happened to the programme? What's happened to the transmission?" There was silence, and the record was under my arm.

Now, as far as I remember, it was Philip Robinson on duty. Philip, who was later, of course, to join us in North Region after the war, as the first producer of Have A Go.

1:05:47

But there were dangers, Tom, weren't there, when there were pauses in the service. Because isn't that the time that the German propaganda people were very, very clever at getting in on our frequencies?

Tom Chalmers:

Well, we were warned about that, that it had happened. I don't know how far that was done. We did have a report from overseas that the Germans would jump in on our frequencies. Although what the listener would have heard, I don't know.

There would have been a certain amount of interaction between the two frequencies if they weren't exactly synchronised. But there was a danger, so we tried not to leave any pause on the air.

The danger was more real, I think, on the domestic services on medium wave, where they could jump in without much difficulty. But the same principle applied, and we tried not to leave any silences, especially if there was a raid on, and there was any chance of the Germans hearing, perhaps, the result of a bombing attack on London, where the bombs were falling. Which was why we never broadcast Big Ben during an air raid. We didn't want them to hear the result of the bombs falling.

But you're quite right. I should emphasise that by that time, of course, we had reached a very specific drill with numerous overseas relays, which were not only the Americans. There were other broadcasting organisations. The whole of All India radio, the whole of New Zealand radio and Australian radio would all relay bulletins, radio newsreel, and things like that.

We'd arranged the continuity operation so that at a precise moment, a network cue would be given, usually 40 seconds before the next programme, which would start with the chimes of Big Ben, for which allowance had to be made. So the station knew exactly, if it was listening carefully, when to come in, and when to leave. The magic words were, "This is the British Broadcasting Corporation," and that was their cue. There were also time cues, of course.

1:08:01

Trevor: I mentioned Philip Robinson. Thinking back to some of your staff at 200 Oxford Street, there was Roy Williams.

Tom Chalmers: Yes.

1:08:11

Trevor: Franklin Engelmann. Albert Moor. Do you remember Albert?

Tom Chalmers: Very well.

1:08:18

Trevor: I remember them very well announcing on the North American network from London, whilst the day and evening shifts on the Pacific African and the Far Eastern Services were brightened for us by working with the lady announcers of your department. [Georgie Henshall, Barbara McFadden 1:08:33] Marjorie Anderson, who was later to contribute, so professionally, to Woman's Hour on your Light Programme, as I shall call it. That faded beauty of the silent screen, or so she seemed to me, Sunday Wilshin. Do you remember her?

Tom Chalmers: Yes.

Trevor: We had the young Australian announcer, [Isobel Ann Shed 1:08:54]. Ann Shed asked one night shift, "What is next, dear?" By this time, Tom, we called it the RTO, the Routine Transmission Order. I looked on this Sunday evening, and I said to Ann, "Oh, it's the old [Opilogog], and I put it down. Anyway, she made the announcement, and she said, "So and so and so and so," and then she left a very brief silence, and she said, "The Opilogog."

Tom Chalmers: I can well believe that.

1:09:25

Trevor: There were two young beginners. One was the 18-year-old daughter of the celebrated film producer, Michael Balcon, in Jill Balcon. We called her Balcon, I think, because on short wave, Balcon sounded like soda water, or something like that. I took their photos with me into the services. Jill and one other lady- She'd been a typist, I think, possibly in your department, until, like you and that Times reviewer, you noticed that she happened to have a very good voice and personality. Whom am I talking about?

Tom Chalmers: You're talking about one Jean Metcalfe. Jean Metcalfe was originally a secretary with Cecil Madden, in his underground hideout studio, under Piccadilly Circus, in the Criterion Theatre, whence a lot of Tommy Handley used to come. She was, as I say, his secretary. I had occasion to speak to her frequently when I was down at Wood Norton, on an ancient telephone. I remarked, in spite of the bad quality of the line, how charming and how clear her voice was.

I asked Cecil Madden if he would allow her to join my staff. Well, there was some administrative difficulty about her becoming an announcer straight away like that. Things didn't happen. The machine got in the way. So she transferred, as a secretary, to Overseas Presentation, and thence, of course, she could be made into an announcer. And indeed she was, and one of the best we had, I think. She and Marjorie Anderson were possibly two of our best lady announcers.

1:11:07

Trevor: I remember Jean, first of all, broadcasting for Noel Iliffe in a poetry programme that you had on your Overseas Service. Of course, then, Jean announcing Forces' Favourites, the record

programme. Also, Joan Griffiths and the delightful Margaret Hubble.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, that is so. And of course, they went on with it after the war, in the new Light Programme, which was broadcast, also, by British Forces Network in Hamburg.

1:11:39

Trevor: Yes. It was as a direct result of having seen a photograph of Jean Metcalfe on my desk in Forces Broadcasting, Hamburg that a certain squadron leader asked me for an introduction. And having got to know one another better while presenting Two-Way Family Favourites, Jean eventually became Mrs Cliff Michelmore.

