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File: LR003232 - BBC Oral History of North Regional Broadcasting -
TREVOR HILL (2).wav
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START AUDIO

Alistair: This is an interview with Trevor Hill, recorded in Studio 4
Manchester on 11th December 1990.

Male: It's a History of North Regional Broadcasting interview number
35.

0:00:10

Alistair: And, having said that, I will do the briefest of introductions. The
briefest of introductions being joined the BBC as a youth-in-
training in I think, Trevor, 1942. Progressed to programme
engineer, moved to British Forces Network in Hamburg, then
moved to Bristol Features in 1949. When was it to Manchester,
then?

Trevor Hill: That was the end of '49.

0:00:37

Alistair: And in Manchester, responsible for a heroic amount of both
radio and television output, ranging from children's television

to radio drama, ending a career- which has not yet ended, I ought to say, but officially ended a career with the BBC in 1983 after 41 years as assistant head of network radio.

Introduction ends, interviews begins, in a formal voice, which says, according to page one of this, Trevor, what brought you into the BBC?

Trevor Hill:

Our next-door neighbour. It was October 1938. My father was a great radio buff. He had to live in a home where he could have a 222ft aerial in the garden. He was, I think, the second customer that Radio Rentals took onto their books. So, he changed his receiver every year.

I remember particularly October 5th 1938, we had a new Bakelite echo receiver in the sitting room. I can smell now the valves heating and the smell of the Bakelite. As the receiver warmed up, we were waiting to hear the start of another Band Waggon series, a great favourite of light entertainment pre-war, Band Waggon.

And suddenly, to my surprise, I heard our next-door neighbour. There he was, on the national programme of the BBC in Band Waggon, and his name was Syd Walker. Syd, in his radio role in Band Waggon, he was the man who went around with this, sort of, cart, and he bought and sold things. He saw human life as it passed, and his line was, "Well, I ask you, chums," he went, "What would you do?"

Within a short while, he was coming back in this chauffeur-driven Daimler car to Mill Hill, North West 7. I just couldn't believe that I actually met somebody who was on the wireless. After a little while, Syd Walker said to me one day, he said, "Well, Trev," he said, "Would you like to come up and see how we do the programme?" And to actually be taken into

Broadcasting House at Portland Place, I mean, was an enormous thrill for somebody who then was aged 13 or 14.

0:03:03

Alistair: Would you have been equally starstruck by a radio if you'd lived next door to somebody who'd come from the theatre?

Trevor Hill: No. Listening to Children's Hour for as long as I can remember, not only to the BBC. Listening to Luxembourg and Dr. Fu Manchu, terribly exciting, becoming one of the Ovaltiners, listening to the Ovaltine programme.

We didn't go to the theatre as a family. I had a very young sister and a baby brother, so as a family, we weren't theatre-goers. The radio meant a tremendous amount to us, as a family. Listening to things like Band Waggon, I mean, were pure magic.

0:03:52

Alistair: Can you try and pinpoint, Trevor?

Trevor Hill: It was Franklyn Kelsey. Franklyn Kelsey was the author of two Children's Hour serials, 'Island in the Mist' and 'Children of the Sun'. They both, I think, had exactly the same villain, his name was Chang Li. I learnt in later years that he was played by an actor that I used quite a lot in drama called Ralph Truman. And there was Shorty and Conky.

But I remember the moment when Chang Li, the evil Chinaman, his airship was brought down over Hyde Park,

London, by an invisible ray. I mean, I saw the whole thing. I saw it in technicolour. The pictures that radio created, in my mind as a child, it was those images, I think, that made me feel that I wanted to work in this medium if I was ever given the opportunity and had the talent to do it.

0:04:46

Alistair: And Syd Walker was the catalyst?

Trevor Hill: Syd Walker was the catalyst. And taking me into Broadcasting House and watching Band Waggon being done, it wasn't at all as I'd imagined, of course.

0:04:56

Alistair: What was the biggest surprise?

Trevor Hill: The fact that they were all reading from scripts. You mentioned the theatre, I imagine I thought it was going to be something akin to a theatre performance, and of course it wasn't. What did interest me was the fact that there was a person who was employed just to do the sound effects. I thought that was rather magical.

In 1942, I was 16. I was at school in London. My father, I know, wanted me to be a civil engineer. That meant getting your ___[0:05:31] BSc. Well, I'd be studying for it now in 1991. I knew I wasn't going to do that. So, at the age of 16, I wrote to the BBC and enquired if there was any sort of job that they thought I might be able to do.

They asked me if I'd like to go up for an interview, and they asked me quite a lot about radio, what I listened to, what I thought about some of the programmes, what sort of job I thought that I might be able to do. And I said, "Well, I wondered if, you know, I could be trained to do some of the sound effects."

To my surprise and delight, I think the interview was in the school holidays, at the beginning of July on August 4th, I was at my father's family home in Gloucestershire and a letter was forwarded to say I'd got the job. I then had to break the news to my father, who was none too pleased at the idea of a son of his going into showbusiness, I think.

0:06:30

Alistair:

Let me ask you a little bit more about that, because you can take what you said in two ways. You talked about being fascinated by the sound effects. I think 90% of the people who went to witness a performance would probably identify with the performers. What was it that made you identify with this very technical, very specialist and rather odd aspect of radio?

Trevor Hill:

The fact that, in radio, unlike the theatre, the member of the cast, the character making the entrance, didn't open his own door and walk onto the set, didn't pick up his own teacup and take tea and then put the cup down, you heard the cup rattle on the saucer.

In radio terms, of course, they just concentrated on reading the lines. They couldn't move around, because they couldn't keep wandering away from the microphone. I mean, this didn't come until years later when we started stereophonic drama. So, the

thing was static. The cast stood very still, apart from just doing approaches and departures on mic. I thought this was- I don't know, it was just fascinating, the fact that somebody else had to do the sounds. They gave the lines.

0:07:48

Alistair: But you didn't see yourself as a performer?

Trevor Hill: Oh, no. Not in those days. I mean, that came later.

0:07:55

Alistair: Let's not jump ahead on that one. Tell me about the details of a youth-in-training, the duties.

Trevor Hill: Well, we were trained at the Langham Hotel in London. I think, in my intake, August 31st 1942, there were 12 of us. Our chief instructor was a fellow called David Godfrey. David H Godfrey became a very excellent producer of radio drama in the London Drama Department, and in later years David and I were to work together.

He was there to give us scripts and the scripts said, "Bring up the sound of the wind and the waves," and so we then had to get BBC effects records and we'd put on- 3B19 was wind, 4B12 was sea. I remember these numbers because one got so used to going into the effects library and asking for 4B12 or whatever. You couldn't just say, "I want wind," or, "I want the sound of a car starting." You had to give a number for it, you see.

So, we were trained to operate the sound effects to play on the records from the control cubicle, sitting with the balance engineer. He was controlling the microphones. Mic 1 was the, sort of, house acoustic, Mic 2 was the tent or the outdoor acoustic. He'd be twiddling the knobs and we'd be standing behind with these banks of grammar phone players, reproducers, the TD7s, and we'd be putting on the sound effects records.

Before we could do that, we had to start off just opening and closing the doors. I was trained by the BBC to open and close doors for very important people.

0:09:37

Alistair: Tell me more.

Trevor Hill: Well, the most important person I ever opened and closed a door for, undoubtedly, was Tommy Handley, followed by Mrs Mopp. Then when the diver- Jack Train had to come up with the famous line 'don't forget the diver'. This was Tommy Handley.

I discovered after when I got to know him, Tommy Handley, in his days as a youth in Liverpool, and people used to jump literally off the jetty, and they'd say, "Don't forget the diver," and you'd throw a coin in. These poor people would jump into the dirty River Mersey and they'd come up with coins. Tommy worked that into the programme.

So, when the diver had to say, "Don't forget the diver, sir, don't forget the diver," one would blow into a glass of water with a straw and you'd get 'bloop-bloop-bloop'.

0:10:21

Alistair: Now, just tell me, Trevor, the exact science of opening the ITMA door.

Trevor Hill: The ITMA door as opposed to any other common or garden door, the ITMA door was 'rattle-rattle-clink', 'diddle-diddle-dack'. I don't know who invented it. I inherited it. I suspect it was probably Pat Jamblin who originated that door.

0:10:48

Alistair: Right. Now, tell me about the chief engineer.

