Adrian Warren: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Adrian Warren

Reasons why chosen for an oral history: As a Producer, Director and Cinematographer, Adrian's long and eventful career has seen him work on many landmark BBC natural history series, as well as pioneering natural history IMAX films and his own production company, Last Refuge Ltd

Name of Interviewer:

Jean Hartley

Reasons why Interviewer chosen:

Longstanding colleague and friend

Name of cameraman:

Alan Griffiths

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1. Childhood memories and early inspirations

JH: I need you to tell me your full name and your nationality and today's date.

AW: Adrian Warren, I am British, and it's 31 October 2008.

JH: What started you on the road to an interesting wildlife career?

AW: The first four years of my life I spent in London living in a flat. Upstairs there was a little old lady called

Miss Kitchen who loved looking after me. So in the afternoons I used to go up there for an hour or so to be entertained by her and I remember her flat so well. She was a typical old lady with hatpins and the place smelled of mothballs. She used to tell me the most wonderful stories about animals and I was transfixed, completely transfixed, because living in a flat in London you don't get any experience of wildlife or wild places. Whenever she got the chance she would take me out in her little car. I remember it was one of those little old A30s with running boards, coloured gunmetal grey and she used to career around at high speed round the streets terrifying my mother but never had an accident. I loved this old lady, she was really wonderful and obviously a lot of what she said sank in.

We used to come down to Somerset, which is where I now live, on family holidays to see my grandparents. They lived near the Quantock Hills and that was really my only experience at that age of any wild places.

JH: Miss Kitchen never used to take you to the park?

AW: Miss Kitchen never took me to the park, no, nothing like that. So my only experience was down in Somerset but obviously a lot of what Miss Kitchen told me and enthused me about, sank in.

JH: It must have done because it's stayed with you.

AW: It certainly did.

JH: Then moving on from there, when you left London you moved to Surrey.

AW: Surrey's very built up now but back in the early 50s, it was about 1952, 53, it was really quite rural. There was this big moment in my father's life, he was finally going to escape the clutches of London and move out and build a house. He bought this plot of land full of long grass. My sister and I, who was a little bit older than me, we used to make tunnels in the grass and find grasshoppers and all kinds of wildlife, caterpillars. I used to dig little pits and collect them all and put them in there and watch them. We had a wonderful time and that was really a good introduction to being and experiencing at close quarters the countryside, and never looked back.

JH: Then not very long after that of course, television started.

AW: Black and white as my sons keep reminding me. They say 'of course, everything was black and white for you daddy, wasn't it?'.

JH: What were the early programmes that you remember watching?

AW: The same ones that everyone else quotes: Armand and Michaela Denis 'On Safari'. In fact I met Michaela a couple of times later on. I remember queuing to have a little children's book, signed by her in a Taunton bookshop, called *Minnie the Mongoose*. I queued up to meet this glamorous lady who signed my book and smiled at me. Then a few years later I met her on a train going up to London and we had a lovely chat.

JH: She did talk to you then?

AW: She certainly did. I reminded her about the book, not that she remembered me of course, but it was nice.

JH: She was always very good at responding to people who took an interest in what she did. She was very much better than he was.

AW: I never met him.

JH: Didn't you? He was rather abrupt.

AW: Did you meet him?

JH: Yes, I met them both when I was 10, I think, and she signed a book for me, so did he. They were very instrumental in my being interested in wildlife at about roughly the same time I suppose. There were other people on the television in those years in the 50s that you must have seen as well.

AW: George Cansdale at the London Zoo. He had a studio based programme and he used to bring animals into Alexandra Palace and show these poor stressed out animals who'd been kept in sacks, suddenly let loose in the studio so he used to get bitten a lot. Armand and Michaela Denis though were really the first sort of exotic films. It was life in the raw being chased by rhinos and looking for elephants, that really impressed me.

Then, of course, Hans and Lotte Hass. I remember their programmes very well. I remember at the beginning of those programmes he said, and it was actually written on the screen as well, two-thirds of the world is unexplored and two-thirds of the world is covered by water or something like that. Then, of course, 'Zoo Quest' (1), the big influence on my life.

JH: So the very young David created an impression with you?

AW: I never saw the West African series. I remember Zoo Quest to Guiana (2) and then Zoo Quest For a Dragon (3) when I was very, very young. I remember watching them in Taunton on holiday with my grandparents, and my grandfather saying to my father, gosh, he is very interested, isn't he, in this programme. So from the age of eight really, I wanted to be like David Attenborough as, of course, did everyone else in the Natural History Unit. David Attenborough, poor chap, is responsible for an awful lot.

JH: At this time you were at school or just starting school in Surrey.

AW: That's right. I made friends with a chap called Hilary King, my best friend at school and remained my best friend for many, many years.

JH: What did you two get up to?

AW: We used to sneak off at weekends on our bikes and hunt lizards and snakes. We were very competitive with each other to see how many snakes and lizards we could each catch and trying to outdo each other. We both got interested in photography. We were learning Latin names of all the animals, aged 10. We started experimenting with flash photography and doing quite interesting close up work, so I learnt an awful lot.

JH: Did you ever study photography?

AW: None at all. We taught each other really by making a lot of mistakes.

JH: This was just stills cameras?

AW: Yes. We'd both bought second-hand, single lens reflex cameras for next to nothing. Very, very poor quality cameras but it did the trick. Used little diopters on the front to get the close-ups to work. It was great

actually, I learnt an awful lot. We went to Spain on holiday together and the competition continued because I remember he was awfully good at catching the big one. It was an Eyed lizard, the big Eyed lizard, it's about that long I suppose and it's covered in a lovely gold network on its back and beautiful blue spots down the side. A very, very pretty thing, but they bit though.

We used to wander up the paths between the vineyards looking at stone walls and he was really good at spotting these Eyed lizards which would scramble for cover but 50 to 100 metres ahead.

JH: Always hiding in the walls?

AW: Yes. So they'd go down the tunnel and he would mark the spot with his eyes, dash up and start furiously digging them out of these walls, ending up with a heap of rubble. But he was always much, much better than me at catching these things and I was very, very jealous until I finally got one of course.

JH: So there was quite a trail of broken walls?

AW: There was. We used to scarper before we were spotted.

2. First expeditions

JH: Then you went to university in London, didn't you, and went for a zoological career.

AW: I did. Well, I decided if I wanted to be like David Attenborough I had to get a zoology degree.

JH: But you also studied photography properly then, didn't you?

AW: No, I didn't, I've never studied photography.

JH: You never studied it properly but you just continued with your photography.

AW: I did indeed. But before I went to university I actually managed to get myself onto an animal collecting expedition to Guiana.

JH: The British Museum of Natural History.

AW: I remember one day aged 17, before I went to university, I picked up the local paper in Surrey and the headlines were all about this local lady who was leading an animal collecting expedition to Guiana. So I hunted her down and said, well, she's not going without me and by 10 o'clock in the morning I'd found her. I can't remember how I tracked her down but I found her and I knocked at the door and I said I'm coming with you on your expedition. Here's a boy aged 17, no experience. 'Look, I can take pictures and I can help you collect the animals.' Anyway got to know this lady over a period of weeks and she finally decided to take me.

JH: What was her name?

AW: Christina Wood and she wrote a book about the expedition but the expedition was a bit chaotic. When we got to Georgetown, Guiana, the whole team mutinied for some reason and split up into two groups. We never collected any animals for zoos. I ended up being shunted off with some of them up to an area in the highlands which was very fortunate because it was an area which was really unknown to science. Together with a chap called Brian Ridout who was working at the British Museum of Natural History we collected moths, we collected frogs, bats, anything we could lay our hands on.

JH: There was this toad, wasn't there?

AW: There was a toad. I brought back bats and frogs to the museum in London and they took a look at these and they said 'this toad is a very interesting one and we don't think we've seen it before'. They got a specialist in the Netherlands to look at it and we ended up writing a little piece in *Nature* about it. This was before I went to university. So that was marvellous. In fact the museum was so impressed by what we brought back and by the area that they raised funds for me to go back the next year, at the end of my first year at university. I invited my friend Hilary to come with me and that was another funny story.

We went by boat because we didn't have that much money. Managed to persuade a shipping line to take us for £30 each way. We offered to work our way across but we weren't allowed to because of the unions. So for £30 we had a cruise through the West Indies, we were living in the owner's cabin. We had a chap to look after us, there and back on our sugar boat, it was fantastic. We broke down off the Azores, so we had four days adrift off the Azores while they mended the engine, and then we went through the Sargasso Sea, and then we had a couple of days when flying fish kept on landing on the deck. It became more and more exotic and finally we got to the West Indies.

Just before we got to the West Indies one night, Hilary had a nightmare and he leapt out of bed in the dark and was leaping around the room like a maniac. He cut his toe very, very badly.

JH: What, jumped into the furniture?