I mention, and if we dwell on 200 Oxford Street, it's because, I think, it provided, perhaps the very best of wartime broadcasting.

Tom Chalmers: There was certainly some very broadcasting going on there, not only in the Red and Green Networks, but also in what was the foreign language network, or several foreign language networks. The Spanish and Portuguese broadcasts came from outside London, at Aldenham. But the Indian and Afrikaans broadcasts came from 200 Oxford Street.

The Indian ones were the most remarkable. They were normally under a former civil servant called Rushbrook Williams, but really planned and inspired by an extraordinary creature straight out of a fair book story, called Z A Bokhari, with long, dark hair and rings flashing on his fingers. A very flamboyant person. And we had people like T S Eliot,

Benjamin Britten and Sidney Keyes, the poet, Vaughan Williams, and many others, whom I can't remember.

They used to come and represent what was the best in British culture for Indian students. What effect they had in India, I don't know, but they would have been ornaments on the Home Service. They appeared much more often on Bokhari's programmes than they did on the Home Service, where poetry and other cultural matters were really rather at a discount, I would have thought. However, there they were.

In the Afrikaans programmes, there was one remarkable person who went on to make his mark in the field of music: Arnold van Wyk, who was a fine pianist and a composer. A great friend of Myra Hess, and performed at the National Gallery concerts on some of his pieces. He was also a friend of another considerable British composer, who's still alive, living here, in Cambridge, Howard Ferguson.

So it was Arnold van Wyk, a man called [Louis Kriel 1:14:11]. I can't remember much about Louis Kriel.

1:14:13

Trevor: Louis Kriel was the newsreader, the announcer. I remember his so well. I don't know what my Afrikaans is like, but I remember exactly what he said. He used to say, "[Non-English speech] this is London's ____." And Anna ____, General Smuts's niece. Do you remember?

Tom Chalmers: Oh, yes.

1:14:30

Trevor: She was on the Afrikaans. You mentioned the Indian Service, and Z A Bokhari, with his gold-topped ivory walking sticks.

Those eyes, he was something out of Arabian Nights, wasn't he?

Tom Chalmers: That's right, yes.

1:14:41

Trevor: I imagined that young chaps like me, if we sort of stared at him, we'd disappear in a sort of puff of smoke, or something. And [Vino Chitterly].

Tom Chalmers: Oh, a sweet person, and her sari, yes.

Trevor: Yes, in her colourful sari.

Tom Chalmers: Yes. There was another poet on the staff there, William Empson, who married an Afrikaans girl, Hetta Crouse. Much to William's surprise, they had a child. Of course, William was a very absent-minded person. He came in very bandaged up one day, and we asked him what the matter was. He said, "Oh, I trod on a rake, yesterday, in the bathroom." That was a real Empson story. But their child used to be rather troubled in childhood, so they brought him into 200 Oxford Street, put him in a small room downstairs, and gave him glasses of gin to keep him quiet. Not the very best treatment for a baby, I think.

So there were some colourful characters about then.

1:15:47

Trevor: Mr George Orwell?

Tom Chalmers: George Orwell, of course. A quiet and silent fellow, who never said very much. He went about with a long, sad face and a drooping cigarette between his lips. He and I used to drink over at The Feathers, a pub right opposite the entrance to Broadcasting House, but he would never say or do very much. He was very withdrawn.

But at the time, of course, he wasn't well. He had TB, for which there was no cure at that time. He died of it soon after the war. But he was, of course, writing *Animal Farm* at that time, so he had a lot on his plate and on his mind.

I remember reading, in the archives, many years later, the terrific battle that he had with not only our own higher programme staff, but the Ministry of Information, about what could and could not be said about the war effort, of which he was somewhat critical.

1:16:54

Trevor: Talking of the Ministry of Information, I discovered that one certain J B Priestley and his famous wartime postscripts- It was Duff who thought that this man was so left that he should be taken off the Home Programme. And of course, eventually, Priestley did stop doing the postscripts, didn't he? But he did come on to Overseas to do *Britain Speaks*, and a very good series it was.

Tom Chalmers: Oh, yes. I can remember Priestley, in the days of the bombing, sleeping very near to me in the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House, because he couldn't get home. He had a broadcast to do at 4:00 in the morning, I think, in the North American Service. So the only thing he could do was to sleep where the audience seats were, that had been taken up, in one of the raked tiers.

The only thing he insisted on was a cup of tea being brought to him by the announcer on duty before he broadcast. So I tiptoed in, woke up the great man, and gave him a cup of tea. He was a remarkable character; not in the best of tempers, as a rule. A bit difficult to cope with. He was the man who coined the phrase about a future Director General as being the only man with two glass eyes. That was Sir William Haley.