Trevor Hill: Oh yes. Well, after we had- we're about a fortnight in on our initial training as the youths-in-training, and in order to see what went on in broadcasting, we were taken in to see the holy of holies, the London control room. In wartime London, that was a high-security area.

It was a hot day, it was the beginning of September. That particular summer of 1942 was a hot summer, and yet all these people were sitting in this very hot atmosphere with all this equipment, all this valve-driven equipment. They were wearing suits, they were wearing ties, their jackets were on. They weren't just sitting in shirt sleeves. It was almost as if we were meeting God.

David Godfrey said to us, "I'd like to introduce you to the chief engineer London control room, this is Mr C. F. Buttle." And there was a terrible silence, and nobody said anything. And I

thought, "Well, you know, somebody should say, 'How do you do, sir?' or something like that." Still a silence. Then I remembered, and I said, "Oh, I believe I know your brother-in-law, sir." And Mr Buttle, sort of, thought, "Oh, good. I'm getting some response." He said, "Do you?" I said, "Yes, sir. He's our butcher."

It happened to be true, because his brother-in-law told me that he had a relation who worked at the BBC and was in charge of London control room, but it really wasn't quite the thing to say to the man in charge of the BBC's London control room in wartime. I'm afraid Hill said it, though.

0:12:41

Alistair: Did it have any repercussions on Hill?

Trevor Hill: It probably did. I mean, it's probably in my annual report. You see, many, many, many years later, Alistair - this tells you something about annual reports - I waltzed in to the department that keeps staff annual reports here in Manchester. I was about to do an annual report on one of the staff who worked within my group by name of Michael Green, who is now controller Radio 4. I was talking to the girl in registry and she handed me the file and I took it back to the office.

It wasn't until I got back and I was about to open it, and I suddenly saw they'd given me my own personal file. I thought, "Ooh, I wonder what it says about N. T. Hill." Page one was my letter of application to the BBC and a report by Dr. Alexander, who was then in charge of programme engineering, which I joined. The third piece of paper was from the man actually who

then interviewed me, Peter Parish, who decided whether I was suitable or not. The fourth was my very first annual report as an engineer-in-training.

It finished up by saying, "Has the gift of the gab but not an original thought in his head." So, I realised that was my assessment by the BBC when I was rising 17. I probably still haven't had an original thought in my head. I hope I've retained the gift of the gab, though.

0:14:23

Alistair: Trevor, what I'd like to do now is move through the war years and the BFN years, because we have in the ordinary sound archive the stories of Cliff Michelmores, of Jean Metcalfe, of Roger Moore, of Bryan Forbes. These are well documented elsewhere, so I'd like to move you forward.

Trevor Hill: Yes. Well, when I came back, the engineering establishment officer, I had to go and see him. He said, "Well, Hill, we've paid all your annual increments, the time you've been in the services, and you're now entitled to £4 15s a week in engineering division. I said, "Well, from the experience I've enjoyed in Hamburg, and I haven't been doing the engineering side, I've been doing the production side, I would like to see if I could get onto a production course."

Fortunately, by this time, in Hamburg I had met one of the sergeants there, apart from Sergeant Bryan Forbes, was Sergeant Margaret Potter. We'd run the features and drama unit there, we'd started it up. We'd had one or two plays accepted by the BBC, and on the strength of that, the BBC asked if I'd like to go onto a production course. So, I did this.

At the end of the course, I was posted to BBC in Bristol as a producer-in-training and attached to features department and to Desmond Hawkins. Desmond Hawkins who started the Natural History Unit. During that period, I think one had a year in which to find a post within the BBC. I was about nine months in on my attachment to Bristol, and I'd been producing the weekly serial down there ____ [0:16:08]. I'd written two feature programmes which the region had broadcast.

Gerald Beadle, who was controller, sent for me once day and said, "There's a job coming up in Manchester. Initially, it's for a three-month attachment, but they want to interview people with a view to taking up the posts of general programme producers." He said, "Look, you're a young person." Then, I was 23. He said, "I think we're a little one-foot-in-the-pig-trough." He said, "I think, really, the North of England is going to offer you better opportunities than we can down here."

So, I put in an application and I was asked to go for an interview in Manchester.

0:16:55

Alistair: What was your impression of the city, visually, when you saw it, I mean?

Trevor Hill: Well, coming out of the train from Bristol, and I was born and bred in the West Country, it was everything that I imagined it was going to be from having watched pre-war George Formby films and things like that. Rather dark streets, very tall buildings. Obviously some of the hotels had been mill warehouses, mill buildings, and had been converted into

hotels. Not at all the softness of Whiteladies Road, Bristol, but seemed to have a lot of get-up-and-go.

I went in for my interview. I was ushered in by the controller's secretary, a very nice lady called Edith Worsley. I walked in, and the then controller, John Coatman, got up and he stuck the thumbs of his hands into his waistcoat pocket. He said, "Ey, come here, lad." He said, "Sit thee down." He said, "Now, is there owt as we should know about thee?"

I don't know what my expression was, but certainly my mouth fell open because the next moment he burst out laughing. And he turned to Bob Stead, who was head of programmes and said, "Well, we don't really all talk like that in the North of England, do we, Bob?" No, it wasn't Cowhill, Tripe and Gracie Fields. Quite the reverse.

The executive was one Henry Fitch. I was Hill, he was Mr Fitch to all the staff. The first thing he said to me, I don't know if it was an order or a question, he said, "You play golf, Hill?" I told Mr Fitch I didn't play golf, I wasn't in the slightest interested in golf. I hadn't come North to play golf, I'd come North in the hope that I was going to find some interesting work in radio."

Old Broadcasting House in Piccadilly wasn't a very large building. It was [banked 0:19:00] buildings. I was in London House, which was next to the Queen's Hotel. I had a large office, for the first few days all to myself, with a secretary called Mary McNulty. After a short while, I was joined by another young producer, a script writer on the features side called Arthur Swinson. Arthur was later to work for television.

My next-door neighbour, who gave me great joy, was the head of variety, as he was called in those days. Like myself, Bowker Andrews was an ex-studio manager, programme engineer. He had what I thought was a very exciting department and a very

exciting programme output. He was responsible for things like variety fanfare and the AI Read Show and programmes such as that.

To begin with, the BBC in the North let me find my feet. Said, "What programmes would you like to do?" I think the first idea I put up was a feature on the Doncaster Yearling Sales. I went across to Doncaster. I knew nothing about Yearlings or that sort of horsey atmosphere, but I stayed around for a few days and picked up what I could, then did this feature.

After a short while, I had done some announcing in Hamburg and the region said to me, "Would I be prepared just to go to London for an announcers' course?" because they'd like me to do some presentation work for them. So, I jumped at it.

I was sent to London and I met the formidable Miss McLeod, who taught all the BBC announcers. A lady with a large bosom and very large wooden beads, which decorated that bosom. Day one, we were given a test piece to read. I read it very nervously and came out, and she looked at me and said, "What gave you the idea that you would ever be able to announce for the BBC?" I discovered that she did this to all of us. It made us try all the harder.

Anyway, in the end, I think I passed muster. Came back North and Bowker said to me, "We'd like you to announce the Northern Variety Orchestra." Well, I was very keen to do that because the conductor at that time was Ray Martin. Ray had been with us in Hamburg, Sergeant Ray Martin of the Pioneer Corp. There he was running the Northern Variety Orchestra in Manchester. This was mainly for the Light Programme.

Ray had a thing about, as he called, he was [Viennese 0:21:45] separation. Ray insisted that the vocalist and the announcer should be cut off from the orchestra so that the

engineers could get a nice balance on the orchestra and a nice balance on the vocalist. The vocalist's voice wouldn't overspill onto the string microphone or the wood wind microphone. So, Ray had us between the outer and inner studio door.

It was one of the BBC double-sided ribbon microphones, and the vocalist would sing at me songs like, "Just to possess you, my heart's desire." And I would make faces at this man and think, "Sooner or later, I'm going to make him laugh," but I never did succeed in making him laugh. He stopped announcing. I don't know what he did after, but his name was Jimmy Young.

0:22:34

Alistair:

Just tell me about the difference in atmosphere or climate, whatever word you want to use, between Bristol, where you came from, and Manchester where you ended up. When you got to Manchester, was there a discernible spirit in the air, as it were?