AW: Something like that, a sharp piece of metal somewhere, and he cut his big toe very badly. So the next morning we had to get the medical officer on the ship to look at it. So he stitched it up. He said, well, you've got to keep it dry and keep the dirt out of it and of course we were docking in the West Indies. So he said, well, there's only thing to do to keep it clean and he gave Hilary a condom to put over his toe. So you can imagine as we walked around the West Indies in flip-flops, Hilary with his condom over his toe, we got some funny remarks. But he carried a few spares as well in case he lost it and he had one in his shirt pocket. I remember going into a bank with him one day and we were talking to this little cashier girl and he wanted to change some money. He pulled some money out of his shirt pocket and this condom, they weren't wrapped in those days, landed on the counter, rolled through and like a coin it finally settled in front of her, much to the poor girl's embarrassment, and Hilary's and mine.

We went through Trinidad on that trip and we went up to Simla, the famous zoological research laboratory, and we visited Asa Wright at the Asa Wright Nature Centre because we wanted to see the Oilbirds. Asa Wright was an Icelandic woman, very, very eccentric. She used to drive her Land Rover and without really looking at the road she'd be talking to the people in the back, careering round corners. It reminded me of Miss Kitchen actually. Also her husband had died a couple of years before and everyone said she's a pretty strange lady, do you know she kept her dead husband on ice in the house for six months before the poor chap got buried? But the Oilbirds were amazing.

Then we got to Guiana and we got to the place and collected more of the toads and more bats and other frogs, even more interesting ones than before.

JH: Is this when you got a frog named after you?

AW: No.

JH: That was a bit later, wasn't it?

AW: That was a bit later, yes.

JH: But you were still very much into frogs and things.

AW: That's right and it was on that trip that I heard about Mount Roraima, Conan Doyle's *Lost World* and I felt, well, this is a must. So I decided to organise an expedition there because I was still at university. So my studies were a little bit fragmented by all this travel and organisation.

JH: We're now at 1971, aren't we?

AW: 71, that's right. I graduated in 72. 71 was a major expedition.

JH: You got a Winston Churchill Fellowship to go on this Roraima expedition.

AW: That's right. I just applied. I thought, well, I need some money to go on this trip so I just applied for one. I went for all kinds of interviews. It was funny because my psychology tutor was also called Warren, it was Eric Warren. Apparently there had been a call at the University one day looking for a Mr Warren to tell him that he'd got a Winston Churchill Fellowship. So he thought it was him but then he realised it wasn't and I remember him coming up to find me. He said I've just had this call telling me that I had a Winston Churchill Fellowship but I worked out it wasn't for me, it's for you, and of course I was overjoyed. That in fact opened a lot of doors for other areas of funding for the expedition.

We made a film about that trip which we sold to the BBC, to *The World About Us* (4). We made a big collection of plants for Kew, as well as animals. We got a lot of very interesting frogs, new species. We got new genes' of fish and some new species. It was really, really a very successful trip actually. We'd gone into an area that was completely unknown on the northern side of Roraima.

JH: So you went right up on the top?

AW: No, we couldn't get to the top. Much to my chagrin I was really disappointed but what we found on that trip was amazing. I collected some frogs that had been discovered from one specimen in 1898 but not been seen since and this was 1971, and I found five. So it was really fantastic.

JH: This seems to me to have started of a lifelong fascination with that part of the world. There was not only Roraima but there were all these other ones.

AW: Auyantepui, Angel Falls.

JH: All these other ones and you really became hooked on that area.

AW: It got under my skin, that's right.

JH: It really got under your skin and actually you still are probably one of the world's authorities on that area.

AW: Not an authority but one of the world's enthusiasts.

JH: Not just the amphibians and the reptiles, you were really into the plants and the botany.

AW: The whole story of exploration is a fascinating one because before they got up these amazing mountains surrounded by cliffs, they did think that maybe there'd be prehistoric life up there. It was isolated

from the rest of the world. That's where Conan Doyle got his idea from for the *Lost World*. It's not prehistoric but the idea wasn't so far from the truth because there's a frog up there who's closest cousin is in West Africa, and that dates back to the days of Gondwanaland. Because of the isolation they're different on every mountain. An amazing place and you always find something new every time.

But that was an introduction to the BBC, you see.

JH: Did you actually film that yourself?

AW: No, not at all.

JH: Who was filming that one?

AW: A chap called Derek Bromhall

JH: I remember him. I met him when I first started the business.

AW: So good old Derek introduced me to cinematography really and I got very interested in cine because of that. We sold the film to the BBC and that was a little step towards the BBC.

JH: Then when you left university you joined the RAF, didn't you?

AW: No, I didn't join the RAF.

JH: Or you went to learn to fly at the RAF.

AW: Before I graduated I applied for an RAF scholarship. Going back to the first expedition to Guiana, I was taken in a light aeroplane to get up to these highlands. The pilot was a bit of a cowboy and he flew us low level around the rivers, banking and turning with the sweep of the rivers, and I found this so exhilarating and exciting. I thought this is just amazing; I've got to do this. In 72 I found out that the RAF will teach you to fly for free if you've got the necessary aptitude because I could never afford to pay for it myself. So I wrote off and applied, went for a two day interview at Biggin Hill, got through everything and it ended up with a long interview at which they said, 'well, you've got it, we're going to teach you to fly'. I thought, well, that's fantastic. 'But we want you to join the RAF for 12 years.'

The attraction of flying lots of different aeroplanes was exciting to me but my first love was natural history. I'd never veered off that course so why veer off it now? So I said frankly I really appreciate the fact that I've got this award from you but I don't want to go in the RAF. So they said, well, can we at least put you on the reserve list for 12 years, so that was the compromise. They taught me to fly on an intensive course.

JH: You got a special award, didn't you, for flying?

AW: It was called a Special Flying Award. That was exciting in itself because it was a very intensive course and soon after my first solo, it was probably within an hour after my first solo, my instructor said just go off locally, get a bit of an experience and come back after an hour. So I did. I didn't take a map because I was only going to be very local. Luckily I had a radio because in those days not all the aircraft had a radio. While I was up a freak storm came in and I tried to get back in and I couldn't. So I radioed in, 'I'm caught and I don't know what to do'. My instructor came on and said, 'don't worry, just go to Blackbushe and land.' I said, 'fine, where's Blackbushe?' and he said 'look at the map,' and I said 'I don't have a map.'

Anyway he gave me the frequency for Blackbushe and I spoke to them. They were very nice. I told them

roughly where I was and they gave me an approximate bearing to fly. Meanwhile my instructor got into his car and he drove up to Blackbushe. I remember making a pretty ragged landing at Blackbushe, safe, but pretty ragged and my instructor was pleased to see me.

JH: That was quite a long way of course then?

AW: Yes, it was. But I learnt a lot.

JH: Then you headed off to the Galapagos?

AW: I did.

JH: What were you doing in the Galapagos, was it research of some sort?

AW: Before we graduated I remember the tutor coming in one day and she said you've got to look at *New Scientist*. There's an amazing job being advertised for the Galapagos and of course everyone said, oh yes, that's right, there's no chance that we'd get that. I thought, well, there's no harm in trying, so I wrote off. I was very lucky to get it. It was six weeks in the Galapagos gathering research for somebody's book, that was the brief. So I spent three weeks going around the islands on a lovely old schooner and then three weeks at the Darwin Station. What an amazing trip that was, absolutely fantastic because it was very different in those days.

JH: Because it wasn't overflowing with tourists in the 70s, was it? A few scientists but not cruise ships full of tourists.

AW: We flew out in a DC3. It was a long way out into the Pacific but that was a fantastic trip. Richard Foster, who later became a very well-known filmmaker, he was master of the ship and Soames Summerhayes, who went on to make IMAX films, he was working as the guide on ship. A very small world.

3. Early Productions

JH: After that you went back to South America, you went to Venezuela then I think and yet another expedition.

AW: I did another expedition in 1974, simply because in 1971 I hadn't got to the top of Roraima and I was still determined to do so. This time we went through Venezuela and climbed up the conventional route which is just like a Sunday afternoon stroll. But still it's a weird and wonderful world up on the top and at last I'd seen that. On the same trip we went to Angel Falls, and on the way to Angel Falls our boat sank in rapids because I was doing some filming on that trip for *Survival.*

JH: This was Howler monkeys and things.

AW: That's right. They decided to take a risk and try me out as a cameraman so I was desperate to do my best of course. I filmed Howler monkeys for them and I was going to film Angel Falls. On the way to Angel Falls our boat sank and we lost everything.

JH: Including the camera?

