



## John Burton: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

John Burton

**Name of interviewer:**

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**Name of cameraman:**

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c. 130 minutes

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### **1. Developing an interest in natural history**

*Int: So it's 3 May 2001 and we're recording John Burton, actually recording him at Lynch Farm, Littleton-on-Severn. Now, John, I'd like to go back quite a long way because, in fact, your interest in natural history broadcasting goes back long before you ever got involved with BBC doesn't it?*

JB: That's right. I became interested in wildlife when I was only nine years old. I started with birds and later moved on and extended my interest from birds into plants and then later into insects. But, of course, I used to listen a lot to radio in those years. I'm talking really about the beginning of the 1940s and, of course we depended a lot on the radio in those wars years for information. But I, of course, I had favourites whether like David Seth-Smith who was then the superintendent of the London Zoo and known on the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] as 'the zoo man'. He had this particular way of speaking, "good afternoon children, this is the zoo man speaking. I would like to talk to you this morning about making nest boxes for your tits" and so on.

Of course there were other people who I listened to; there was Commander Stephen King Hall who did these current affairs broadcasts for children, and usually ended up something like "well that's all for this afternoon children but now be good, but not so good that your parents and betters come to you say and now what mischief are you up to?". Then another person I listened to a lot and later got to meet at the Natural History





Museum, that was where I had my first job, and that was Evelyn Cheeseman who, of course, was an intrepid explorer and insect woman as they called her. She was a keen entomologist and really from the 1920s she went off quite alone and explored wild places like New Guinea, where she hunted insects amongst the headhunters, and really had some quite extraordinary experiences. Of course, she wrote three or four books at least, which I read avidly. But, of course, she got by in these places because she was such an extraordinary wizen little woman that they called her the devil woman and thought she was a spirit. So therefore they didn't dare harm her.

But then, of course, later on there was a great step forward as far as natural history broadcasting for me was, was the starting of Nature Parliament (1) which started during the war years. With Peter Scott, later Sir Peter Scott, and L Hugh Newman who talked about insects, mainly butterflies and moths, and then James Fisher, and later Bruce Campbell also, who later became Head of the [BBC] Natural History Unit in the late 1950s. Of course, that was marvellous to hear these really informed naturalists, because some of the natural history broadcasting about that time was really rather twee. It was all what you call I suppose love of nature, and mother nature was really the style of a lot of writing and early broadcasting. I don't know whether you'd agree with that, Chris?

Then, of course, in 1947 the first really good natural history programmes started on radio with The Naturalist (2) which Desmond Hawkins started. Of course, those were marvellous programmes and they came just after the one o'clock news, usually when we were having Sunday lunch, and it was a very relaxing time. Really to hear people I'd already actually heard as a schoolboy, through joining the London Natural History Society, I got to know some of them like James Fisher and Richard Fitter and Ernest Neale, hear them speaking on the radio was also a great joy for me. They were very informative and enthused me even more.

Then actually about that time, in 1948, I was delighted to receive a letter from Ludwig Koch. Now of course Ludwig Koch was a household name and it so happened he was looking to find some nests of three or four species of birds, meadow pipit I remember and winchat and so on. He'd asked John Parrinder, one of the leading lights in the London Natural History Society, if he could suggest someone who could find the nest and he suggested me. So of course I was, as I say, still at school. I was very proud to get this letter from Ludwig Koch, a household name. Anyway I went out and found these nests but, of course, unfortunately when I told Ludwig where they were he said, well, it's so near the industry of London and the traffic noise and so on will make it impossible to make good recordings. Of course which later on I learnt because I never knew that one day I would more or less step into Ludwig Koch's shoes, when I joined the BBC.