Trevor Hill:

Oh yes, very much so. As Gerald Beadle said, West at that time was a little one-foot-in-the-pig-trough. I'd been working to Frank Gillard, who was the head of programmes. Frank was part of the BBC war report unit when, during the war, in engineering, I was on Radio Newsreel, he was one of the reporters. There was never a joke in his cue material before he went ahead with his report, unlike Wynford Vaughan Thomas and others. This was really borne out when I came face-to-face with the man.

The atmosphere in the North, under John Coatman and particularly Bob Stead, was totally different. They did, in the

North at that time, in 1949, have a band of fairly young producers. I don't know. It was just a livelier, more pulsating atmosphere in which to work.

0:23:52

Alistair: Was there any evidence of this atmosphere? How was this atmosphere made manifest?

Trevor Hill: Well, I discovered fairly early on that Bob and the people in Talks and Features, they all went round to Mrs Mac's, just behind old Broadcasting House in Lever Street, Mrs Mac's pub at lunchtime. An awful lot of BBC discussion took place in this pub. That certainly never happened, to my knowledge, in West region.

The programme boards where we discussed ideas or other people's work was criticised, praised, and pulled to pieces perhaps, was far livelier in Manchester than I'd noted it to be in West region. Of course, the North was a far bigger region. It was doing, I suppose, the major part of regional broadcasting into the old Home Service and the Light Programme and the Third Programme, far larger than any other region. So it had an established track record.

West, in a way, I think was trying to find its identity. It's identity came later. Mainly in Natural History Programmes. The North, of course, it had very strong light entertainment, it had a very good talks output with things like Public Enquiry. From 1951 onwards, The '51 Society, one of the first really free-ranging discussion programmes which was produced by Graham Miller.

We had some very good radio features under Norman Swallow, to be joined a little later by Denis Mitchell on the radio side. Arthur Swinson was doing radio features, Barney Colehan had been brought in from Hamburg, British Forces Network.

He, at that time, had started- he'd taken over Have A Go and he later on was doing programmes like Top Town, where you're getting talent from a particular town and a panel of judges, and you put one town against the other. It was a competition to see which town could produce the best amateur talent. Some of it was of a very, very good standard indeed.

Barney was marvellous at finding new people and bringing them in to broadcasting. Ray Lakeland up in Newcastle, another of the staff that they'd taken on from the Forces Broadcasting, he was going ahead up there. Leeds was the centre of drama and was providing not only regional drama but a pretty substantial amount of the drama output that was going into the basic Home Service in London. It was a go-ahead region.

I realised what Gerald Beadle meant. Had I been 10, 20 years older, perhaps I would have stayed in the West. But the opportunities to me at that time seemed to exist in the North of England. Bob Stead, as head of programmes, was, in my perception, aged 23, a very good head of programmes. He was firm, but he encouraged you.

He'd listen to ideas you had. Where, in West, Frank Gillard would say, "You know, do you really think that's any good?" Stead may have thought it wasn't very good but he'd tell you to go ahead and try it out and discover for yourself whether it succeeded or failed. All in all, the atmosphere, the conditions, the encouragement in the BBC North region to me were, I thought, ideal.

0:27:44

Alistair: Tell me how you got into Children's Hour.

Trevor Hill: Well, I said a little while ago, Alistair, the idea was they wanted somebody to come here for a period, and that was a three-month period. I discovered after that that three months was, in order to take over from Nan Macdonald. Nan Macdonald was, and to me, remains Northern Children's Hour.

She inherited a well-found ship from Olive Shapley in 1937, 1938, carried on through the war years working, of course, during the war to London because regional broadcasting closed down. But at the end of the hostilities, Nan's Northern Children's Hour was totally different from any Children's Hour that I'd been listening to pre-war as a listener in North West London.

0:28:37

Alistair: In what way was it different?

Trevor Hill: Well, Nan's was a grown-up version of Children's Hour. Yes, she'd started Nursery Sing Song on a Tuesday just before the war. Nursery Sing Song was entirely as the title implies, but she also had Commonwealth affairs. She had Harry Ree doing current affairs talks which, to my mind, were rather left wing. I thought, "I wonder if Children's Hour really should be party to this type of broadcasting."

She had concerts by the BBC Northern Orchestra, Charles Groves, the then conductor, introducing the concerts himself, coming into the studio a day or two beforehand and talking to the audience about the items that they were going to perform. You couldn't get into the Milton Hall on Deansgate because children knew from the broadcast when the concert was going to be, and it was always a sold-out performance.

Nan didn't give them any old light diet of music. I say any old, I mean with respect here, you didn't find Eric Coates. You did find Sibelius in the concerts that Nan planned, and you found youngsters, to my amazement, some of them turning up with a score so that they could actually follow the music they were listening to.

0:30:00

Alistair: So, if Nan Macdonald was doing such good work...

Trevor Hill: If you are absolutely wedded to the product in every respect, there is nothing else in your life, you can tend to expect just a little bit too much of everybody else. In terms of support staff, the programme engineers for example, they found it, at times, very difficult to work with Nan. Regional Round, a London programme, it was all the regions in the BBC except North, Nan wouldn't take part in it.

She was insular. In a way, I suppose, although I don't like to say this, she was insolent. Her controller and head of programmes found it very difficult to contain her standards, if you like, and the way that she treated some of the staff. The idea was that Nan would go away for three months so that the rest of the staff could have the holiday. I discovered that I,

having been appointed, was to take over Northern Children's Hour from Nan for that three-month period.

Within my first few days, because obviously I was going to trail Nan, I think for one month, or perhaps it was only two weeks before she went on this holiday, she wasn't satisfied, for example, with the staff, the programme engineers, who were doing her spot effects. So, she said to me, "You've done this, you go and do them."

So, I found myself in a situation in old Studio 1 Manchester where I was standing behind the effects screens to screen it off from the rest of the studio with the person who was from engineering, who was supposed to be doing opening the doors and rattling the teacups and crinkling paper to sound like fire, and encouraging them. I was quite determined I wasn't going to take over, it wasn't my job.

The head of the programme engineering department was standing on the balcony to make sure, in his mind, [Guy Watteau 0:32:08], that this new producer was not doing the spot effects. This was the, sort of, silly situation that I found myself in.

After a while, Nan and I reached an understanding. We'd been over to Leasowe children's hospital, Liverpool, and on the way back in the staff car Nan announced to me- she didn't ask me, she just said, "Tomorrow, you're doing so-and-so." I said, "Well, tomorrow Nan, I'm going to go to Birmingham to visit my fiancé," who was the Sergeant Potter from Forces Broadcasting.

She, sort of, blew up and said to me, "How will you ever know anything about Children's Hour if you're not prepared to take more interest in it?" So, I went. I didn't go to Birmingham. I attended the play, I think, Nan was doing on the Sunday.

On the Monday morning, I walked in and I thought, “Well, it isn’t worth it. I’m going to stand up to this lady.” Nan’s desk was always absolutely covered in books. The cleaners weren’t allowed to dust her desk. She was there with her head down and she was scribbling away, and I said, “Good morning,” to her and she never answered me. I got very cross.

I said to her, “I said, ‘Good morning,’ to you, Nan.” And to make the point, with two hands, I swept her desk clean of her books, and they clattered onto the floor and, without being too theatrical about this, the dust was rising. And suddenly, these piercing eyes looked up and Nan, very [Scots’ 0:33:48] face, hair parted in the middle, rather tightly-crimped hair, and these piercing eyes suddenly softened.

She smiled and she said, “I’m a bastard, aren’t I?” And I said, “Yes, Nan, you are.” And from that moment on, I think I became one of her greatest fans. We got on extremely well and, in later years, when I had taken over her post, she was doing a lot of work for me because she was a brilliant adapter. She was marvellous at features.

Whatever difficulties we had with Nan, the BBC should always accommodate somebody like that if they are of that calibre, and if they are doing that sort of job, and if they are producing the sort of programmes that Nan not only produced herself but got others to produce.

0:34:45

Alistair: But they didn’t accommodate her?

Trevor Hill: They didn't accommodate her, and in the end she went down- she was posted to children's television in London. Eventually, she left the staff.

0:34:56

Alistair: Now, was that a calculated easing out?

Trevor Hill: Yes. I think it was a kind easing out. I say kind because, after Nan left, Gwen Pain took over as organiser of Children's Hour, before I took over myself. Gwen got Nan to adapt quite a lot of things. Gwen herself didn't do any of the drama production, I looked after that after Nan went with Herbert Smith. Yes, she was eased out.