1:18:20

Trevor: Mmm. Dr Wellington Koo, a great man.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, I remember him. A great man, yes.

1:18:28

Trevor: He was the Chinese Minister of Information in London at the time, wasn't he?

Tom Chalmers: He was indeed, yes. He frequently broadcast.

1:18:35

Trevor: Whoever his engineer was, at the end of the broadcast, he would say, "And now, let us go and sample the delights of your restaurant," as he called the canteen. And on the way up, he'd look at- Do you remember [Tilly 1:18:45], the lift girl?

Tom Chalmers: Yes.

1:18:46

Trevor: And he would say, "Now, how is Tilly today?" Quite remarkable. He knew everybody's name in that building. Another man that impressed me enormously in wartime with

his broadcasts, and the sort of person that he was, was Jan Masaryk.

Tom Chalmers: Oh, yes, the Czech Foreign Minister, or Prime Minister of the provisional government.

Trevor: As he became.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, indeed. A great man. The son of Tomáš Masaryk. Now, he was assassinated later on, I think, wasn't he, young Masaryk?

Trevor: Well, he so-say committed suicide out a window. I think in point of fact, he was pushed. During the war, the Home Guard we had at 200 Oxford Street, it was Home Guard night, and I was in my uniform, and I remember Masaryk saying, "Are the BBC going to give you some of our splendid guns?" I said, "Your splendid guns, Mr Masaryk?" He said, "Yes, they're manufactured at Brno." Of course, it was the Bren gun.

We did get a rifle between five of us. We never reached the state of being issued, though, in the Home Guard, with Bren guns.

Tom Chalmers: I thought you did have a Bren gun once, because there was a story about Lobby De Lotbinière, the Head of Programmes under Tony Rendall, who was, I think, in charge of the Home Guard at 200 Oxford Street, showing how a Bren gun, or one of its near relatives, was dismantled. Which he did quite

successfully, only to find that he couldn't put it together again, and looking at it in disgust and amazement, and saying, "Well, perhaps it would be better if we tried it [with a shins 1:20:36]. Which one should perhaps explain is a term which is used for doing a thing backwards.

1:20:43

Trevor: I'd like you, Tom, if you will, to talk about one or two of the top figures. Myself, as a lowly engineer, we didn't come into contact with them. I'm thinking particularly of Maurice Gorham.

Tom Chalmers: Well, Maurice was a very remarkable man. He was a Roman Catholic Socialist; two things which didn't, as a rule, go together. In fact, he must have been the only one. He lived in the odour of sanctity with his sister. I say odour of sanctity deliberately, because he was in the shadow of Westminster Cathedral. He was utterly devoted to broadcasting. He had been Editor of the Radio Times in the early days of broadcasting, and was a rebel about almost everything.

He didn't endear himself to the hierarchy, which I think was why Tony Rendall took him on as Head of the North American Service. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge about America and things American, and he was absolutely the right person. He assembled a remarkable cast of people, including Denis Brogan and others, as speakers. You always met distinguished people on Maurice's programmes.

He started Transatlantic Quiz with a team in New York: Alistair Cooke and John Mason Brown, and a team in London, being very erudite, as far as one could be over short wave. Transatlantic Quiz was such a successful programme that it was later transferred, lock, stock and barrel, to the Domestic Services. We took in Light Programme, and it continued for

many, many, many years. And I think you, Trevor, at one time, was producing it, were you not, [in London 1:22:36]?

Trevor: Yes, when it was revived, I was.

Tom Chalmers: The Round Britain Quiz.

Trevor: Initially at 200 Oxford Street, with Transatlantic Quiz. Children's Hour, of course, had the oldest quiz. Children's Hour started the quiz. I think Transatlantic was probably number two. I remember a very young – and all the secretaries and people swooned when he came – Major David Niven taking part in Transatlantic Quiz from 200 Oxford Street.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, David.

1:23:04

Trevor: Your technical background, particularly in dealing with engineering colleagues, as well as with broadcasters and presenters, must have helped you enormously in your work.

Tom Chalmers: Well, it did, because I later took over the task of being the liaison between the programme side and the engineering side in the allocation of transmitters, or centres, as they were properly called. Which had to be switched on and off, according to what time of day it was in what part of the world you were trying to serve. One had to know all about aerials and what angle they fired at to the horizon, and that sort of thing.

I could interpret the programme needs. In other words, if we needed another quarter of an hour on the Indian Service, how could that be got? By switching transmitters from one service to another. The engineers would then ponder the suggestion, and come up with, possibly, a better one, or adopt mine. So that was very useful, and knowing how the Control Room worked.

It wasn't altogether relished by engineers, who thought that the programme people should stick to their side of the glass panel, and they to theirs, but it was useful.