AW: Including the camera, sound recording equipment, the lot, absolutely everything went and I almost lost my friend too. There were three of us in this little dugout canoe. I remember the rapids were pretty fierce and dugout canoes are not the most stable of craft. The Indian's engine, the outboard engine, was really not up to it. At full throttle we were just barely making headway and suddenly I remember it just gave out. Of course the boat turned around broadside onto the rapids and of course water slopped in both sides. All three of us stood up as one as the boat went down. Then we were just swept away. The Indian was very, very sensible. He rolled up in a ball and he was carried down on the riverbed into quieter water and then he surfaced. My friend, he got caught on some underwater branches and he was in bad shape. I managed to get out and crawl along this branch and had to pull him out because he kept on being sucked under, and every time he came up he gasped for air. I just saw this face coming out of the surface of the water gasping for air.

JH: But you got him out?

AW: I managed to get him out, yes. So that was a bit of a disaster but at least it had a reasonably happy ending.

JH: Then you started making a more traditional way of earning living. You started doing research for the Central Office of Information films.

AW: I'd been badgering the BBC. I had one or two contacts in the BBC, badgering them to let me do some research, *Science and Features* and *Horizon* (5). Managed to get a week's contract for some research. I thought, I'm in.

JH: For Horizon, so in London then?

AW: That's right. Of course, the week came to an end and they said, well, there's no more next week but come back in a couple of weeks and we'll see if we've got some more. In the meantime I went to the Central Office of Information to see if they had anything. I did some research for them and then went back to Horizon and did some more. Working on programmes like 'Building Design', 'The Psychology of Music'. I worked with a producer called Dominic Flessarti on 'Electronic Warfare'. What an amazingly thorough man. He made extensive notes on absolutely everything. I learnt a lot about film research from him.

JH: But it's still not really the natural world.

AW: All that time I was still trying to get into the Natural History Unit. A job came up in Further Education to work with David Bellamy on a programme on 'Europe'. At that time Science and Futures was in Kensington House in London, and at that time David Attenborough was producing his Tribal Eye (6) series. I bumped into him one day in the corridor and we had a chat, my hero. I remember asking him his advice and I said I really want to get into Bristol but I've had this offer to work on 'Bellamy's *Europe*' (7). I said what would you do, naively. He said 'just go for it, are you mad? All things come in good time, just go for it, what an amazing chance' - so I did.

JH: How did you find working with David Bellamy?

AW: Fantastic, wonderful guy. I was doing the research for that series which was a bit of a challenge because David's so enthusiastic he will make broad, sweeping statements. I'd have to say, David, that's not quite right according to my research. It's quite difficult telling someone like that that it's not quite what it should be but he was very good about it. He'd usually listen.

JH: Then I think before you joined the Unit you went off to Venezuela again for the WWF.

AW: Yes, because I did a bit more research at Horizon and while I was doing another week's research, or a month's research, I had a telegram from WWF in Venezuela who said we want you to go and make a film about Canaima National Park. So I read it a few times because I didn't believe it. I replied and they said, yes we want you to come out for a few months and make this film.

JH: How had they heard about you?

AW: Well, I started to get a name for myself in Venezuela of course with all the expeditions. I bought a 16mm camera and went off. Kept in touch with contacts at the BBC, a lovely lady called Barbara Todd in the Appointments Department. She was very good at corresponding and kept me posted on everything that was going on. She seemed to be very keen on getting me into the Natural History Unit.

I finished this film in Venezuela and basically on the strength of that I think I got my first job in Bristol.

JH: Was it Mick Rhodes who gave you your first job?

AW: That's right.

JH: He was head of the Unit at that time. This would be, what, 1976?

AW: 76, that's right. That film, I did a rough cut at Shepperton Studios. I was playing about with editing by myself trying to learn what it was all about. I had lunch with someone one day, a producer, who wanted me to do some research on a film set in Amazonas. We were having lunch and who should walk in to join us, Ridley Scott. He was just embarking on his feature film career at that stage doing The Duellists (8) but he was still a very big name in commercials. So we had this lunch and I was pretty overawed by meeting Ridley. Of course, this other producer told Ridley about my film and he said I'll have to come and see it. So my first screening of that film was with Ridley, that was amazing.

JH: So then you were in the Unit?

AW: I was in the Unit, got my foot in the door.

JH: Finally got your foot in the door and you started off with Animal Magic(9).

AW: *Animal Magic*, Johnny Morris, lovely man. He had me in stitches.

JH: He had everybody in stitches. An extraordinary way of presenting but it worked for him.

AW: It really worked for him and it was a shame when it all ended actually for him. He was very, very sad it all came to an end because it was his life.

JH: Yes, he put his own mark on it, didn't it, his way of doing things.

AW: He did and it was very entertaining. It was very anthropomorphic, yes, but he put these voices to the animals.

JH: Well, the kids loved it.

AW: Kids adored it, it was lovely.

JH: There were a whole generation of kids that got interested in animals because of that.

AW: That's right. The BBC sent me on a studio direction course so I then started directing studios. I much preferred to go on a film direction course but they sent me on a studio direction course. Never mind, it was all about learning. Then we moved onto *Wildtrack*(10) with Tony Soper. Took Tony up to the Island of Rhum, I seem to remember to film the first release of white-tailed sea eagles. A chap called John Love and he was doing the first release.

There were very rough seas going over to Rhum and we shot the sync piece with Tony on the deck and Tony was feeling really ill. We had the camera set up on a tripod looking down the length of the boat to get full effect of it lurching in the rough sea. I had Tony come out of the cabin and stagger along the deck to talk to camera. Well, he came out of the cabin and, of course, his first move was to go to the side, he vomited over the side, recovered himself while the camera was still running, came up to camera and he did his piece. A consummate professional, a lovely chap.

JH: After that I think you got involved with Wildlife on One (11)*, didn't you?*

AW: Mick Rhodes called me into his office because I was pretty entrenched by this stage with Animal Magic and Wildtrack and that was not really what I wanted to do, and Mick knew that. He said I'm going to send you to Africa for a month. You're going to go to Kenya and I want you to rent a car, drive round all the national parks that you can. Just learn what it's like to be in Africa.

*JH: There were no **fixers** then, were there?*

AW: No fixers.

JH: What Africa was this, what particular Africa series or programme?

AW: It wasn't, this was just a recce. Mick out of the kindness of his heart sent me to Africa to get some experience, and that grew into making that film, *Last Chance for the Grevy* (12).

JH: Which I've never seen and can't find a copy of. That was your first film in Kenya, wasn't it? Then you did a Garden Jungle (14)*, something about bobcats.*

AW: That's right. Well, those re-cuts. They were presentation jobs where the film would come in, it wasn't the right length and it was basically cut to a different length. It was slightly redesigned and that was a way of learning about programme making.

JH: So was Last Chance for the Grevy your first Wildlife on One?

AW: That was my first complete film for the BBC.

JH: And the Grevys are still pretty endangered.

AW: They are. And then the next one was Vampire (14).

JH: That was bats, was it?

AW: Vampire Bats with Martin Saunders and had a lovely time with Martin.

JH: I seem to remember you telling me you made a film about bats as a way of getting into the Unit. You went and studied bats.

AW: No, I was going to do a PhD on bats. I was all set to start and then I got the chance to go into Bristol so I dumped it because that was where my heart lay. I would have loved to have done that.

JH: Where did you do this vampire film, the bat film, with Martin?

AW: Mainly in Trinidad. We did some other bits of shooting in Venezuela and a bit more shooting in Germany where a German scientist was studying vampires and he had some in captivity. We went there to film parental care and a few specialised flight sequences using flight boxes and what have you. But the crux of that film was to get vampires feeding and that was a big challenge. So when we got out to Trinidad I looked around for domestic stock - cows, goats, donkeys, whatever - that were regularly being bitten because once an animal's bitten the vampires tend to come back every night to feed on the same animal.

We found the stock that was regularly bitten and I caught some vampire bats at a roost and starved them for a couple of days. I was actually going down to the local abattoir and collecting blood and feeding them blood but we starved them for a couple of days before trying to film the sequence. Rather unethically we released these starving bats close to the donkey and I thought this is not going to work, there's no way they're going to come out and feed with us with a camera there. We had a little light on them as well and there was just no way, but, as soon as I opened the cage door, they went straight out, straight on to the donkey. Martin and I were completely gob-smacked. So we got that sequence and managed to get them off the donkey before they did too much damage.

4. Life On Earth and Living Planet

JH: Then you had a big break with Richard Brock, didn't you, with Life on Earth (15). *A big break for you.*

AW: The *Life on Earth* was earlier. When I was in Venezuela in 76 doing the World Wildlife Fund film Richard had contacted me and asked me if I could film some hoatzins. I knew places where I could go to get hoatzin because I'd been filming howler monkeys in the Llanos for Survival, so I knew exactly where to go. I managed to get a really nice nesting scene.

JH: You were the first person to film nesting hoatzin?

AW: So you say, I wasn't aware of that.

JH: I was told that this week.