Let me put the other side of the coin though to you. As soon as Nan went, before the BBC appointed a successor, Bob Stead sent for me and said, "Look, will you hold the fort until such time as we've advertised the job, boarded it and everything?" I said, "Yes." Within about two days of Nan going, the phone rang and my secretary said, "It's Mr McCulloch," and there was Derek McCulloch on the line.

"Oh, Hill, Regional Round in three weeks' time. Of course, North will now come into it, dum-dum-dum." He was issuing an order from the head of the department in London. I'd already met Derek McCulloch, he came out to us in Hamburg. It was a great thrill to meet him, because there was one of my childhood heroes. But the reality of meeting Mac, Uncle Mac on the wireless and Derek McCulloch as a person, I mean, Derek again was a very, very difficult person.

0:36:32

Alistair: There is an impression I get, Trevor, from hearing you speak and from talking to other people, is that one of the great faults of the whole BBC in the '40s and '50s is that there were people who were almost psychotically unsuitable to be in charge of others.

Trevor Hill: It was a splendid department because, alright, you had McCulloch, and perhaps it needs the McCullochs and it needed the Nan Macdonalds, but supporting Derek, you see, you had David Davis, who was one of the kindest, gentlest of people. You had Elizabeth, Josephine Plummer. Taking them as a department, four people running the Children's Hour department, it was very well balanced.

Just going back to the phone call and the instruction that I had, "North will take part in Regional Round," knowing the situation, I went to my head of programmes. Bob Stead said to me, "You may tell Derek McCulloch that we'll record the next Regional Round, and if we think it's up to standard, we'll join in the following month." So, I thought, "Oh, Christmas," you know?

Anyway, I picked up the phone. "Mr McCulloch, sir, we're going to record the next edition, sir, and if we feel it is up to standard, sir, we shall take part the following month, sir." It didn't go down very well. I thought, "Well, I'm glad to see there's a head of programmes who is taking a stand and was supporting a former member of staff who had come to the conclusion that perhaps it was rather a slightly cosy programme and featured, perhaps, Derek McCulloch a little too much, and that they didn't want to be part of it."

But having heard that thing, we took part in the thing and North continued in Regional Round for the rest of its life.

0:38:29

Alistair: This raises a point, Trevor, that is worth exploring. What was the level of autonomy that people like Bob Stead had? It sounds pretty great.

Trevor Hill: It was. It was indeed. It was won, I think - I say 'I think' because I wasn't here - almost entirely by the appointment of John Salt, pre-war. John Salt was head of programmes here in Manchester. In 1938 he married Olive Shapley, who'd been my predecessor, as it were, but two.

She was running Children's Hour and then, as you know, because you've done programmes about Olive and the very, very major part she played in the radio feature, Olive married John. Normally, of course, under the BBC rules and regulations, she would have left staff, but the war broke out.

John, at the time of Pearl Harbour, went as the BBC representative in New York with Olive, and came back at the end of the war. He was ill. Before I came to Manchester, John had died and Bob had taken over. John, through his personality, through his diplomacy, won a rather exceptional position for himself whereby if he said he was going to offer a programme, then London knew that it was going to be of a very good standard, that it was going to be done at a reasonable price, and that he could be utterly, entirely relied upon.

Bob not only inherited that, he enforced it by his own actions, by the way he went about the job, by many of the staff he himself appointed at boards. So, I think the North was probably in a stronger position certainly than Midland region and most

certainly from my own experience a much stronger position in programme selling than West region was in in the late '40s, early '50s.

It had a very good reputation on the radio side. It's interesting to me to see that that reputation on the radio side has continued right through to the 1990s.

0:40:52

Alistair: Let me ask you now about Children's Hour and your view of the output before coming on to what you actually produced.

Trevor Hill: On balance, the pre-war aunts and uncles atmosphere, to me, did exist a little on a national basis. On the regional basis, speaking for the North of England, Nan was never Aunty Nan to anyone. The feel and the flavour of her output, to me, was far more adult than any other regional Children's Hour, or indeed the London Children's Hour. I know Gwen Pain, when she took over from Nan Macdonald, she built on that sort of aspect.

I mean, Gwen introduced features like Other Children's Schools, where we'd sent Bertha Lonsdale, the script writer, and they would ask the school, the pupils and the staff to re-enact their own history in the first part and then have a famous, distinguished old boy or girl coming round and showing the school as it is today.

Gwen started on a Saturday, and I think this was a very strong card. She started a programme in 1950 called Out of School. This was a teenager magazine programme. She didn't produce it herself, I produced that alternately with Herbert Smith, who was a very important figure in the story of Northern

Children's Hour, a splendid actor, and the reader of those Horace Hedgehog stories by Margaret Scott. Marvellous because one had the incredible combination of the author and Herbert's performance.

Out of School was very much a teenagers' programme for teenagers and by teenagers. Right from the start, Gwen said to me, "Are you going to introduce it?" and I said, "No, I think it's a teenager programme. Why don't we get some teenagers to introduce it?" So, we did. I started off, Geoffrey Wheeler, he'd done an interview for us, I got him to present the programme. Brian Trueman, Judith Chalmers.

From that, I made up my own mind in later years that, as far as I was concerned, Northern Children's Hour would not be presented by Trevor or Gwen or Nan, if possible, certain programmes would be presented by young people for young people.

0:43:21

Alistair:

Again, Trevor, we have in other archive interviews exhaustive material about who was started in Children's Hour. Violet Carson, the great names of Northern Children's Hour. So, what I'd like to do for the purposes of this interview is move onto your involvement with children's television. Can you tell me how that came about?

Trevor Hill:

Yes. After the whole Holme Moss transmitter opened, within a very short while, we shared an outside broadcast unit with Scotland. The very first programme I was involved with on the television side was from the Playhouse, Manchester, where we did a lot of the variety programmes, a radio studio.

I did a programme, I called it Out of the Bran Tub and it was my debut as a director and it was Violet Carson's debut as a performer.

0:44:21

Alistair: On television?

Trevor Hill: On television. On television. Vi and I of course had worked together closely in the Children's Hour. We'd also worked together on the Light Programme. We started a series shortly after I arrived, I'd done my announcing course singing and playing for you on a Sunday evening. We alternated with Semprini.

Anyway, Vi was very well established as a very fine singer, particularly of Appalachian folk songs and Lancashire and Yorkshire folk songs. The Bran Tub programme went out, didn't hear much more. Some time went by, and then I was asked by Freda Lingstrom in London if I would start introducing one or two of the programmes myself, so I did, with either Derek ___[0:45:11] Davies or Ray Lakeland or Bill [Cave] directing.

The first one I did as a presenter, I think, was from St George's Hall Liverpool. It was a collection of ancient musical instruments. Shortly after that, I was asked if I'd like to go and introduce a programme from Slazenger's factory. It was, sort of, how you make a cricket bat, how you make a tennis racket and how they make bows and arrows and things like that.

Shortly after that, I was doing a piece on speedway riding with Alan Clarke, who was our sports commentator at Belle Vue speed track. Then I did the practice races at Oulton Park.

After a while, I came to the conclusion that we'd probably get a little more output if, instead, like the old days of Children's Hour where the organiser did the presenting, I was going to learn how to direct, then I could get other people, more experienced and younger and indeed more qualified, to present the programmes.

I asked my head of programmes then, Brian Kay here in Manchester, who was a most supportive person as far as I was concerned, if I could go on a television production course.

Alistair: Let me ask you about the technology involved in television when you started. If one were to walk into one of the productions you talked about at the Playhouse, which presumably would be done on what nowadays we call a drive-in basis.

Trevor Hill: Yes, with a scanner.

0:46:48

Alistair: What kind of equipment for vision mixing and so on would you have in front of you as a director in that scanner?

Trevor Hill: That was sitting in the scanner. It was a small console. It was basically just knobs. Of course, we didn't have anybody to vision mix for us. You did your own vision mixing and you just pressed a button to cut from one camera to the other. You wore headphones and you could say, "Cut to camera one," you know, "No, just pan a little to the left, will you? I want to get that end of the keyboard," or whatever.

In a way, it was very hit and miss. You would get your cues from London. You didn't see the announcer, you didn't see Mary Malcolm or McDonald Hopley sitting in Lime Grove on a monitor saying, "Now we're going over to Manchester." You only heard that on the sound line.

You went ahead, and you didn't see your own programme output, actually. You didn't see the transmission coming back. You saw what was going out on the top monitor and then you had, beneath that, three monitors for the three cameras you had. The image orthicon- I think it was the image orthicon camera in those days. You had to be very careful of the tubes, that you didn't rattle and vibrate them, so they had rather large, well-tired wheels. Of course, you had to be very careful about flaring.