I took part in a very interesting experiment from one of the transmitter stations at Rampisham. Because the Engineer in Charge of All India Radio, a man called [Goyda 1:24:40], who was a very interesting person indeed- As a schoolboy from Mill Hill, he had reflected signals off the surface of the moon. He was a brilliant engineer, if a trifle mad.

He kept on telling us that our signals from the BBC were markedly inferior to those of the Germans. And from recordings that he sent us, it was patently clear that they were. This was partly due to the fact that the German transmitting station was right in the centre of Germany, and we had one hop longer transmission path to provide than the Germans. So they could, as it were, pack more punch into their transmission from [Dresden 1:25:28] than we could from Daventry.

But that wasn't the only reason. The experiment I was involved in concerned studio quality. And it was shown, quite conclusively, that it was the particular kind of microphones and the bad acoustics of our studio which were responsible for our lack of clarity and intelligibility.

The Germans had got this right, as they usually did studio things, right from the start. As, indeed, they had with magnetic

tape. They were using paper tape, vinyl tape, right from the start of the war, and we weren't. We were fiddling about with magnetophone and acetate discs. They were streets ahead of us, technically.

But as you say, my technical knowledge, such as it was, was of considerable use to me.

Maurice, as I was saying earlier, was a very remarkable man. After a spell of duty as Head of the North American Service, he was asked if he would head up the new Allied Expeditionary Forces Programme, which began D-Day, plus one, which he did. Because he was the only man who knew how to deal with American generals and all the PRO riffraff that Eisenhower collected around him. He could deal with Glenn Miller and others in that world.

He was very, very successful in that. I think it was this that encouraged Haley to think that he was the right man to head up the new Light Programme, just as Wellington, a relic from the old Reithian days, was asked to head up the very conservative and staid, middle-class Home Service, in its new guise, and Harman Grisewood the Third Programme.

So Maurice said, "Would you like to come with me, and we'll start up The Light Programme?" It was called Programme B in those days, before it came on the air. He said, "There are going to be three people. There'll be myself at the head. You'll look after the presentation, and we haven't got number three yet. I haven't found the right man."

So for almost a year, I think, I had to double as being his Chief Planner, the man who translated his ideas into fact, and liaise with the output departments, and Head of Presentation. Then John McMillan came from British Forces Network, Hamburg, to act as Head of Presentation, and I became Maurice Gorham's

deputy de jure, as well as de facto, and John was in charge of presentation.

Later on, that changed, and Franklin Engelmann became Head of Presentation, when I went up to fill Gorham's place. But that's rather anticipating the story. The Light Programme was formed, initially, of most of the wartime successful comedy programmes, American ones included, the American bands, the British band, the AAF, and Paul [Fennerlay 1:28:41], was it? I can't remember. And a lot of the quiz shows, and that sort of thing.

It was very much a mixture, as before, because we had to get something on the air, and make it as popular as possible, before Luxemburg restarted and got its giant share of the British audience. And in this, we were quite successful. Almost too successful, because Haley was rather a culture vulture in his way. He also operated under the pen name of Oliver Edwards, and wrote thoughtful little pieces about Thackeray and Victorian writers in the columns of The Times, even when he was DG.

He thought that The Light Programme should not only entertain, but it should instruct and educate. Well that was the Reithian formula, but it wasn't so easy to do, and compete with Radio Luxemburg at the same time. Some people thought it didn't matter, and it should be an entertainment programme only, because after all, there was the Home Service, which could do the serious stuff.

But there was no doubt that if you had a popular programme on The Light, people would stay there, and wouldn't switch over to a serious talk on current affairs, or whatever.

So we had his remit to us. Our directive was to interest listeners in life and in the world around them, without, at any

moment, failing to entertain. That meant we could do practically anything, including chamber music and poetry, which we later did.

The Home Service, I don't know what its remit was. It was regionalised. All the regional transmitters had gone off the air with their own programmes during the war. They hadn't got their own programmes; it was one vast network. They were all unscrambled soon after D-Day, as soon as the Home Service started up again, and became their regional entities once more.

The Head of all that was Lindsay Wellington, who had been an announcer in 1924, coming straight down from Oxford. He and John Snagge were two of the originals. He'd been thoroughly imbued with Reithian principles, Reithian ideas and Reithian practice. That, I think, showed. He had very high ideals. He was always- We said bleating, but perhaps it would be more polite to say he was talking or arguing about the importance of having standards. It seemed that standards were sometimes more important than programmes.

Some of the Home programmes were very dull, and didn't attract very large audiences. Whereas The Light Programmes were anything but dull, and did attract large audiences. There was a certain amount of jealousy about this, especially as in the early stages, Haley encouraged inter-programme rivalry, and it was only too easy.

The Home Service were given two very important properties: Saturday Night Theatre and ITMA. That was just about all that they had. We had pretty well everything else. John McMillan, when he came to us, was really a man of the entertainment business, particularly bands. He could devise programmes himself, as well as the Variety Department. He knew all the comedians. And this didn't go down very well.