Anyway 1948, of course that aroused my interest a lot more in Ludwig Koch, and I was able to attain through the RSPB [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] two sets of his early recordings made in England for Witherbys, Songs of Birds (3) and More Songs of Birds (4), of wild birds. At that time I should say, being the RSPB's headquarters which at that time were in Victoria Street in London, I used to go up there after school quite often and help in the office with various things. So I got to know the secretary of the RSPB then and Philip Brown was then the Director of Watches and Sanctuaries, and Gwen Davis who was the editor of the Society's publications. So as a result of that, of course, they allowed me to borrow these records. I remember at school at that time, I was at the Rhone School in Greenwich, we had every morning before school started, after the morning prayers, we had musical interpretation run by the music master which I personally at that time found rather boring. But I had these records and I thought they were so lovely. So I went to the headmaster and said, look, can't I do a musical appreciation for a week? I've got all these splendid records so I could play two or three each morning and talk about them. So he agreed, so I actually for a week had the whole school to myself while I played Ludwig Koch records, and sort of talked about them.

What happened then? Yes, then I left school in 1948 but in 1949. No, I ought to go back a bit more. Yes,

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about this time when I borrowed the records from the RSPB and I used to help out there, they, of course they asked me if I would like to help at the Schoolboy's Own Exhibitions that were being run at that time. So I helped out for two years, 1947 I think and 1948, and that was very interesting. Well first thing, of course, I was so keen on these records of Ludwig's I had the idea of taking the gramophone along to the RSPB stand and playing these records kind of continuously, to attract the attention of people to the RSPB stand. Well all well and good at first, the curlew calls rang out loud and clear across the whole of the Caxton Hall, I think it was, where it was being held at least one year. But eventually there came a time a whole posse of other stallholders came over and said, if you don't switch off those bloody bird records we're going to break them over your head. So I did ease off a bit.

So, anyway in 1949, by which time I had been a member of the Junior Bird Recorders Club which was the junior branch of the RSPB for a few years, and in fact was on their committee. The BBC planned a television broadcast about birds from the Alexandra Palace and James Fisher was in charge of the programme as it were. There was, Philip Brown was also contributing on behalf of the RSPB. Then there was myself and another girl, whose name I've forgotten for the moment, from the Junior Bird Recorders Club, and we also talked about the club and various other things about birds. I remember of course this was very interesting because this was all live in this big studio in Alexandra Palace. It was in Children's Hour (5) so we were the first item which was quite a long one. Then at the other end of the stage was Muffin the Mule with Annette Mills. Then on the other side was Adrian Hill who was announcing results of an art competition.

Well all went quite well with the programme. What I remember before we were on air, James Fisher was playing around with Sylvia Peters who was one of the BBC's first television announcer, very petite, very attractive young woman. Even I noticed that at the age of seventeen. The only problem I remember in the programme was we had a model of Grassholme which Philip Brown was talking about the gannet colony there. Of course, he tended to be a little nervous. He kept moving it back and forward and I remember the cameraman having a great job moving back and forth to keep it in focus.

Then, of course, once we'd finished our item we were able to walk across the studio and watch the other items. So we went over to see Muffin the Mule being performed and of course on my way across, being me, I managed to trip over one of the main cables but fortunately nothing serious happened as a result. So that was my first television broadcast. The only other thing of course I remember was the joy of sort of having to go to make-up at that time and being made up, and finding myself sitting next to Arthur Askey.

Yes, the other thing I remember about that particular day was it was a Saturday, sorry it was a Sunday, but the previous day had been the occasion of the BBC's first ever TV outside sports broadcast, and they'd televised the Boat Race. I remember everybody at the BBC was saying how marvellous it had gone and congratulating each other that it had been such a great success. So that was quite remarkable in that sense.

One of the other sort of people I met, though I don't think he ever broadcast, was Cherry Kearton's son. Now, Cherry Kearton was one of the pioneers of bird photography and his son used to do a sort of lecture tour, and about 1949 he lectured at the Lewisham Library on birds, using both his and his father's and uncle's photographs. So for me it was very interesting to have a link with the Kearton brothers, Cherry and Richard whose books, of course, when I first got interested in birds as a young schoolboy I read every one.