In the early days of Sooty, I had to say to Harry, "When you're waving the wand, don't do it too quickly past the camera, otherwise it strobed across." You had to be awfully careful- we weren't allowed to in children's television- I mean, Freda Lingstrom would not allow us to strike a match on the air. That was teaching children to play with fire.

If, in an adult drama, you struck a match, you had to do that rather slowly and away from camera, otherwise the picture just melted.

Alistair: Burnt out.

Trevor Hill: The light intensity. Looking back now, it was very exciting. It was very, very primitive. Slightly later on when I'd finished my production course and I'd done several series for Freda Lingstrom from London, I came back North. When I started

producing in earnest, directing in earnest, I was allowed a small budget for film.

I'd go out with a film cameraman, Gerry Pullen or Arthur Smith, we'd do a little filming, we'd bring it back. We had no telecine, no machines for reproducing the film here in Manchester. That had to go down to London. There was a system called Flying Spot Mechau. I never saw Flying Spot Mechau, but I was very impressed.

Normally, with telecine and films and that, I mean, one sees these days- you know, you always have the leader, number three in the gate. Well, it was ten. It goes ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three and you get 'beep', and that's the sync, sound and picture. Then two seconds after three in the gate, your picture comes up.

Well, with Flying Spot Mechau, this didn't happen. It was an instantaneous start, a magical process. Somebody in London pressed a button. You didn't have this run into your film, it started immediately. But we had no monitor. We couldn't see what was going to come up. Came the magic moment when you were cutting from live studio action, I mean, everything was live, to a little film insert, you just pressed the button and hoped to God that the Flying Spot Mechau started. Otherwise, people at home were just seeing a blank screen.

I mean, normally, it did start. But there were times when we'd got the picture safely to London but not the sound. I had a tape recorder up in Manchester, we were on tape then, we'd gone from the days of disc. The studio manager with me in the cubicle at Dickenson Road would press the tape recorder at the moment that I [set a 0:50:40] London run. We'd hope the two synchronised.

It wasn't often speech, it would be commentary over film or it could have been sound effects.

0:50:53

Alistair: What do you think was your greatest achievement in children's television?

Trevor Hill: Possibly two things. Firstly, my work in the field of puppetry. As a boy, that neighbour of ours, Syd Walker, gave me a set of glove puppets. I made my own theatre. Now, that interest came in very handy when Sooty joined me from Lime Grove. We were together, boy and bear, for 12 years.

Harry Corbett always said how much more trouble was taken over his programmes once he'd come to Dickenson Road, and I think that was true. If we were to ensure that both Sooty and Sweep appeared to have a life of their own, and by that I mean not always at the end of Harry's arm, then that meant careful rehearsal with the cameras.

Let me say, I think we were far more adventurous in the 1950s and the 1960s with Sooty in black and white, and in his heyday with Harry Corbett, Harry's brother Leslie, doing Sweep most of the time, Margery Corbett assisting, and that brilliant prop and model maker Harry employed, Bill Garrity.

Now, we took up the Daily Express Challenge. The Daily Express Challenge, I think, was started, what, after the First World War. It was a sum of £1,000 I believe, if I got this right, for the first man-powered flight. In other words, without an engine. Well, in the case of the Sooty programme, we did the first dog-powered flight. It was achieved by Sweep. He was seen flying around Blackpool Tower.

It was a very clever model of an aircraft. Sweep had to pedal like fury. Of course, Sweep on this occasion did have feet, put into small wellington boots. The wings of this aircraft, like bird wings, flapped. We took the model inside a real aircraft and we flew round Blackpool Tower two or three times. For that and another Sooty programme in that same year, we won a National Television Award.

We'd obviously gained various experience when I launched the Pinky and Perky programmes on their first television series. Roger Moffatt, he was an announcer in Manchester. In the first series, Roger was running a commercial station. We called it Station POP, or POP with the pigs. By the time Pinky and Perky were running their own catering establishment, the Pop-In, we had John Slater with us as the Italian proprietor. We called him Papa Luigi. At that time, of course, John was the star of Z-Cars, and also the star, I think, of Pinky and Perky.

I'd managed to get the Dalibors to work from forklift trucks by now, rather than have puppets suspended at arm's length and with the scenery only a foot or two behind the puppets, because that made terrible difficulties for people like Tommy Mottram in doing the lighting. I mean, most of the time, you either got the shadows of the puppets on the backing or you got the strings showing.

By the time I and the very hard working technical team I had with me in those days took Pinky and Perky to sea, aboard the paddle steamer Melody Master for an around-the-world musical voyage, I got Jan to make these latex rubber sea creatures. They were operated inside a large studio tank by Phillip Rose, one of our manipulators.

I persuaded Phillip to wear a frogman suit and to manipulate the puppets, literally, from under water. It was rather lovely

because John Slater, this time as Captain Scuttle, was able to lean over the prow of the paddle steamer and pat a seal on the head. People were saying, "Where are the strings? However do they do that?" Well, that's all part and parcel of make believe. I say again, it was a team effort.

Some years later, the television arts programme Omnibus credited us with having done much of the pioneering work which was later greatly improved upon when they came to do the Muppets. That's the puppet side, which I did up until towards the end of, what, about 1967, '68, when Harry left us and went to Thames Television.

Back in 1956, and building upon Gwen Pain's idea for the teenage magazine programme Out of School on Children's Hour, I started Children's Television Club. That went out on a Sunday between 5:00-5:45, hosted by Wilfred and Mabel Pickles, because I feel we needed a name to draw a Sunday audience, children and adults. But introduced by a very young Judith Chalmers, whom I'd started on her career of programme presentation. She started presenting programmes in Children's Hour.

The Club had a dog. The dog's name was Spot, who appeared on every programme. I'd get various experts in to show a small invited audience how, for example, to put the initials CTC, Children's Television Club, into sticks of Blackpool rock and then letting them try their hand at this, and things like making pottery. I had just about enough of a programme budget, I can't remember now what it was but it wasn't a lot.

People said Wilfred Pickles was mean, this is totally untrue. Wilfred's agent was always very much against the fact that whatever Wilfred did for Children's Hour or children's television, it was a far, far reduced fee. We weren't paying him the Earth to appear in Children's Television Club.

Having paid him and a little more towards the scenery, the set, and I paid that off edition by edition, I had just about enough of a programme budget left to be able to afford a bit of silent 16mm film for such things as the boy scouts Soapbox Derby finals. It was then shown with a live studio commentary by Judith. Oh yes, and I also had a news roundup. Despite what others in London may say, I take credit for having started what became and remains Blue Peter.

0:57:35

Alistair: Give me a description of what you'd see if you walked along Dickie Road and came across the BBC premises.

Trevor Hill: Well, you would see this chapel building. It was a Wesleyan chapel. It had been taken over after the war by Mancunian Films, and Frank Randle did an awful lot of his burping there, and the Old Mother Riley films. The BBC, of course, from about 1953 onwards, were looking for premises. The going cheap was this converted chapel.

What I remember about going into the building was the fact that, in the rafters, it said, "Let there be sight." I thought that was rather appropriate for a building that was going to be used for television purposes. Acoustically, of course, it sounded like the inside of a chapel. Within a very short while, we started going in Dickenson Road. I think Barney Colehan, myself and John Ammonds were probably the only people who were actually doing television programme output from there at that time.

It was soon realised that the whole place had to be properly refurbished and that we had to have our own telecine, we had

to have a proper control cubicle, we had to have racks next door to it where they, sort of, corrected the picture, the light intensity and everything, a proper lighting gantry. So, the building closed down for a short while, we went to more outside broadcasts, and then we came back into Dickenson Road.

From the time we came back, which I think was around '56, '57, then we really got going. For a period, I'm pleased and proud to say that, as regards children's television, the bulk of regional material going onto network came entirely from the North. I mean, regular series were things like the Dalibors with Pinky and Perky. They would be once a week for a 12-week run. Sooty was once a week. We did about 36 programmes a year with Sooty, the rest of the time Harry was touring and the Dalibors with Pinky and Perky. They were abroad.

We started Barn Dance, a series which Gwen had started on radio and translated very nicely to television. At Dickenson Road, you only had to put up a few beams, put a bit of straw down on the floor, and we were in a barn. Later on, we were doing the Jackanory programmes. We did quite a lot of Jackanorys from Manchester. They were easy to do. I mean, it was just storyteller and stills.