Of course, Programme Controllers and their staff were not supposed to talk to artists or entrepreneurs and impresarios; that was to be left to Variety Department at Aeolian Hall. However, we did, because we knew a lot of them ourselves. It was I, myself, who approached Wilfred Pickles, for instance – of course, I knew him well – and asked him if he would like to take part in a poetry programme.

I said it was all a matter of presentation. You could put chamber music on the air, if you went about it intelligently, and didn't use the frightening words, 'chamber music' and tell listeners what it was, but just gave a nice music programme. Well, that was the same with poetry. I said, "Wilfred, if you read a poem by John Masefield, they'll listen to you. But if Mr Somebody from the repertory company reads it, they won't, because he doesn't count for anything. You do."

Trevor: That became The Pleasure's Mine.

Tom Chalmers: The Pleasure's Mine, and he used people like Dickie Murdoch, Stinker Murdoch, from Much-Binding, to read The Walrus and the Carpenter, and other people like that. Similarly, this was all a matter of following out Haley's dictum about interesting listeners in life – poetry was a part of life – without, at any moment, ceasing to entertain them.

So when it came to the chamber music, we got distinguished people like [Moziévich 1:33:44] and Myra Hess. They did uninterrupted chamber music with no announcements; one piece leading into the other. It was only at the end that we told them what it was. They thought, "Well, this is a nice tuneful programme," so they went on listening to it.

Trevor: That was Music in Miniature.

Tom Chalmers: That was Music in Miniature. I remember the programme budget for that. It was considered enormous in those days: £175, augmented when you had stars like Mozievich. That was what the money was in those days.

1:34:18

Trevor: One the LE side, I now outwent quite a lot of the wartime LE shows. Were you responsible for bringing in Jimmy Edwards and Take It From Here?

Tom Chalmers: I can't remember whether it was in my day or in Norman Collins's. I should just add a note to the effect that Maurice Gorham, with his great experience and expertise, was taken away from The Light Programme and sent to restart television. In the course of that, he quarrelled with Haley and the board, because he considered they weren't backing television in the way that it deserved, and were starving it of money. So he resigned.

He'd been succeeded on The Light Programme by Norman Collins, who'd had a distinguished career in the publishing world, outside the BBC, and later, in the BBC itself. When Norman went to television to succeed Maurice Gorham, I was put in his place. I cannot remember whether it was I or Norman Collins who brought in Jimmy Edwards. I think it was probably Norman.

But there were so many. There was Educating Archie. We didn't have Round the Horne, which was just as well, I think.

Otherwise there would be some questions asked about some of its sketches which I wouldn't like to have answered. I don't know how Lindsay Wellington faced up to the barrage that must have come his way over some of the sketches in Round the Horne.

1:35:58

Trevor: One great attraction on The Light Programme was Diddle, Diddle-Um, Dick Barton.

Tom Chalmers: There's a story to tell about that, and I did come into that. Because Norman Collins deputed myself and John McMillan to handle the Dick Barton matter. He considered that a serial rather better done than Front Line Family or the Robinson Family, or whatever it was called in wartime, was a necessity in The Light Programme, and we should have it. We all wanted it done by Light Entertainment.

We thought that they were the people to handle it. They had a lighter touch. They were more susceptible to ideas. Val was of the stage. After all, he never forgot, and let anybody else forget, that he had a brother called John. We didn't think that they were able to handle it.

Well, Val hit the roof at this, and said that no matter what the subject matter was, it was cast in a dramatic form, and that it should be Drama Department that handled it. In the end [Benjie 1:37:06] Nicolls ruled that it should be handled by Drama Department, and that they would have to get it right in answer to our challenge. And of course, which they most triumphantly did.

It might have been better if Light Entertainment had handled it, but I think it was pretty good as it was, and a great tribute to them.

1:37:29

Trevor: In view of what you've said, Tom, was this the stage at which Controllers started being virtually Editors?

Tom Chalmers: Yes. Well, they were from the start. This was Haley's theory, that each Controller was, as it were, the Editor of his own newspaper, and to some extent, he fashioned it according to his own liking. Subject to the overall control of a man called the Senior Controller, Benjie Nicolls, Sir Basil Nicolls, as he later became.

We had the right to prescribe what went into our pages in newspaper terms. We could also suggest who we wanted to use in them, although it was really up to the professional Production Departments to say who they would use to fulfil our prescription. We had a limited right of objection of editorial control, but we could only exercise in general, and not in detail. We couldn't say, "You must take out that paragraph," or, "We don't like that word."

We could take out a whole programme, which we sometimes did, and say, "No, I'm sorry, but that is not good enough. We won't have it."

But you're absolutely right. We had, in theory, editorial control. But it was a very uneasy balance, and went on being uneasy for a long time, and was the cause of a great deal of friction between the Production Departments and the Controllers.