AW: Interesting because they eat leaves so the females regurgitate what looks like pea soup into the chick. I remember that quite clearly because I was sitting in a little hide very, very close to the trees so I could look down on the nest.

JH: You were again filming yourself this time?

AW: I was filming myself because I'd managed to get a camera credit on *Life on Earth* just for that sequence. Richard was very kind and then, as you say, Richard was very kind to me again. He invited me to work with him on *Living Planet* (16) which was the next big series after *Life on Earth* with David. That was a wonderful opening for me, an opportunity to work with David again as well. Richard was very kind because he had 4 of the 12 programmes for himself. He was executive producer for the series. There were three senior producers each of whom had four programmes. Richard ended up giving me two of his four to do myself, the one on the 'Jungle' and the one on the 'Sky'. I'm eternally grateful to Richard for that.

JH: That was when you got David in a weightless situation at NASA, isn't it?

AW: I did. We scratched our heads for a way to do this programme about the air because we'd split *Living Planet*, which was all about different environments, into 12 different environments. There was one called *The Air*, and so we were scratching our heads as to how to approach this. Richard said, well, just go away and scribble a few ideas down and come back with a theme. So I came back and said, well, why don't we use gravity as the theme because everything that moves through the air has got to overcome gravity. While we're on that subject why don't we open the film with David in zero gravity? Richard laughed and said that's nothing to do with natural history, is it, it's nothing to do with wildlife. So I said it could be quite a spectacular scene.

So we invited David down to Bristol and we discussed it over lunch and it was up to me to sell him on the idea. The deal was that if I could arrange it with NASA then we could do it. So I did arrange it with NASA, a little bit more easily than I thought and we ended up flying for three days on the vomit comet with David, and Martin Saunders doing the camerawork, and Dickie Bird (sound). We had David sitting cross-legged on the floor, going over the top, levitating and then playing with a glass of water and it turning into lovely spherical globules.

JH: A very famous sequence. You won an Emmy for that, didn't you?

AW: The *Living Planet* won an Emmy but it was the *Sky Above*(17) that was entered for it. *Sky Above* was slightly different to the other films in that it had a lot more David in it because of the nature of the programme. We had David in extended sequences whereas the other films tended to use David to join paragraphs together, particularly from one thing to another. The *Sky* was a little bit more integral so we had him talking about gravity or we had him in a high altitude balloon trying to collect insects at high altitude.

JH: Was that in Scotland?

AW: That was Scotland, that's right.

JH: He's got a tale about that. The balloon came down in some remote area and David decided to go and walk away for help or something.

AW: That's right. We went up to 20,000 feet. It was Don Cameron who was the pilot and we were all togged up with oxygen bottles and parachutes, and all this paraphernalia all jammed into the basket. You couldn't have fitted another comb in there. We went up to 20,000 feet or something and we were above the clouds, and Don started to get very worried that we were going to end up over the sea. So we came down and we came down through the cloud, and as we came down beneath the cloud we could see it was just moorland. There was nothing as far as you can see but moorland. We came down and down. There was one fence that was going across this moorland and Martin says we're heading towards this fence. He said I'm sure we're going to hit that fence and we did. It clipped the end of the basket and of course it grabbed the basket and the balloon went over with the wind. Then of course if lurched back like a pendulum, tore itself off the fence, the basket swung back and then it swung back and hit the fence again. So we hit the one fence not only once but twice.

Then we came to a stop in the moorland and David went off for help and found a little farmhouse. Knocked on the door and said, hello, I'm David Attenborough, we've just landed in a balloon. They all made us cups of tea and that was very nice.

JH: You did some more Wildlife on Ones as well, didn't you? You went back to South America.

AW: Venezuela, for capybaras with Neil Rettig (35).

JH: With Neil? Is that the first time you worked with Neil?

AW: The capybara one was actually before *Living Planet*. I struck up a good working relationship with Neil. With *Living Planet* we started experimenting, working in the canopy with ropes, going up and down trees and also between trees on horizontal lines. Made a lot of mistakes and got ourselves into a lot of scrapes.

JH: Famous footage of David going up ropes. That was all your fault.

AW: I got David up a silk cotton tree in Ecuador. It was a big responsibility because I had to show him how to use the harness and how to transfer the rope.

JH: He tells the story very well about when the rabbit went round the tree. He tells it very well.

AW: We got this all on tape because he was still on radio mike. It's a lovely story.

JH: But nowadays I think getting up into the canopy isn't quite so difficult. There's much more sophisticated equipment.

AW: The equipment's more sophisticated and in those days it wasn't sophisticated.

JH: It was fairly basic but you always had this thing for heights so you were well adjusted.

AW: Not that I particularly liked heights. Heights really do scare me but it's something that you need to overcome.

JH: Well, you've certainly overcome it in various ways.

AW: Only because I make myself. I do get scared, everyone gets scared, a healthy way to be.

But while we're talking about the tree. We were staying in a place just down the River Napo, a little guesthouse which was ridden with bedbugs. The whole crew were sleeping in this one large room just like a dormitory and we woke up on the first morning all itching, and not really daring to say much. David was sitting on the edge of his bed looking down and all he said was 'they even got the old gentleman' which broke the ice. I'll never forget that.

JH: You made a couple of programmes in South Africa then. You went and did your crocodile film.

AW: With Tony Pooley who discovered the parental care in the Nile crocodiles (36).

JH: The crocodiles carrying the young. Rodney Borland was on that and while you were in the area you did another one on St Lucia (37).

AW: Which was more difficult and not so successful because it was quite a difficult film to make.

JH: Well, it's a very strange environment.

AW: It is, very strange but the crocodiles was very raw and Tony Pooley was a lovely chap to work with.

JH: Then there was one about wild horses, a World About Us (18).

AW: I didn't do a huge amount on that. I worked with Dilys Breese on that one. She did the Camargue section and I did the New Forest section. It wasn't particularly exotic.

JH: Nothing in Mongolia?

AW: Unfortunately not.

JH: Then you went back to South America again and started filming People.

AW: That really grew out of *Living Planet* because we had a sequence that was filmed by Hugh Maynard on Waorani in *Living Planet*. Jim Yost who was the anthropologist studying Waorani was getting very concerned about the oil companies creeping closer and closer to these people he was studying, who had chosen to really live as far away as possible from civilisation and maintain their traditional ways. He wrote to us saying he would really like us to go and record their way of life before it was too late. They wrote to Richard Brock actually and Richard said, Adrian, this is one for you. So again Richard was pointing me in the right direction.

We went to film the Waorani with Jim which was wonderful to see these people living such a traditional way of life, still using stone axe heads and taking us off on blowgun hunts and killing peccaries with spears (40).

JH: I remember the blowgun sequences. Was it around that time that you did your little trip on Autana?

AW: A little bit later, about two years after that. Back to Venezuela again, another lost world, a Tepui, I wanted to see. Autana is shaped like a chimney stack, it's very, very small on the top. It's very, very tall. Its about 2,500/3,000 feet tall and about 800 feet below the top is a line of caves which used to be the path of an underground river system when the lay of the land was originally the same as the top. It's amazing, it's just eroded away.

JH: But you decided to parachute in there because it wasn't possible to land presumably.

AW: We could have landed by helicopter, but we decided to skydive onto the top carrying the crew in by tandem and that was really the first time tandem parachutes had been used for anything in earnest. Up to then it had been experimental for military purposes. It was quite a big operation and I had a lot of specialist people. It raised a lot of eyebrows in Venezuela who were quite suspicious about all this hardware and effort going into filming a few plants and filming butterflies, and they were convinced we were spying. We did the expedition and unfortunately Jean Boenish, who was one of the skydivers; she broke her leg very, very badly.

JH: It was a very different sort of film (38).

AW: It was a very different kind of film. We clambered down to look at the caves and then when we got back up the top we were arrested by helicopter for spying supposedly. We were under house arrest for a couple of days.

JH: Somebody was after you in Venezuela if I remember rightly.

AW: They were, because they were convinced when we did the original Roraima expedition in 1971 that we'd strayed across the border, and that was a disputed border with Guiana. Whether we had or not is anybody's guess because there's no marks in the forest where the border is but I seemed to get a bad reputation for that.

It had an effect on me in 1974 when I went into Venezuela but when I went to Venezuela to do the World Wildlife Fund film I arrived in Caracas and they wouldn't let me in. They said it's because you're a spy. So I had to pick up the phone and phone one of my contacts in Caracas who came to collect me. But I think my name was on the blacklist for a few years and even to Autana because it raised its head again then.

JH: You did a series on birds with Hugh Maynard if I remember, Birds for All Seasons(19)?

AW: '*Birds for All Seasons'* with Jeffery Boswall.

JH: How did you find working with Jeffery?