Then, in order to provide London with the sort of output that they weren't getting elsewhere, I managed to talk my way into persuading, first of all Owen Reed and then his successor, to let me take the film unit out and about, and particularly abroad. I discovered, for example, that British Airways, Overseas Airways, with their new Britannia aircraft, were bringing children back to schools in this country at the end of the summer holiday.

I persuaded the BBC that I should take a film unit. By a film unit, that was Gerry Pullen, the cameraman, and myself. I did

the recording on a UR type tape recorder. We couldn't afford an assistant cameraman, we couldn't afford a lighting person, we couldn't afford a sound recordist. Today, of course, with the unions, we'd never get away with it.

With British Overseas Airways' cooperation, we went to Bangkok and Hong Kong and filmed the children in their own homes and then coming back to schools in this country. I was able to persuade Donald Baverstock to allow me to go to Norway to make two films for children's television. I discovered that, because of NATO, there was an international school at Fontainebleau.

That wasn't such a difficult programme to sell, Alistair, because right from the start I was able to persuade other members of NATO, the French, the Germans and the Dutch etc. that we would do their own language versions, which only meant filming certain sequences in their own language. We'd do it in English, we'd do the same thing in German, the same thing in French, with English, German, French children, and the commentary just had to be in its own language.

So, that sort of things we found was fairly easy to sell and didn't cost a lot. And the budgets, of course, were infinitesimal by comparison with today's costs.

1:02:37

Alistair:

I asked you earlier, Trevor, what you thought was your greatest achievement. It's maybe the same question under a different guise, but what did you enjoy most of children's television in those days?

Trevor Hill:

Oh, the subject matter itself, and going out and meeting the people. It was the enthusiasm that we received individually from those that we went to. With Children's Hour, we could approach anyone, and I do mean anyone, and the answer was always, "Yes." It was never, "Well, I'm not sure." Or it was never, "Oh, Children's Hour?" The acceptance was immediate.

We'd been talking about television. I remember, rather sadly, going to York. We'd done a very large amount of radio and television output from the city of York, particularly at the Castle Museum or the Railway Museum. Shortly after Tonight started, the London programme- Tonight, for the first time you see, used not entirely BBC staff. They would hire outside units, directors and people, to cover the very wide range of subjects that they included in that very splendid, innovative programme.

I found, going back on one occasion to York for some occasion I rang the town clerk and said, "We'd like to do so-and-so," and for the first time received a very lukewarm response. It turned out that they had just had a visit from an outside crew employed by Tonight, and I suspect they had talked over their treatment of the subject or how they were going to go about it, but when it came to actually filming it they had done otherwise and slanted it slightly.

It was just a question of a slight evaporation of trust. This is something that I found, from there on in, we had to contend with.

1:05:01

Alistair:

While we're talking about changes within the BBC, let's move on to the demise of Children's Hour. From your own point of view, when did you first realise that Radio Children's Hour was in trouble?

Trevor Hill: Really in trouble, I suppose, I mean, the lights began to dim around 1959, 1960. The programme budgets became tighter. We suddenly got to a period where London had declared that no longer would the Kathleen Garscaddens in Scotland, the David Davises in London, Trevor Hill in Manchester, no longer would we present the programmes.

It would be done by the London continuity announcer, whoever might have been on duty that day. It was just another programme, the presentation side of it, which was very important and was brilliantly done by Nan and indeed by David, that was just taken away.

Gradually, one realised that a very big hole was being dug and that Children's Hour, and not only Children's Hour but everything it stood for, was going to be put into a very, very deep grave.

1:06:48

Alistair: Can you recall, Trevor, one incident or one moment which crystallised that feeling of decline?

Trevor Hill: I think when David rang me, David Davis. David was not the sort of person to cry on somebody else's shoulder, but, you know, he made it very plain that Children's Hour was for the chop, and he'd been told that it was old fashioned, it was outdated, there was no audience. When I heard that, I said to David, "Have you, by any chance- I mean, do you think it's worth just bringing it to management attention, the patronage, to Radio 3 as opposed to Children's Hour?"

I mean, Children's Hour, even then when it came to a shuddering halt in 1964, was probably getting four times the audience that Radio 3 commanded. It was the one time when I really am rather ashamed of their policy and the way in which they killed off the programme.

1:08:03

Alistair: The argument has been put forward that when Children's Hour was killed off, which is now 27 years ago, it was hopelessly outdated and old fashioned, just as the argument for the death of features department slightly later was that it wasn't in tune with what an audience of the '60s wanted from radio.

Is there anything that has made you change your mind over the years and gone some way towards accepting that point of view?

Trevor Hill: On the contrary, what do you imagine Children's Hour was doing for network listening in the final year of its existence? Well, let me tell you what the North was doing, Alistair, in 1963. [Eyes Up 1:08:56], a further space research programme compiled by Nan Macdonald and featuring leading scientists of the day. In that programme, an 18-year-old described his own rocket-firing device. Is that outdated?

That was followed by Telstar and Co, the success story of the world's first communication satellites. With feet very firmly on terra firma, the same year Wilfred Pickles did the last of his Walks with Wilfred features. Presumably, that was judged to be adult enough since it was then transferred straight to the Light Programme under the title of Pleasant Journey.

Alan Garner, one of the most widely-read authors of children's material was commissioned by me to write Elidor as part of my drama output for network listening. Henry Reed to compose the music, which was then played by our Northern Symphony Orchestra. Later, incidentally, Elidor became a best-selling book.

To bring our young listeners up to date then on what was going on that year as regards films, television and the theatre, we had a whole list of interviews. The interviewees included Cliff Richard, the principals of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, Richard Attenborough, Otto Preminger. I had features on the Theatre Royal York, on the Liverpool Playhouse.

On the subject of features in regional airport, that's a live outside broadcast, reporter Alan Dixon- who also did Thrills for a Living that year, incidentally with the Red Arrows. Alan visited Newcastle Airport.

I don't think the then-head of BBC Radio Drama considered Children's Hour to be outdated and old fashioned in 1963. He got David Davis to repeat his Children's Hour production of the highly successful Rosemary Sutcliff novel Eagle of the Ninth. This, as a Saturday night theatre. London also did a series of Nature Parliament. They continued with Derek McCulloch, Peter Scott, Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald.

Michael Bowen in West Region, Michael provided us with further programmes of jazz in the series Downbeat. Judith Chalmers and I, we visited children's wards with our record request programmes. Michael Barton, who did many splendid programmes for Children's Hour, he took a party of teenagers from the Cavern Club, Liverpool, to Hamburg for a week in order to see and to hear some of their pop idols of the day.

For those who might appreciate both pop and literature, I did four more editions of A Young Person's Forum on Books, taking the likes of John Betjeman, Marghanita Laski, Lord David Cecil, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, to answer questions on reading from fifth and sixth form audiences. Children's authors like Noel Streatfeild, we took those to junior schools.

No, I completely fail to see those programmes in the final year before Children's Hour was axed as being even remotely outdated, juvenile, what was the other word? Twee? Despite the assertions of Frank Gillard and other members of London management who, presumably, just never bothered to listen. Does that answer your question?

1:12:08

Alistair:

Just let me pick up on that. When you talk about taking that panel to schools, because the argument might be put that the one thing children do not want is Lady Violet Bonham Carter when they can get Wee Willie Harris and Cliff Richard, people who are of their own generation.

Trevor Hill:

Generation. Well, I mentioned Noel Streatfeild, and we had George Cansdale at that time was a great attraction on television, he did a lot for us in children's television. We used people like that. I still believe very strongly that young people like to be informed as well as entertained.

It may sound slightly stodgy to you when I mention Lady Violet Bonham Carter and Lord David Cecil and people like that talking about books, but they were experienced and professional enough to talk to the audience. I mean, I took them to Eton, I took them to Stowe, I took them to little prep

schools you've never heard of, I took them to comprehensive schools.

You see, an awful lot of the young people who listen to Children's Hour were young people who read. So, the serials- I mean, they still dress the characters, they made their own scenery listening as they did in reading, and they liked to be informed.

Don't imagine for one moment that the listenership for Children's Hour was confined to the four, five, ten, eleven, twelve-year-olds. The other end of the scale was the 60s plus. I'd believe- I mean, there is a period of second childhood, and those of us in our 60s and 70s, more so in the 70s, we have exactly the same burning desire to learn and to hear about things as grandparents, as do children.