Trevor: And yet, now, it is accepted practice, of course. And particularly in television, where the Controller is the man who calls all the shots.

Tom Chalmers: All the shots. We weren't allowed to call all the shots in those days. We were feeling our way towards it, but I think that's the most one could say. I got into awful trouble with Music Department, objecting to some items in a lunchtime concert, and I was forced to retract by Stuart Wilson. I may say that in later days, I found great support from Maurice Johnstone as Head of Music in compiling our music programmes, because he knew exactly what we wanted. He had the common touch, as you might say, and worked very happily with us.

In fact, we started, with his help, the Northern Proms series, using the Free Trade Hall. We also took Have A Go from North. It was Have A Go, Joe at one time, and then that title was changed. It was so successful. I remember ringing up John Salt in Manchester, and saying, "We'd like to have it," and he was delighted, on the understanding that Manchester would retain complete control of the programme. I was only too happy to agree to that.

Of course it became the top-rated BBC programme. At one time, even collecting, very nearly 50% of all the adults in Great Britain as listeners, leaving the Home Service absolutely nowhere.

1:40:43

Trevor: You took on the post of Controller, Light Programme at the age, I think, of thirty-seven.

Tom Chalmers: Thirty-six, I think.

1:40:51

Trevor: Thirty-six? Well, that must have made you the youngest controller in the BBC.

Tom Chalmers: It certainly did, yes.

1:40:57

Trevor: How did you view the prospect of another 24 more BBC years ahead of you, with only one promotional step? That to, I suppose Director of Radio.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, I suppose that would have been the only other step. I was tempted to go into television by Norman Collins, who wanted me to go up to Alexandra Palace, in charge of Presentation. But it didn't attract me very much. It was chaotic, and I'd learned the value of orderly presentation, and all that sort of thing, in wartime, in the Overseas Programmes, and later, in The Light Programme.

Also, I didn't have a very highly-developed visual sense. I realised this from my engineering drawing days, on the drawing board. My sense was oral, both O-R and A-U-R. I thought I'd better stay in radio, which I knew a lot about, rather than venture into television, which I knew nothing about. I'm quite certain I was wise to do that.

So I withstood Norman's blandishments, as much as I loved working with him. He was a tremendous person to work for; bubbling over with ideas. Some of them not realised, or some of them bad, but a lot of them very, very good. You've only got to think of things like Housewife's Choice and Woman's Hour to know how good his ideas were.

Of course, before we leave this, I must just say a word about the terrific support we got from the regions informing The Light Programme. Because owing to an oversight on Haley's part – or perhaps it wasn't an oversight – we could deal direct with Regional Controllers and Heads of Programmes in the regions. We did not have to go through Supply Departments. Therefore, I could order my music programmes not out of [mould 1:42:56] of Head Office, but direct from Manchester and Glasgow and wherever.

And Wales; a remarkable source of programme material. Things like Silver Chords that made Mai Jones an immortal memory. And even Any Questions? from Bristol, which they wouldn't allow to go outside the region to begin with. I fought many battles with Beadle to get that programme out of the West Region. Even under their production, it didn't matter, and get it into South Shields or Manchester or Liverpool, into other areas in the rather comfortable, agricultural-dominated economic system of the West Region. But Beadle wasn't having any. He was proved amply wrong by its subsequent history.

So I could deal direct with John Salt and [Scotland 1:43:54], and other people like that, and we received the utmost support from them. In fact, The Light Programme couldn't have done what it did without the regions. This is a heartfelt tribute to people like Olive Shapley and Bowker Andrews and other people. Bowker, who produced the Gracie Fields shows for us.

Trevor: Yes. Variety Fanfare.

Tom Chalmers: Variety Fanfare and things like that, which had a vigour and a life to them, denied to the Aeolian Hall, even though we had some pretty good stuff from there.

Trevor: And the Blackpool outside broadcast during the summer season under Bowker's banner.

Tom Chalmers: Oh, yes. Well, the whole of the Variety Department and North Region Engineers and production staff migrated to Blackpool. And one or two Controllers were known to go up there too. Only one, I think, and that was me. The Home Service stayed at home.

1:44:51

Trevor: Why, in the end, did you decide that you were going to give up The Light Programme and move to pastures new?

Tom Chalmers: Well, as you said earlier, it was because at the age of 36, I became Controller of The Light Programme, and I'd got 24 more years to go before retirement. I couldn't think what on earth I was going to do in 24 years in the BBC. As you say, there was only one step, at that time, for me, on that side of broadcasting, in an editorial position, and that was on the board of management, as Director of Broadcasting.

Somehow, I didn't feel that I wanted to wait all that time, or indeed, that I would get that post. Because I don't think I was adept enough at the political game, the infighting that went on, and there was an awful lot of it. I'm not sure that I was persona grata with people who mattered.