AW: Jeffery is a very interesting man. I won't say he was the easiest person to work with because I'm quite a private person and Jeffery takes it upon himself to find out everything about anyone he's working with, so it was not easy. We made these three programmes on birds of the world. I think Jeffery had originally wanted to make a series of 13 one-hours and it was finally whittled down to three so he wasn't very happy about that. Out of those three he was executive producer for the series and the deal was that I would be producer of two of the three, so I don't think he was very happy about that either. So we got off to a bit of a bad start but this was a directive that came from higher up.

I did the polar film (20) and then I did the tropical film (21), and Jeffery's first love was the temperate area anyway so that worked out fine. He wrote the book and he had overall control of the series. The tropical one was really my love and I put a lot of effort into a couple of different sequences, actually both of them with Mike Richards. One of them was in Venezuela again filming wire-tailed manakins where the male will display to the female and with his wire like extension, feathers on the tail, he just thrashes her around the face with it with his back to her and this turns her on.

JH: Extraordinary. I don't think that had been filmed before.

AW: Never, never.

JH: In that same area you had the cock-of-the-rocks bird.

AW: Yes, that was quite a long time before.

JH: Was it not in the same series?

AW: No, it wasn't. That was for *Living Planet* with Hugh Maynard in Suriname.

JH: Then went with Mike, he got very, very sick, didn't he, in Borneo or somewhere?

AW: I put a lot of the budget, it was a bit of a gamble actually. I was always very keen on birds of paradise and I remember talking at length with David (Attenborough) about birds of paradise because it was one of his loves too. There was this one bird in Indonesia called the Wallace's Standard wing which had not been seen for about 60 years. I thought it would be fantastic to try and find this bird. I found an ornithologist called David Bishop who reckoned he knew where he could find one on the island of Halmahera in the Moluccas, just off New Guinea.

So I decided to gamble money. Mike Richards, David Bishop and myself; we travelled out there and we not only found it but we made tree platforms high up in the canopy and we filmed its display. It was the first time it had ever been photographed at all, stills or anything, and we managed to get the display. I think that was probably the most rewarding natural history experience of my life rediscovering this bird with David and Mike. But it had dreadful consequences for Mike and for me.

David seemed to get out scot-free because David wasn't the one up in the tree platforms. Birds of paradise they display just before the sun comes up and as soon as the sun comes up over the horizon that's it for the day, they stop. So we had to position ourselves about 4 o'clock in the morning up in these tree platforms and we had to sit quietly, and still, through the worst time for mosquitoes before it got light. So we were eaten alive by mosquitoes. There was no other way to get the sequence.

So the first job to do when we came down from the tree platforms after filming the birds, and we did this for several mornings, was to go and bathe in the river to try and soothe our sores because it was awful. It turned out that the river was just downstream from a village and so it was like a running sewer. Of course, we'd been scratching all our bites furiously and so the skin was broken so we got infected. Suddenly we started erupting in these boils and we got blood poisoning and then we got malaria. I was the first one to go down with malaria.

We moved on from Halmahera to Papua New Guinea to film some other birds of paradise and I don't think I've ever felt so ill in my life. I was evacuated from there by helicopter and flew home. I got home and saw the doctor. He looked at the big boils all over me and my malaria, and he said do you realise how ill you are? I said I don't want to know that, I feel pretty bad but I managed to get through it.

JH: What about Mike?

AW: Mike wasn't hit by malaria until he got to Spain which was on a subsequent filming trip. It took quite a while to develop and then he was hit. He ended up in hospital for about eight months.

JH: He's still on medication.

AW: He's still on medication. It was serious because during that eight months he was on the critical list three times so we nearly lost him. Of course I felt awfully responsible for this. But his condition was so bad that he had an internal fungus growing on his adrenal gland and they had to whip it out. He's on steroids for his life now. It was a big price for that one sequence. But Mike still soldiers on, he's still filming.

JH: He came back and worked with you again on The Great Rift (22) and he got sick again if I remember.

AW: That's right. We were filming vultures.

JH: Vultures up in Shaba.

AW: That's right, from the top of the hill there. Of course, having lost his adrenal gland he lost control of his body heat and body thermostat and he overheated. We'd all taken water up to the top of this hill but it did get awfully hot that day. So all of us gave him all our water but it still wasn't enough and we had to finally help him down the hill into the car. He was still really overheating badly. All we had in the back of the car was a crate of beer which was pretty warm by that stage but we opened every single bottle and we tipped it all over him like a shower. He was completely soaked in beer and stank of course, poor Mike.

We drove back and we had to stop in Isiolo for something and, of course, as soon as we stopped we had a crowd round us as you always do, and they took one whiff of the inside of the car and said 'wow'. At least he's still out there doing it.

5. IMAX

JH: Well, The Great Rift I think was almost the last thing you did before you got into Rwanda. Well, you got into Rwanda during The Great Rift and then after that we had the mountain gorilla film, didn't we?

AW: The *Natural World* film, *Gorillas in the Midst of Man* (23) that grew out of *The Great Rift*. They decided they wanted to make a film about the gorillas and I did with Neil Rettig, and out of that film grew IMAX.

JH: That's when you left the BBC.

AW: I'd always wanted to do IMAX. I remember seeing an IMAX back in the *Living Planet* days when I was in Washington. I went to the Aerospace Museum and I saw an IMAX film and I was thrilled by it.

JH: Was that a wildlife film?

AW: No, just a flying film.

JH: There wasn't any wildlife film at that stage.

AW: The gorilla one was the first wildlife film.

JH: That's right, and I remember Chris Parsons set up the IMAX Natural History Unit.

AW: That's right. He was in conversation with IMAX about doing some natural history films and we were talking one day and I said, well, what about gorillas? Gorillas would be possible to do on IMAX because you can get close to them and they're big animals, they're impressive, and they look wonderful on the big screen. So he took that suggestion and took it to IMAX in Toronto and they were really interested in following that up. So while we were editing the *Gorillas in the Midst of Man* for the *Natural World* we were having conversations with the IMAX Corporation on the possibly of doing an IMAX film.

JH: With that in mind I seem to remember for the IMAX film, Blue Planet (24)*, the space film, combining a little bit of Blue Planet in Northern Tanzania with a training session for some wildlife cameramen so that they could learn how to use the IMAX cameras. We had that little session in Northern Tanzania. I think that was quite early on.*

AW: It was because IMAX decided to go ahead with this gorilla film and during the fundraising part of it they decided to send Neil Rettig and he was going to film the gorilla film(25) with me, and Kim Hayes of course. They decided to let us cut our teeth on a sequence of *Blue Planet* and we were joined by people like Richard Goss as well.

JH: Hugh Miles, was he one of them?

AW: No, he didn't come actually.

JH: There was somebody else there. I remember Richard Goss and I remember Neil but there was somebody else. I forget who it was now. I thought it was Hugh Miles but maybe it wasn't. That little sequence in the Ngorongora Crater, wasn't it, or the Serengeti?

AW: It was the Serengeti.

JH: That made a tiny bit of an impact in the Blue Planet film and that led to the mountain gorillas.

AW: The most dramatic shots were Lake Natron actually and we did some other shots in Rwanda as well. Lake Natron was spectacular because we did some aerials from a helicopter. The wildebeest were difficult to be honest because filming with an IMAX camera is very, very different. You're talking about extreme wide angle lenses because the depth of focus is so small, so you need wide angles, and so you need to get close to the animals. I had this massive camera and in front of us we had a million wildebeest on the plains, really dramatic. So we set the camera up and I looked down the viewfinder and I couldn't see one because the wide angle lens had just thrown them into obscurity. I thought surely this isn't going to work.

But then David Douglas, who was nurturing us on this training session, he said when you look down the viewfinder forget it's a viewfinder, just imagine that you're sitting in a theatre and you've got a giant screen in front you, that'll give you a better feel for what you're looking at. Because actually it's only a very small area of the IMAX frame that you're really looking at, the rest is peripheral. So it's a question of unlearning a lot that you've been taught and starting all over again.

JH: The early films IMAX though everything did seem to be a rather long way away and you started with gorillas. You managed to get closer and suddenly wildlife IMAX seemed to be more exciting.

AW: Well, gorillas are great because they get close to you because when we embarked on the gorilla film we were very worried about the noise the camera made. It was a very noisy machine apart from the size of it. So we made this mock-up camera which made a noise and on a trial run we hoicked it up to a gorilla group. We planted it there very carefully and then we switched it on, the gorillas didn't even look up, they just kept on eating so we knew it was going to work. But every time we did take all this equipment into the gorillas it was a big, big rigmarole because we'd have to put the legs in place.

Craig Sholley, who was working with us, he would stand there looking at the gorillas and we would use him as a shield. So we'd build the camera behind him, tripod, the tripod head, a big heavy thing, then the camera and then the lens and then the magazines. It took about 15 minutes to set the whole thing up, and then hopefully you're going to get something happening. But more often than not by the time you'd set the camera up the gorillas had got bored and they'd wander off, so you'd have to break it down again and follow. We worked for months on that, every day carrying all this gear up the mountains. Both Neil and I ended up with bad backs because of that. But seeing the images on the screen was very rewarding.