So Children's Hour consisted of the very young, or the young, and the old. What took Children's Hour's place? Home This Afternoon, a programme for the retired people. It was a poor substitute, to my way of thinking.

1:14:22

Alistair: What was it that lead people who, in some ways no doubt, were very contented with their radio lot, to seek work in television? Was it novelty? Better money?

Trevor Hill: I mean, yes, if you were doing television, I noticed that, at a period when I was organiser of children's programmes (radio television), yes. My monthly salary cheque did go up. The BBC were very quick when it ceased to suggest it should go down again. It was that. It was the fact that it was something new.

To begin with, of course, as I've explained, just as Out of School, the television version, was Children's Television Club, Barn Dance on radio went just as well if not better in television terms. To an extent, we were using proven programme output in radio terms and some of those translated beautifully to pictures. I mean, Barney Colehan started doing things from the city, varieties, old time music hall on radio, look how that finished up.

I mean, The Good Old Days was one of the biggest light entertainment successes in the region's history in television.

1:15:43

Alistair: So, in the best sense of the word, or the phrase rather, it was jumping on a very successful bandwagon.

Trevor Hill: It was not jumping on. It was doing a pretty precarious balancing act to jump onto that bandwagon, given that we had so few facilities. What counts is what it's like when it gets into the home of the listener or the viewer.

The viewer is not going to say, "Well, considering this is coming from that clapped out old chapel in Manchester, I do think this is a good programme." Why should they? They can only judge the thing on what they feel to be its excellence or its shortcomings.

1:16:27

Alistair: This may be an unfair response, but on the basis of what you've said so far I get the impression that whatever the human qualities of the management, they were pretty bloody

appalling in getting people the facilities they wanted or needed to make the programmes. Which to me is a function of management, that you give people not just an intellectual climate but the nuts and bolts to do what they need or want to do. Is that unfair?

Trevor Hill:

No. I'll go along with that, to an extent. Huw Weldon, a man I greatly admired, possibly because I worked with him when he was presenting All Your Own and any additions that came from the North, I was working with him. Of course, eventually, he became our managing director of television.

Huw was always trotting out this same theory, "Unless you're pushing out," and he'd flex his muscles, "You've got a bit caged in, constrained." This was his excuse for lack of money, lack of facilities. It was a valid excuse, Alistair.

Looking back now and occasionally delving into the sound or the television archives and seeing things and thinking, "Oh God, I did that 30 years ago," looking back now, my assessment is that the programmes where we had a very small budget were probably far better than some of the programmes where I had a far larger budget. It imposed, if you like, a discipline upon you. I think, from that point of view, Huw Weldon was right.

I have seen the most excessive expenditures on things. I mean, quite appalling. Things that I associate with the film industry and not with BBC television, or indeed BBC radio. I thought, "Good lord. We've poured all that money into it."

This really came back to me because, for a period, if I may just mention this, I was doing a series of what I call cameo cartoons on radio. North very kindly gave me the pilot money, I think they gave me £25 in 1949. I wrote this thing, it was called

Floppy's Tail, and it was the story of a rabbit that got lost because, in point of fact, its tail had got very dirty and other rabbits couldn't see this little white blob in the dark. I mean, it sounds awful now. And that was really twee Children's Hour.

From that, it got to the point where I was doing these cameo cartoons regularly, not just for Children's Hour. I was writing and producing them and they were broadcast on the Light Programme, on the Home Service by transcription. My wife and I were commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company of America to do one.

In 1951, for the first time in Britain, we were commissioned by the Light Programme to do one of these on the Alice stories, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, as one of these cartoon musicals. They were expensive to do by normal budget terms. But then a little while later, we received a commission together to do a musical version for BBC television for Boxing Day on the story of Beauty and the Beast.

I couldn't believe it when Francis Essex, the producer, rang up and said they'd like to commission us to do this thing. He started talking about the budget and what they were going to spend on it. It was probably the whole of the Children's Hour allowance that I had when I took over Children's Hour in 1953.

I think my budget then, the annual budget was about £15,000 for the year, providing a daily programme, I say daily, I mean we didn't do from Manchester from 5:00 to 6:00 every day. That was covering a year's output. Beauty and the Beast, the budget was my entire allowance for Children's Hour for a year. I didn't think much of the thing when it went out.

Alistair: Move on to politics now, Trevor. The battles with London.

Trevor Hill: Well, there were continuing battles with London. As a southerner, one saw this perhaps in a slightly different perspective. The North was always banging its fist, you know, and it was the old ___[1:21:33], "What Manchester does today, London does tomorrow," sort of attitude, which I think was rather unnecessary.

With the demise of Children's Hour, I came to the conclusion that I didn't want to be part of the battle, that it would be infinitely to my advantage, and I hoped to the advantage of making programmes, if I could get to know the heads of the output departments in London.

Just as Alfred Bradley would always go to head of radio drama, I would go to the drama meetings, I would put up ideas for serials and, for a time, from the North, we were doing the major part of the serials that came from the regions. Adult serials that is.

I found that you had to just get to know the man in charge, or the person in charge. If they had faith in the sorts of things you were offering, if they felt that you were the person to do it, then you had a sale. If they thought, "Well, it isn't a very good idea," they would tell you so. If they thought you weren't the person to do it- I mean, the ones that I really admired would say to you, "It's a lovely idea. I think we ought to pass this onto somebody." I didn't come away feeling nonplussed.

1:22:56

Alistair: Any spectacular battles with London?

Trevor Hill: After Children's Hour and after McCulloch, no. I mean, quite the reverse. As a result of broadcasting in the '70s, which virtually did away with the regional system that had been started in 1936, the advantage to a producer was that you now had access to your channel controller.

Instead of going through the head of department in London, you were entitled to go straight to the channel controller. So, I could go to Tony Whitby, he was running Radio 4, then Ian McIntyre and put up ideas for programmes.

I found it very strange that, at some of the meetings I attended, I was introducing the channel controller to members of his London staff. He'd never met them before because he was only used to seeing the heads of the output departments. He wasn't used to seeing the features producers together, the drama producers. It was an odd system. It advantaged the regions, broadcasting in the '70s, from the point of view that you had a one-to-one relationship with the controller.

1:24:13

Alistair: You once said to me, "I'm not sure if television gave me up or whether I gave up television." Now, would you care to expand on that over the ___[1:24:26] remark?

Trevor Hill: Yes. Well, I still don't know the answer, I must be honest. It wasn't that I ever received a memo saying, "I'm very sorry, but your things are just not up to standard." I don't think it was that. It was the situation that had arisen. We talked about killing off Children's Hour, 'children' was a dirty word in the BBC. Children's television, you weren't allowed to call it 'children's

television'. I mean, it became 'family programmes'. It's an attitude.

It's an attitude, Alistair, and this attitude was creeping through television. I felt that radio was far more creative. I was doing television programmes and thinking, "I'm not really getting an awful lot of personal satisfaction out of it." I'd be listening to the serials that were going out.

Having done many years of providing serials for children's programmes and having had one or two serials accepted for adult listening that my wife and I had done, I came to the conclusion that I would go back to radio, which I did. And found that the Ronnie Masons of this world running the drama department in London were very happy to take things that I'd suggested. So, there was work there.

There was work when Children's Hour packed up with the Home This Afternoon substitute, working to a splendid boss in London. I just felt the whole atmosphere was more professional. It was better organised.

1:26:11

Alistair: Do you think there was any resentment, Trevor that- I mean, you've mentioned the fact that you worked with Margaret Potter as adapter, as writer. One view of that would be that you can be a very close-knit and productive team and sort a lot of things out without having to resort to formal meetings. But there might also be jealousy on another part that it's all kept within the family.

Trevor Hill: Yes. That question first came up some time in the 1950s. Briefly, Margaret and I started writing together in Hamburg. We

did one or two single plays, we did a very long-running serial, the Adventures of Robin Hood, which the BBC later bought. We did two more serials together, and Margaret started doing, of course, single programmes and series like the Adventures of Samuel Poppleton. She started those in Hamburg.

Before we were demobbed, or just as we were demobbed, the Light Programme bought one or two of our early plays. When we were demobbed, Margaret began doing some adult features for the BBC in her home town of Birmingham. Then London Children's Hour started buying various serials and series she'd written on her own, and sometimes they asked for sequels.

Now, I was allowed to produce much of her work, but not of course to commission anything. When we were married in 1952, Bob Stead, head of programmes then but it was before he became our controller, instructed me to send in a formal letter since I was marrying a BBC contributor, which I did.