Yes, perhaps if I could just go back a bit to the Schoolboy's Own exhibitions. One of the characters I met there was a chap called P A Adolph who was actually demonstrating his football game, table football game, that he'd invented which he called Subbuteo. Well, of course, I mentioned to Gwen Davis about this and she said, oh, you mustn't go and talk to him, he's a notorious egg collector. So I thought that sounds interesting. So of course I did go over and talk to him when he wasn't so busy. Of course he called the game Subbuteo I

realised because it turned out *Subbuteo* is the part of the scientific name of the hobby falcon, *Falco subbuteo*. This turned out was his favourite bird, his favourite bird of prey. So of course his game became world famous as you know, and I think it's still going strong though I think it nearly folded. But I think another company took it over.

But that was an interesting case for me to talk to P A Adolph and of course, though an egg collector, he was a keen naturalist. But then, of course, a lot of naturalists and bird ornithologists had started with collecting eggs, like our own Bruce Campbell. He was of course a marvellous birds' nester and became, as I say, a senior producer at the [BBC] Natural History Unit in 1959 for three years. But I mean I always found it sort of a marvellous experience and I had the fortune of working with Bruce before I joined the BBC at Oxford. He could spot birds' nests when driving along in the car. You'd be driving along and he say, "oh, there's a robin's nest" and you'd say, "God Bruce how did you know?" He'd say, "Well, there's always that telltale patch of leaves, dead leaves, below the nest hole." Of course we'd get out and look and there would be a robin sitting on five eggs say. Anyway Bruce I suppose we'll come onto a bit later.

Well, 1946 I was of course still at school but that was when I joined the London Natural History Society, and I went to their London meetings very regularly. Of course, being the largest natural history society in the country at that time and having the largest ornithological section, there were a lot of very well-known naturalists who were either members or came regularly to speak. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to meet them and people like Eric Hosking, who I got to know quite well and became good friends forever after. Well, James Fisher and Eric Simms who subsequently succeeded Ludwig Koch at the BBC, in charge of the library of wildlife sounds, or it was the Wildlife Sound Unit at that time, and then based in London not in Bristol. Other people like Field Marshall Lord Allenbrooke came and showed his films, and Eric Enyon of course, Bill Condrey, Ron Lockley. So it was a marvellous opportunity, as I say to meet a lot of well-known people.

## **2. Before the BBC**

One of the people I'd got to know was Max Nicholson who at that time was a civil servant but he was also just been appointed, because it was after the war, the first Director General of the Nature Conservancy. Because he was one of those people who'd fought hard in the years leading up, and during the war, to get the government to take seriously the question of setting up national parks and nature reserves throughout Britain. Of course, he'd worked with Ludwig Koch when Ludwig Koch first came to England from Germany in 1936, when he felt as a German jew that he was being persecuted by the Nazis. So he came over here and brought as much of his collection as possible. The BBC started using his recordings quite early on. In fact, there is in the BBC archives a recording of Ludwig his first broadcast I think, 1936 or 1937 when he produced the first of these sets of records which I mentioned earlier, *Songs of Wild Birds* (3) and *More Songs of Wild Birds* (4).

It was a straightforward talk and one didn't really recognise the Ludwig of later years because Ludwig then spoke with what I would call a normal German accent, perhaps a bit strong. Something on the lines of, "So over the past year I've been working hard on recordings of sounds of British birds, and among ze birds I've succeeded in recording is the green woodpecker and here with have a recording" you see. Not like he later became, when he became a regular broadcaster on the BBC and, as I said, became a household name. He realised that people loved this accent of his so it got more and more exaggerated. So we had, "Zo I waited vor days and days on this wretched island to record ze sounds of ze great northern diver". Or one I particular like where he says, where we're talking about grey seals, he said, "Ze singing of zeals and zo the stories of sailors who have heard veird and eerie sounds came to life, and also ze age of long stories of zummer maids singing on ze rocks". He really was, wasn't he Chris, he was really wonderful at the way he used the English language. It was really quite marvellous.



Anyway Max was one of the people that when Ludwig first came to England in the late 1930s and was really penniless but wanted to make more recordings. So he had a letter of introduction to Sir Julian Huxley. Sir Julian Huxley put him in touch with Max Nicholson and they managed to get the help of the Parlophone Gramophone Company. So they went out with a unit, Max and Ludwig and the unit, to record birds, mostly within the London area actually. Also with the help of another well-known ornithologist and publisher, H F Witherby of Witherby & Sons. Of course Max had a lot of nice stories about these earlier expeditions.