JH: Apart from the weight and the size of the camera you've got this three minute load which is really hard for filming wild animals.

AW: It's like going back to the old Bolex days because also an IMAX shot has got to be minimum half a minute to make it make sense. So you watch the roll get shorter and shorter as you're running camera and waiting for something to happen, and it gets to the point where, well, you might as well just run the roll off. But you've only got a certain number of rolls because they're so expensive.

JH: They're 1,000 foot rolls. Now just recently we had an IMAX shoot and they've got 500 foot rolls now. I wondered what was the point.

AW: For weight.

JH: Maybe it's weight, maybe that's what it is. It must be incredibly difficult.

AW: It's certainly not easy and I think that's a big reason why a lot of IMAX films feel a bit wooden. The gorilla film we had a total of 109 shots, I think, altogether for a 40 minute film, that's not many, and we had one shot that lasted more than 2 minutes, a lovely shot, which gives you a great sense of reality but it's not the sort of speedy cutting that we get used to in TV, especially now. It's a totally different way of thinking. In fact, during the cutting of the IMAX film we worked on a 35mm reduction print and we cut on a Steenbeck. So you're cutting, looking at a small screen trying to imagine that as a big screen.

So we'd take the rough cut, shoot down to the local cinema to look at it on a big screen and see what the effect was, and always, guaranteed, the shots were too short. They felt really long on the Steenbeck but as soon as you look at them on a big screen they're too short.

JH: It's very different.

AW: Very, very different. Very difficult to judge actually.

JH: Another good thing that came out of your mountain gorilla days was meeting George Schaller.

AW: Absolutely. George, another hero.

JH: That was the first time you'd met him?

AW: Yes. He is a God for conservationists. He writes so eloquently. Yes, he and Kay came out to join us for the gorilla film because he did the first meaningful work back in the 50s, 59, on mountain gorillas. So he and Kay came to join us to be in the film.

JH: I think I have some of Neil's unofficial footage of you all standing on top of the volcano.

AW: On top of Visoke, that was just before we were called down.

JH: Andrew's (Buchanan) saying 'come on down'.

AW: That's right, when the war broke out. We were ordered off the mountain which was a very difficult moment because we hadn't finished the film. In the end we had to make do with what we had because we were going to do aerials, and we were going to do a dramatic reconstruction.

JH: You had all those costumes.

AW: Exactly, for a dramatic reconstruction of the discovery of gorillas. We had all that and we could never do it because the war broke out. The very next morning after we were ordered off the mountain we woke up to gunfire and all of us, we were huddled in the corridor of our houses for more than seven hours under fire.

JH: Tracer bullets going across the garden.

AW: And grenades going off too.

JH: I remember that well. I could hear all the gunshots when I was on the phone to you, trying to get you out.

AW: Well, the French got us out. The French paramilitary came and got us out. In fact, after seven hours we were getting quite concerned and there was a big hammering on the door, soldiers burst in. We had no idea whether they were the Rwandan army or whether they were rebels, they all looked the same to us to be honest, dressed in camouflage, pointing guns at us and screaming and shouting. The first thing they saw, of course, was on the table was a pair of binoculars and walkie-talkies. We had walkie-talkies because we were living in two houses and we were keeping communication with each other by walkie-talkie. Of course, they jumped to conclusions and hauled us outside which I thought was a bit dangerous and hoicked us the road. We were put into a school compound with a lot of other villagers and we were under fire there for about an hour until the French arrived and took us out. It was a shame really that it came to an end like that.

JH: It was extraordinary. Then after that you did another IMAX film on plants, didn't you?

AW: The *Secret of Life on Earth (26)* which was Chris Parsons's film. It was initially called *The Green Contract* and we did a short version for the Korean Expo called Green Contract. Then we did a long version

which was called *Secret of Life on Earth*.

JH: Did it work as a film?

AW: It did. It was one of those piecemeal films. It was lots and lots of different sequences all over the world so it was very much a narration driven film rather than a visually driven film. So for me it wasn't as nice as a good visual story would have been. It was very much Chris's story. He asked me to field direct for him, so I just field directed the sequences following his script. Very, very grateful to Chris and always remember him. A wonderful man to work with and a wonderful man to have known. There's such a long list of people I've been so privileged to meet and work alongside.

JH: Well, Chris I would think would be high up on that list. He was head of the Unit, he was head of IMAX, and he started off Wildscreen, a lot of things he's done.

AW: One of the great visionaries.

JH: He was one of the first people in the Unit.

AW: Tony Soper was in charge of the Unit very, very early on.

JH: Then you left IMAX and you stopped making IMAX I think after that, didn't you?

6. Last Refuge and getting back behind the camera

AW: I did because I wanted to make a film about giant pandas and had an introduction to the Chinese scientist through George Schaller. George Schaller and I went to China together.

JH: That was for Geographic, was it?

AW: That's right. It wasn't an easy film simply because it was a new area in China.

JH: They didn't like overseas film people coming into China to make panda films, did they?

AW: They didn't, no.

JH: I think you were the first again to be allowed in.

AW: The first to go into the Qinling Mountains since the crackdown of 49. It was a really big event for them and the initial recce was a long caravan of cars taking me up to the Qinling Mountains. A bit over the top really.

JH: Were you doing the camerawork yourself then?

AW: No.

JH: Who was on camera?

AW: Jeffery Farrell who was one of the assistant IMAX cameramen. I decided to try him out. But to see giant pandas in the wild, completely new area because according to the Chinese scientist, Professor Pan

Wenshi, there were about 200 wild pandas which would have made it the biggest wild giant panda population in China. But the big problem, like most areas in China, is that they're all restricted to hilltops with farmland in between so they can't get to each other. It's a terrible situation.

JH: Is it getting any better now?

AW: To be honest with you I don't know but it's certainly dire and I can't imagine it's got any better. I remember one day we found a pair of giant pandas courting which was something that Professor Pan had told us about and he'd never seen. So I radioed him immediately thinking that he should come up and see it. We were awed by this, seeing this behaviour. He arrived quite quickly and darted the animals immediately and I couldn't understand what he was doing because I expected him to come in and creep up quietly and watch with us. But he just marched in and darted the animals to collar them. I don't understand to this day why he did that.

The giant pandas film we called *Giant Panda - The Last Refuge* (27) and I set up a company to handle the budget for that film.

JH: That was Last Refuge which is still going.

AW: Last Refuge and I decided to keep it because everyone said that's an interesting name. Some people said you'll get confused with Last Resort. In fact I've got a receipt from somewhere which is called Lost Refugee. We've had all kinds of funny versions of Last Refuge. But, yes, we set up a company on that to do more films as an independent.

JH: Then you started with the series Nightmares of Nature (28).

AW: Yes, with Richard Matthews, again National Geographic and BBC. Did some interesting drama sequences in that too. We did one on underwater (28) and one on reptiles, *In Cold Blood* (29). I remember filming with John Waters cobras hatching.

JH: Where did you film that?

AW: It was up in the Midlands somewhere. It was one of those parks, zoo parks. John and I were in this little room, dark room, with mother cobra and her eggs for about 36 hours trying to keep each other awake, waiting for the magic moment for the cobras to start hatching. The mother stays with the eggs so she guards the nest. We were anxious not to fall asleep because it's not a good thing to do. We did get it and it was interesting. It was another nice little natural history sequence to be involved with, watching them hatch.

JH: Then you started doing things for Partridge Films, didn't you, and did a few other things, and then you got involved with?

AW: We started doing Etosha which was a *Living Edens* series. Good old Mike Rosenberg.

JH: You got behind the camera again there?

AW: I did because I'd been talking to Mike for years. I think as much as I love producing and directing I was always a bit of a frustrated cameraman and desperate to get back to it. I talked to Mike back in *Living Planet* days and Mike said come and join Partridge. I'll give you a camera and you can go out to Africa. I said I can't do that, I'm in the middle of this really important series but he didn't forget. Come the early 90s he said, well, buy a camera and go off to Etosha and I loved it, I really loved it.

We did elephants in Etosha, we did lemurs. I made a film in Madagascar about this little white lemur, a freak. It was called 'Sapphire'. He wasn't a true albino because he had the black bands around his tale and he had bright blue eyes, an extraordinary little animal. I filmed him from soon after he was born right until he died unfortunately. Freaks do die sadly because they become abandoned.

JH: They become picked on too, don't they?

AW: They do. So that was a nice little film to do. Alongside that one we did one on Sifakas (31) as well which was about a family. It did win a nice award from Jackson. I then went on to do another *Living Eden*, not with Partridge but ourselves with my partner Dae (Sasitorn) on Ngorongoro (32).