From then on, Gwen Pain, who succeeded Nan, when she commissioned Margaret to do any work for her then Gwen's schedule was put before Brian Kay. Brian Kay was our head of programmes North region.

When I took over as organiser of children's programmes, radio and television myself, that was in 1953, of course any commissions for Miss Potter came either from the head of Children's Hour in London or from Owen Read. He's succeeded Freda Lingstrom as head of children's television programmes. Later, on the television side, any commissions came from Monica Sims.

One regional member of staff based in Leeds did, at one point, try to put a stop to Margaret doing anything. He thought it was quite wrong that a contributor and the producer, as it were,

should work in the same region and indeed should be man and wife. Incidentally, I'm pretty sure he was the same charmer who sent a note to Graham Miller informing Graham that I was making films for Harry Corbett on the side and using BBC equipment.

In point of fact, yes, Harry and I started- we called it Guiseley Films. They did quite well. We made a series of road safety films, but as I explained to Graham, with the cost of doing these Sooty films in expensive and very glorious technicolour, I really couldn't take the chance with clapped-out BBC cameras. It had to be the very best equipment, so I hired from a firm called Samuelson's in London. What's more, I produced the hire contracts. I think Graham was quite happy with this explanation.

Let me say that BBC management didn't seem to mind a member of staff getting some external experience. I mean, if I'd been moonlighting for Granada or any other commercial firms, if indeed they'd have had me, that would have been a totally different state, but that never occurred.

Talking of BBC management attitudes to doing things for outside, it was Bob Stead during the time that he was controller, he persuaded the management in London that I should be released to take up an outside offer to make a commercial film. For that, the BBC granted me three months' unpaid leave of absence. I think that was very decent of them. I certainly gained experience outside working not with BBC people but with a film crew that I had to hire with different lighting people, with another designer.

The experience that I gained from doing that commercial film I hope was experience which I was then able to put to use when I came back to work in television for the BBC.

1:31:11

Alistair: Moving on from that, in the other interview for the archives that I've done with you, we've covered North & South, the Herries Chronicles and Sons and Lovers. We've also covered the technical innovations that you've done with various studio managers in the North, such as the introduction of monaural sound, and the sound of the city.

Let's move on to your translation to an administrative role in the region. Was that a difficult transition?

Trevor Hill: No. I think, being at the helm of the programme idea, either writing or producing the idea yourself, next to that, I derive enormous satisfaction out of getting other people's work accepted and seeing the ideas that they have, some of which you immediately look at and think, "Gosh, I wish to Heaven I'd thought of that," because they had access to the channel controllers, but Michael Green was within my group, Gillian Hush, the drama Alfred Bradley, Tony Cliff.

When you're asked to write somebody's annual report, then you thought, "Oh, yes, well they're in my group. That's sometimes how you found out. Ken Ford was in my group. Lovely Ken, doing Gardeners' Question Time and the farming programmes. Then it got to the point where Graham hadn't got an assistant head of programmes, and I was running the largest group on the radio side, so I became his number two.

Then later on, of course, when he became- broadcasting in the '70s, when that took effect, he became the network editor. He was acting head of centre for a time, and I was acting network editor. Then I was the assistant network editor to Graham.

Then, at that time, it worked out very nicely, I was still thoroughly enjoying doing drama. Tony Whitby had invited me, in the early '70s, to see if I could get ___[1:33:28] quiz going again. Of course, when Graham retired, the post was advertised and I thought, "Right, this is it Hill. Don't you deserve it? You've worked all these years for the organisation. Now, you're going to be in charge of radio in the North of England."

It was- I mentioned Tony Whitby. It was Tony Whitby, I think, who told me before anybody else in the region that I hadn't got the job. He rang me. He rang me at home, the sort of person Tony Whitby was, and he said, "Trevor, I'm very sorry, you haven't got the job, but you're going to be working with, I think, one of the nicest people in the BBC. He's young, he's talented, he's got a lovely sense of humour and he's as straight as a die." I mentioned the fact that I had worked to Graham but not perhaps with him.

Suddenly, all the windows opened, and as far as I'm concerned, and I believe a lot of my colleagues, 1974 to '78, '79, David's period, was the happiest time that I've ever spent in the BBC. David made things happen. He got us together, he bolstered us. Where we weren't doing frightfully well, he either spoke to us and said, "Don't worry about that any more, but how about so-and-so?" He just made one's creative life so much easier, so much more interesting. It showed. It showed in the regional output.

We had, in those years, I think, the finest management team that I've worked under. North region benefitted enormously from David's presence as network editor, and I worked closer to him than any other member of staff. So, I feel I can say that without fear of contradiction.

Alistair: Since we're talking to both David Hatch in person and Michael Green, his successor, in person, there's probably no need to dwell much on their styles of leadership as it...

Trevor Hill: Very different.

1:35:46

Alistair: ... reflected North region, certainly. Tell me about the circumstances of the regional headquarters.

Trevor Hill: Well, now, I'm not going to dwell too much on this because people far better qualified to speak on this than myself, like Bob Stead, Graham Miller and others in this History of North Regional Broadcasting cover this period. The upshot was, of course, that in the end, the whole thing was scaled down. The original firm of architects, their plans were not accepted and the BBC brought in its own architects. We have the building that we're sitting in now.

Alistair: That we deserve.

Trevor Hill: Well, believe you me, a great improvement upon the old premises. What was amazing, and I look back, humble engineering days in the BBC, when you weren't allowed to say, "Wouldn't it be nice if this studio, instead of being sick pea green, could be duck egg blue?" You weren't expected to comment on things like that, your working conditions, "Good lord. What next?"

When it came to the planning of this building, Graham knew he would be retiring, and I'm very grateful to him because he came to me one day and said, "Look, old boy, I'll have been gone a long time before this building opens. It's been suggested I should be chairman of the radio planning committee. I think you should take this on." He said, "You know, from your background and everything, and you've had quite an experience of programme making. Not just in one department, but across the board." So, that's how it came about.

"Right, chairman of the committee. So, who are the committee members going to be? People who've never been in a studio, never done any broadcasting, don't use the equipment? Not on my nelly. If this job is going to be done, I want to have those who are actually going to use the studios." The BBC said, "Yes," so I had some of my colleagues in programme engineering, studio managers who were actually going to use it, technical people. I got some of our television design people in, and we went ahead.

For the drama studio, for example, I think we put up 36 recommendations for the drama studio, including things like- I mean, from television experience, you don't have to have the man in the studio doing spot effects, or when we came to stereo working, the floor manager, on the end of a headphone lead. You can give him radio headphones.

We had a far more sophisticated form of talkback so that we'd actually talk to people while we were on the air and saying, "Ian McKellen is slightly off mic, left. Just move him, will you, slightly more centre," this sort of thing. More important, things like the actual control panel itself. We hadn't now- to take on something that had been designed by the BBC and built by EMI, as had been the previous practice. We were now free to

buy from some of the very good firms outside who were supplying professional studio equipment.

Thanks to the recommendations that the committee members made, we ended up with, I'm proud to say, the best drama studio probably in Europe, of the time. That's, what, 15 years ago. The whole difference in attitude of management was so marked.

1:39:30

Alistair: You talked about David Hatch being appointed, and then the job comes vacant again. Once again, you don't get it.

Trevor Hill: When Michael Green was appointed. Well, yes, I mean, I wasn't surprised. If I'd been on the board, to be honest, I wouldn't have appointed myself. If the role of the region had been the resurgence of children's programmes perhaps, or again, another string to our bow was going to be the quiz strand, yes, I would have been probably better qualified than many others I can think of. But that was not the role.

I mean, Michael was there. Michael had taken part in analysis and he'd started strands of his own, and very successful strands. He didn't need Michael to reinforce the drama. We had people who were very capable and established and accepted, but there were areas that Michael could use his expertise, his knowledge, and indeed his enthusiasm. Therefore, he was the right person for the job.

It was a very happy time working as number two to Michael. There were certain things where he just said, "Right, you look after that." I found he was very good, again, like David, in dealing with staff. This really is what it all adds up to.

Management has to be there to make conditions right in which the people can create and do the programmes. They have to be there to field cannonballs that are shot off by irate people in London at staff. they have to be there to discourage on ideas that probably aren't going to work, and very much to encourage ideas that they feel are going to work.

They are the creative leaders of a creative team.

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