So I thought, "Well, what can I do now?" After three years of The Light Programme, I felt that one was rather like a cart horse going round and round the same old track again. One began to know the answers. After all, I'd been in The Light Programme before it started, in the planning stage.

So I was looking for new outlets. And one came along in the shape of Colonial Broadcasting, as it was called then, when the British government decided, under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, to allocate a certain sum of money – quite a large sum of money – to the development of broadcasting in the colonies, as they were still called, having seen the value of broadcasting abroad during the war, largely through the work of the external services.

So the job of Nigeria came along. West Africa was their first target. India had, after all, got its broadcasting service, largely as a result of the BBC seconding, first of all, Reith out to talk about it, in the early days. Then Reith seconded Lionel Fielden, who started All India Radio, which was how Bokhari came into the BBC as one of Fielden's protégés.

Beadle had been out to South Africa and had started up the South African Broadcasting Corporation. So it really only left the colonies. Some of them had no broadcasting at all, and some had only wired broadcasting; a very primitive kind of wired broadcasting.

Lots of African soldiers had served in the war, had travelled, and had come back imbued with what seemed like, in those days, rather socialist, subversive, indeed Communist ideas from contact with other units, and the British and other countries. Noises about independence were being made in some of the African colonies, and it was quite obvious that something was going to happen there.

Macmillan hadn't invented the wind of change, but the first breezes of change were already blowing. And what better to keep these ideas in the right channels by having a good broadcasting service? Television was not yet in their minds. Radio, it had to be.

So a certain sum of money was set aside out of CG&W funds, and a survey was made of the three West African territories, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, as it was then, and Nigeria. One extraordinary scheme was proposed, which was a central broadcasting service, situated, probably, somewhere in the Gold Coast, covering the three territories.

This was a scheme which could only have come from the brain of a civil servant. It was utterly unrealistic. These countries, with their different traditions, their different tribal loyalties, their different customs and different languages. So it was eventually decided, just before I came on the scene, that each territory was going to have its own broadcasting service and its own allocation of money.

Of these, Nigeria was by far the biggest. Nigeria, with an uncounted population; nobody knew how big it was. The North Region alone was thought to be 70 million people. The last census had been before the war, and even that was totally unreliable.

Nigeria, although it doesn't look it on [Mercator's 1:50:01] projection, is a country about a third of the size of Western Europe. It's enormous. The problem was how to cover that with radio transmission of some quality.

A survey was made, initially, by a BBC engineer called [Leslie] W Turner, and a Crown Agent's engineer called Fred [Baron 1:50:25]. Even by the time the ink was dry on their report, it was out of date, owing to political developments. So I arrived

out in Nigeria, having been seconded from the BBC, leaving The Light Programme in the hands of Kenneth Adam, another Cross Street man. He'd worked on the- I'm not sure if it was The Guardian or The ___ [1:50:46]. It was The Guardian, I think.

Trevor: The Guardian, yes, and a BBC Radio producer in the North Region.

Tom Chalmers: BBC Radio producer, yes. A very excellent person.

Trevor: And that takes us to the end of 1950.

Tom Chalmers: Takes us to the end of 1950.

[Break in conversation 1:50:57 - 1:51:11]

1:51:11

Trevor: ...promotional step, that to, I suppose, Director of Radio.

Tom Chalmers: Yes, I suppose that would have been the only other step. I was tempted to go into television by Norman Collins, who wanted me to go up to Alexandra Palace, in charge of Presentation. But it didn't attract me very much. It was chaotic, and I'd learned the value of orderly presentation, and all that sort of thing, in wartime, in the Overseas Programmes, and later, in The Light Programme.

Also, I didn't have a very highly-developed visual sense. I realised this from my engineering drawing days, on the drawing board. My sense was oral, both O-R and A-U-R. I thought I'd better stay in radio, which I knew a lot about, rather than venture into television, which I knew nothing about. I'm quite certain I was wise to do that.

So I withstood Norman's blandishments, as much as I loved working with him. He was a tremendous person to work for; bubbling over with ideas. Some of them not realised, or some of them bad, but a lot of them very, very good. You've only got to think of things like Housewife's Choice and Woman's Hour to know how good his ideas were.

Of course, before we leave this, I must just say a word about the terrific support we got from the regions informing The Light Programme. Because owing to an oversight on Haley's part – or perhaps it wasn't an oversight – we could deal direct with Regional Controllers and Heads of Programmes in the regions. We did not have to go through Supply Departments. Therefore, I could order my music programmes not out of mould of Head Office, but direct from Manchester and Glasgow and wherever.

And Wales; a remarkable source of programme material. Things like Silver Chords that made Mai Jones an immortal memory. And even Any Questions? from Bristol, which they wouldn't allow to go outside the region to begin with. I fought many battles with Beadle to get that programme out of the West Region. Even under their production, it didn't matter, and get it into South Shields or Manchester or Liverpool, into other areas in the rather comfortable, agricultural-dominated economic system of the West Region. But Beadle wasn't having any. He was proved amply wrong by its subsequent history.