JH: I remember I worked on that one with you.

AW: The whole aim of that one really from script stage was to find servals. I remember writing this fanciful treatment for *Living Edens* and it was all about servals (39) but we got it. We got servals in the den which was very rewarding.

JH: Especially about that same time the BBC had come up with a serval film for Wildlife on One.

AW: That's right.

JH: Owen Newman had made a serval film and you were worried that your footage was not going to go so far because the BBC had come out with one. I seem to remember you getting worried about that.

AW: That's right but that seemed to go down okay.

JH: Absolutely. But then you did more Living Edens.

AW: Yes, I did. Back to Venezuela (33), to the Lost World again.

JH: The Lost World and you went straight over the Angel Falls.

AW: Using a wing mount.

JH: Was that your own wing mount?

AW: Yes.

JH: The one you've designed which apparently is doing really well now.

AW: Yes, it seems to work. It went through a convoluted evolution from very primitive starting points because sticking a camera out on the wing of an aeroplane the lens always gets covered in bugs. So I came up with all kinds of Heath Robinson ways to protect the lens until you started shooting, including little squares of plastic attached to bits of string that you tug off from inside the plan before you start filming.

Then I thought, well, why don't we have some sort of mechanised system and while we're doing it why don't we start moving the camera because up to that point the camera had been a fixed position. So we slung the camera underneath and we had this tilt mechanism so you could tilt the camera down to vertical. In between shots you could deploy a little device to come up to protect: the shield.

JH: A bug shield.

AW: That's right. I decided to develop it because it was turning in some nice shots. I went to the Civil Aviation Authority here in Britain and they tried to discourage me but I talked to them again and again, and eventually they did help a lot. The difficult thing with the CAA is that it's illegal to stick anything on an aircraft without having it certified. But it's catch-22 because you can't develop anything until you've proved it's going to work. So I was completely open with them and they knew I was sticking this equipment on an aeroplane to test it out, and they happily turned a blind eye to it. Eventually we got it certified and we had to rebuild the whole thing with CAA approved materials, right down to the last screw, but we got it through.

JH: Do you use the same mount for your still photographs or not?

AW: No, stills are shot out the window. We reached the point where we wanted to develop this device so the only way to develop it was to buy a plane. So we bought a little Cessna which we keep out here. We thought while we've got the Cessna we'd better make use of it, not just for developing this device, but we'd better take some stills as well and build up an aerial archive of Britain. So we started on that.

JH: The wing mount is popular with filmmakers?

AW: It has been, yes. We've worked for hundreds of hours with it.

JH: Because there's quite a lot of aerial shots in some of the series I've seen recently with Titchmarsh in (41).

AW: Yes, we did some.

JH: So it's still being used and you're still flying?

AW: Yes, certainly. It's being used in Germany in a couple of weeks time.

JH: It'll fit onto any 206 (Cessna), will it?

AW: It'll fit onto any Cessna with a strut except for the little ones like a two-seater 150 or a low powered 172. I'd discourage that but the bigger ones it fits very well. It's no match, however, for Cineflex but it's a different animal. I developed it because I wanted to have a device that you can carry around the world to remote areas where you can't find helicopters or it's too expensive to use helicopters. That you could just clamp onto any plane, any Cessna plane, because you can find Cessnas almost anywhere, without drilling holes, and go and do some aerial shots and it fits the bill for that.

If you want superb aerials and you've got a lot of money to spend then you go for a fancy Cineflex which is marvellous, the best system, there's no question about that. But you need £2-300,000 to buy one or £10,000 a week at least to rent one, it's enormous money but the results are unmatchable.

JH: So then you went back to Rwanda again and did another gorilla film(34) which, again, has done very, very well.

AW: Yes, I wanted to tell the story of the discovery of gorillas. It came about because I had an email one day, out of the blue, from the grandson of Robert von Beringe who discovered gorillas in 1902 so I immediately wrote back. I said it's fantastic to hear from you. You know I'm very keen on filming gorillas. Why don't we go to Africa together and you come as the grandson and retrace your grandfather's footsteps, and we can use that as a vehicle to tell the story of gorillas which we did. We raised the funding and I did that.

JH: It won a lot of awards.

AW: It did, it did very well but gorillas are beautiful. They're charismatic creatures, lovely to work with.

7. Career reflections and future collaborations

JH: Now recently you're not been doing quite so much filmmaking, you've been concentrating on your aerial stills, producing calendars and books and things.

AW: Yes, we just decided to broaden our horizons and we started to build up the publishing side of the company. We started 2004 and it's going very well. Now it's come full circle and I'm going back to more filming again. I'm back to Venezuela again, the Lost World in December, filming gorillas again in January with George Schaller, and we're filming next year in Nepal. So there's a lot on the cards now as well as the books.

JH: Adrian, looking back over this long and exciting career, which people have you really been pleased to meet? I think we've probably covered some of them but was there anybody else that you can remember?

AW: Number one David (Attenborough) who was responsible for getting me into this really. George Schaller, of course, and a lot of the producers at the Natural History Unit - Richard Brock, John Sparks, Jeffery (Boswall), too many to mention really. Cameramen: Martin Saunders, Neil Rettig, Hugh Maynard. Mike Richards is an independent of course, and knowing people like Hugh Miles. Well, the list is endless really because it's a very special community and I think I was very lucky to get in quite early on when the Unit was still like a family. I think when I first joined there were only 11 producers as well as the other staff as well, so it probably didn't number more than 25 or so, now there's 250. So it's grown enormously.

I think I've been very lucky to have lived through the golden times of developing the techniques of cinematography in order to get those magical animal behaviour sequences.

JH: Well, you have got some pretty sensational sequences in your time. Your Wallace's standard wing.

AW: Some very memorable landmarks actually.

JH: What other sequences stand out in your memories that you're proud of?

AW: Just being there to observe even. Things like watching chimpanzees fishing for ants. Just wonderful just to sit there as an observer. To spend time habituating a cheetah family so they get used to you and allow you to follow them.

JH: Where did you do that?

AW: In Ngorongoro and Etosha. I followed a family for a long time. All these animals, getting close to them in the wild. It goes much deeper than just what you see on the screen because in the old days we would go and spend six months in the field to make an hour and half of film.

JH: This doesn't happen nowadays, does it?

AW: Which was a huge luxury and it did allow you to spend time getting the animal's confidence. I've had a lot of close encounters that really convince me that animals are very ready to trust you whatever they are,

even lions because I had a very close encounter with a lion.

JH: Really, where was that?

AW: In Ngorongoro. One morning I was on my own in the Land Rover. Early morning I was going down into the crater and saw these lions courting. I thought, okay, I'll just get this as a short scene. They carried on and on and it got better and better and I got closer and closer. In the end the sun got a bit hot, 8.30, 9.00 in the morning, and the female decided she wanted some shade so she stood up and she looked around. Not a bush in sight, but there was my car. So she came over and she got herself underneath my camera box because the camera's built up and it's built outside. So you've basically got the camera set outside the vehicle to give you a nice big degree of pan, and I was sitting outside with it.

So she wanders over and she just flops down underneath and that was fine. The male takes one look and he's not so sure, not so confident. So he wanders over a little bit and gets closer and closer. Then he starts marking his territory with urine and comes up and sniffs the female and he sits down, and he puts his chin on the edge of the camera door which was almost on my knee.

JH: You can't just wind up the glass because there is no glass, you've got an open platform.

AW: No, it was completely open. All I could do really was to keep stock still and just pretend it was fine. But the thing is psychology I don't think lions see you as prey while you're within the shape of the vehicle. Though I was effectively outside I don't think he saw me as being touchable. Although he had his chin on the edge right close to my knee he didn't really know what to do about it, and we were like this for four hours. He'd get down for a bit and then he'd get up a bit and look at me. I thought no one's going to believe this so while he was down with the female once, I managed to change lenses because the lens I had on there wouldn't focus that close. I put a wide angle lens on the camera and I swung it round ready for when he came up next time, and he came up and I got a shot of it. So I've got proof at least.

JH: You've got proof that he was that close. Did you take stills at the same time?

AW: No, I didn't dare. You've got to be really careful in that situation.

JH: So in your travels you've covered a lot of different areas of the world. It seems to me you've got favourites. South America and Africa come out on top, or Central America.

AW: When you talk about favourites it's very difficult because everywhere you go is somewhere special.

JH: But you get involved with the people and the projects and things. You've just been back to your Waorani people, haven't you?

AW: I've been back twice to visit the same people to get more footage which I've still got and I'd love to put that together as a 25 year piece of their history as their culture changes.

JH: Is it changing noticeably?

AW: Yes, it is. They've all moved now, they're not living traditionally anymore.

JH: Were they glad to see you?

AW: I think they remember me. I went with Jim, of course they remember Jim. They smile and they're very hospitable.