So I could deal direct with John Salt and Scotland, and other people like that, and we received the utmost support from them. In fact, The Light Programme couldn't have done what it did without the regions. This is a heartfelt tribute to people like Olive Shapley and Bowker Andrews and other people. Bowker, who produced the Gracie Fields shows for us.

Trevor: Yes. Variety Fanfare.

Tom Chalmers: Variety Fanfare and things like that, which had a vigour and a life to them, denied to the Aeolian Hall, even though we had some pretty good stuff from there.

Trevor: And the Blackpool outside broadcast during the summer season under Bowker's banner.

Tom Chalmers: Oh, yes. Well, the whole of the Variety Department and North Region Engineers and production staff migrated to Blackpool. And one or two Controllers were known to go up there too. Only one, I think, and that was me. The Home Service stayed at home.

1:54:58

Trevor: Why, in the end, did you decide that you were going to give up The Light Programme and move to pastures new?

Tom Chalmers: Well, as you said earlier, it was because at the age of 36, I became Controller of The Light Programme, and I'd got 24 more years to go before retirement. I couldn't think what on

earth I was going to do in 24 years in the BBC. As you say, there was only one step, at that time, for me, on that side of broadcasting, in an editorial position, and that was on the board of management, as Director of Broadcasting.

Somehow, I didn't feel that I wanted to wait all that time, or indeed, that I would get that post. Because I don't think I was adept enough at the political game, the infighting that went on, and there was an awful lot of it. I'm not sure that I was persona grata with people who mattered.

So I thought, "Well, what can I do now?" After three years of The Light Programme, I felt that one was rather like a cart horse going round and round the same old track again. One began to know the answers. After all, I'd been in The Light Programme before it started, in the planning stage.

So I was looking for new outlets. And one came along in the shape of Colonial Broadcasting, as it was called then, when the British government decided, under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, to allocate a certain sum of money – quite a large sum of money – to the development of broadcasting in the colonies, as they were still called, having seen the value of broadcasting abroad during the war, largely through the work of the external services.

So the job of Nigeria came along. West Africa was their first target. India had, after all, got its broadcasting service, largely as a result of the BBC seconding, first of all, Reith out to talk about it, in the early days. Then Reith seconded Lionel Fielden, who started All India Radio, which was how Bokhari came into the BBC as one of Fielden's protégés.

Beadle had been out to South Africa, from Manchester, I think, and had started up the South African Broadcasting Corporation. So it really only left the colonies. Some of them

had no broadcasting at all, and some had only wired broadcasting; a very primitive kind of wired broadcasting.

Lots of African soldiers had served in the war, had travelled, and had come back imbued with what seemed like, in those days, rather socialist, subversive, indeed Communist ideas from contact with other units, and the British and other countries. Noises about independence were being made in some of the African colonies, and it was quite obvious that something was going to happen there.

Macmillan hadn't invented the wind of change, but the first breezes of change were already blowing. And what better to keep these ideas in the right channels by having a good broadcasting service? Television was not yet in their minds. Radio, it had to be.

So a certain sum of money was set aside out of CG&W funds, and a survey was made of the three West African territories, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, as it was then, and Nigeria. One extraordinary scheme was proposed, which was a central broadcasting service, situated, probably, somewhere in the Gold Coast, covering the three territories.

This was a scheme which could only have come from the brain of a civil servant. It was utterly unrealistic. These countries, with their different traditions, their different tribal loyalties, their different customs and different languages. So it was eventually decided, just before I came on the scene, that each territory was going to have its own broadcasting service and its own allocation of money.

Of these, Nigeria was by far the biggest. Nigeria, with an uncounted population; nobody knew how big it was. The North Region alone was thought to be 70 million people. The last

census had been before the war, and even that was totally unreliable.

Nigeria, although it doesn't look it on Mercator's projection, is a country about a third of the size of Western Europe. It's enormous. The problem was how to cover that with radio transmission of some quality.

A survey was made, initially, by a BBC engineer called Leslie W Turner, and a Crown Agent's engineer called Fred Baron. Even by the time the ink was dry on their report, it was out of date, owing to political developments. So I arrived out in Nigeria, having been seconded from the BBC, leaving The Light Programme in the hands of Kenneth Adam, another Cross Street man. He'd worked on the- I'm not sure if it was The Guardian or The ___ [2:00:58]. It was The Guardian, I think.

Trevor: The Guardian, yes, and a BBC Radio producer in the North Region.

Tom Chalmers: BBC Radio producer, yes. A very excellent person.

Trevor: And that takes us to the end of 1950.

Tom Chalmers: Takes us to the end of 1950.

[Break in conversation 2:01:10 - 2:01:29]

END AUDIO

Under copyright