JH: What about Rwanda? You've got I think a feeling for the people.

AW: I do.

JH: You made an effort to put your gorilla film into the local language.

AW: I'm glad you brought that up because I think it's very important to translate these films into local languages and take them back. It's all very well going out to these exotic places, it's all about taking, isn't it? It's rather exploitative but if you translate the film into the local language and take it back, you're at least giving a little bit back. So we started to encourage them to distribute them educationally. The gorilla one we translated into Kinyarwanda, the first *Natural World: Gorillas in the Midst of Man.* We took that back when we were talking to them about doing the IMAX film because that followed fairly close on.

We took it back and the Rwandan government was going to have a special screening in parliament, so it became a big thing. Andrew Buchanan came with me and we took this film. We arrived at Kigali Airport to be met by four high up government people, shaking hands and all that, and led us out to the entrance. They all got in the car and there was no room for us and they drove off! They'd scheduled a special showing in the new parliament building which was going to be the first time that building have ever been used. With great pride they took Andrew and I to show us the inside of the parliament building, and to show us where we were going to be able to show the film and so on because we'd had to take a projector from England as well.

We got to this lovely new building and it was locked and they couldn't find the man with the key. Eventually they did find the man with the key and after much waiting around we did get in. The evening of the great event came and, of course, they didn't have a projectionist so Andrew and I were doing our own projection work. We had to give a speech. They'd invited all the embassy people and anyone of any significance in Kigali so it was jam packed with people, wonderful event. Andrew and I gave a speech to introduce the thing and then we had to sprint up the aisle to back of the room and run the film. It was just hilarious, it was just a circus.

JH: How did it go down?

AW: It went down very well.

JH: The Rwandan people appreciated it at that level?

AW: Yes, because it was in their own language and then we showed it to the locals. We took it up to the Virungas and we had an open air show which was more rewarding for me because it was very special to be able to show these people who lived right by the park, who maybe had never seen a gorilla, to actually see it. That was very nice.

We did the same thing for the Madagascar films too. We translated those into Malagasy and I sent 100 tapes I think back to Antananarivo and the customs wouldn't let them in. It was a free gift for the Madagascan government, an education gift. They said, no, you've got to pay duty. I refused and in the end the prime minister himself went down to the airport and collected the tapes. So they did get them in the end.

JH: They went down well?

AW: Very well.

JH: The Madagascan people liked them?

AW: They did. It was the first time they'd had a film translated into Malagasy like that.

JH: I think it's very important. It's a way of getting the conservation message across.

AW: Well, I think Filmmakers for Conservation are doing quite a lot of this now, translating into other languages.

JH: Some people have been doing it for years. Simon Trevor's been doing it for years, Alan Root's been doing it for years. Everybody should be doing it. Spread the message around a little bit.

AW: It's just too easy when you finish a film to forget about things like that because you get involved with another project. 'Yes, I was going to translate this into…' but it's bad, it shouldn't be forgotten, it's important.

JH: How do you think the industry is going at the moment? How do you see it in maybe 10 years time?

AW: The last complete film I did was the gorilla one with von Beringe's grandson: *Gorillas of my Grandfather* (34). I finished that in 2004 and I took the decision at that point to stop chasing commissions because to be honest with you I didn't like the way TV was going. It was too much about reality, too much about presenters and not the meat of the show. For me that probably shows how old-fashioned I am but for me it was always about good natural history, watching good animal behaviour, and not looking at a presenter telling me about it. So I lost heart a bit I must admit and that was another reason why we decided to put our efforts into broadening other areas of the business.

But now it seems to be swinging back a little bit I'm happy to say and I'm getting involved in doing camerawork for shows that are really much more traditional which I'm very happy about.

JH: Some of the presenters who are really awful are so visible now. New people seem to be coming in that have got a more sensitive and more sympathetic way of delivering the message.

AW: Yes, I think so.

JH: You think so? You think it's still going?

AW: I like to think positively and I like to be altruistic. I'm sure it'll swing back. I think the Natural History Unit went through an awkward stage of becoming very, very big because it went through the golden boom days at the end of the 70s, the 80s, beginning of the 90s. It grew and grew maybe a bit too quickly, it became too big and suddenly they had to find new ways of using up all this energy. I think it lost direction a little bit, that's my personal opinion.

JH: Do you think it's getting back?

AW: I think so. I like to think so. There's a lot of very important stories to tell still. There'll never be any shortage of good natural history stories to tell.

JH: I hope there'll be no shortage of people to make these films.

AW: I wish I could have all the experience that I have now and be 30.

JH: Is there one film that you haven't made that you really wish you had? Is there one film that you would still say now I've got a chance to do that, I've wanted to do that all my life?

AW: It has to be the unfinished Waorani film, charting the changing culture which tells so much about not only the people, it tells a lot about the destruction of the environment, loss of habitat and therefore loss of wildlife over a huge area. So it's a very, very wide ranging theme. So one day maybe.

JH: I wonder if the world is still there, I like to think we can mend it before it's completely wrecked but it's dodgy, there's too many people in the world I think.

AW: That's right and I don't know how you change that. It's one thing that it's very difficult to stay optimistic about. I don't know how you can reduce the population. It would be political suicide for any leader to stop you having babies.

JH: So you're still very much involved with what you're doing, branching out, looking to go back and do a film here and there. You're not giving up yet.

AW: I don't think I've worked so hard in my life actually. Running your own business of course – it's difficult to leave it as you know.

JH: I think that's probably your life in a nutshell, Adrian. Have we missed anything out that's really important to your life? So I'd like to say thank you very much for spending the time.

AW: Well, thank you for the opportunity. I have to say that a lot of people said to me I was mad when I left the BBC but when I went to do the IMAX films the BBC kept my post open for me. They said go off and do it and come back and tell us all about IMAX. After doing the IMAX and it was crunch time and the BBC said, well, we can't keep your post open forever. It's been three years now and you've got to make a decision. I remember writing a letter resigning my post and people said you're mad. I probably was but I certainly haven't been out of work and I've been able to do things that probably I couldn't have done at the BBC.

You get to these dividing points in life. Yes, it would have been great to have gone back to the BBC, of course it would. The BBC was always good to me and I learnt so much and travelled all over the world for them. But by leaving the BBC at least I was able to fly and develop the aerial filming, aerial photography, and work for whoever I wanted to. It hasn't been easy, it's certainly not easy giving up that security. It did open new horizons for me and I was able to do camerawork and that was probably the biggest significant thing. If I'd gone back to the BBC I would never have done camerawork.

JH: You changed when you got behind the camera again. You became happy with life. You weren't really happy directing and producing.

AW: I think I became a better person, a happier person in some ways.

JH: Well, I hope you make many more films.

AW: Thanks you so much.

JH: Thank you very much for sparing the time.

End

People, films and organizations mentioned

Alan Root
Alan Titchmarsh
Andrew Buchanan
Armand Denis
Arthur Conan Doyle
Asa Wright
Barbara Todd
Brian Ridout
Christina Wood
Christopher Parsons
Craig Sholley
Dae Sasitorn
David Attenborough
David Bellamy
Derek Bromhall
Dilys Breese
Dominic Flessarti
Don Cameron
Eric Warren
George Cansdale
George Schaller
Hans Hass
Heath Robinson
Hilary King
Hugh Maynard
Hugh Miles
Jean Boenish
Jeffery Boswall
Jeffery Farrell
Jim Yost
John Love
John Sparks
John Waters
Johnny Morris
Kim Hayes

Lotte Hass
Lyndon (Dickie) Bird
Martin Saunders
Michaela Denis
Mick Rhodes
Mike Richards
Neil Rettig
Owen Newman
Richard Brock
Richard Foster
Richard Goss
Richard Matthews
Ridley Scott
Robert Von Beringe
Rodney Borland
Simon Trevor
Soames Summerhayes
Tony Pooley
Tony Soper

Alexandra Palace
Asa Wright Nature Centre
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British Museum of Natural History
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Glossary

Cessna: Light aircraft used a lot for aerial photography and skydiving

Cineflex: Multi-axis gyro-stabilized camera system designed for aerial photography

Diopter: A unit of measurement of the refractive power of lenses equal to the reciprocal of the focal length in meters

DC3: Douglas DC3 aircraft

Fixer: An individual or organization that arranges in advance legal and other matters ready for filmmaking to take place within a country or area.

Hoatzin: Tropical bird found in South America

Schooner: Sailing Vessel

Steenbeck: German manufacturers of editing and viewing machines for 16 and 35mm film since 1953

Vomit comet: Nickname for an aircraft that creates a nearly weightless environment in which to train astronauts

Wingmount Camera System: Special camera mount designed for Cessna aircraft and approved and certified with an STC

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6. *Tribal Eye* (BBC, tx 1975)
7. *Bellamy's Europe* (BBC, tx 1976)
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