I mean one I do like is where they've been recording curlews on the Surrey Heath nearly Thursley, not very far from the Epsom racecourse. Anyway it was arranged that they would get up very early in the morning to record these curlews but there was this misunderstanding. There often still is between, I think, the continental way or German way of saying the time and the English. When we say, when a German says half four, sorry half four he means three thirty but we tend to think it's four thirty. So Ludwig had said to Max and the other members of the crew we will get up at half four and they thought he meant half past four. So at half past three Ludwig was annoyed to find that everybody was still in their rooms asleep. So he proceeded to go round to knock them up. Unfortunately at the first door he knocked at was occupied by a young woman. So he hammered on the door and burst in and said, "wake, get up, get up, ze time has come" in his deep accent. Of course, she shrieked but Max, who fortunately was awake, came and managed to explain to her that she wasn't about to be attacked by a sex maniac but that what the real reason was. And fortunately she'd had a big win on the horse races the day before, I think it even was the Derby, and so she was in a very good mood and took it in very good part. So Max Nicholson had a lot of nice stories about these early recording days with Ludwig.

Then the other person I got to know before I actually joined the BBC, partly because in the 1950s first of all I used to go with Bruce Campbell to Bristol when he made broadcasts on the radio, and television as well. Then later I was invited to take part in radio programmes myself. So I got to know Maxwell Knight, Major Maxwell Knight, who was a delightful man. I was, of course, living in London in the early years and he used to invite me to his club, the Army & Navy Club in London, Piccadilly I think it was, for lunch and so on. Then, of course, later when I joined the staff of the BBC in 1960 I was able to work with him, and indeed occasionally produce programmes in which he appeared. But, of course, it was only years later that I discovered that he in fact he was a leading man, I think, in either the MI5 or MI6, but anyway the Secret Service. Of course, if you read this book that Mrs Thatcher tried to ban, Spycatcher (4), he's mentioned several times and, in fact, was largely responsible for breaking up a big soviet spy ring, in the 1960s I think it was.

So I thought this was sort of a wonderful cover for a man who was sort of such a leading Secret Service officer, who really wrote books on bird gardening and caring for your pets, and appeared on BBC radio programmes talking in a very affable way about birds. A very **avuncular** manner he had.

Actually 1953 I went to Oxford to join the staff of the British Trust for Ornithology, in fact I became their first assistant secretary. The only other member of the staff at that time was Bruce Campbell who was the secretary. We had, of course, one girl as secretary worked for us both at that time. So, as I said earlier, I used to accompany Bruce sometimes to his broadcast, he was a regular broadcaster on the BBC at that time. Then later I left the Trust to actually read for a degree in zoology at Oxford. While I was there I had a call out of the blue from Jeffery Boswall who was an old friend of mine, really from Junior Bird Recorders Club days, and so we knew each other when we were 16 years old. But anyway Jeffery rang up and said I've just been appointed the radio producer with the Natural History Unit of the BBC, have you any ideas for programmes? So I said well I've got a couple I can think of straightaway. Why can't we do one on herons which is something that I'd been working on with a friend of mine, Dennis Owen, for the Trust. I'd been running the National Heron Census and Dennis had been studying their ecology. So that was taken up by

Jeffery with a programme on herons in *The Naturalist* (2). Then I also suggested it would be nice to do one on insect migration. So that followed up in 1958 with C B Williams who, of course, was the leading authority at that time on insect migration.

Then, of course, with those broadcasts from time to time I did get invited into others like *Naturalist Notebook* (7) which Winwood Reid was producing at that time, and Maxwell Knight I think was the chairman of that programme. Those were fun, those early broadcasts, because they were often heavily scripted but at the same time they were live. I mean I remember about the scripts. The one where I did the heron programme which James Fisher was the chairman, the regular chairman of *The Naturalist* (2). So I had to write out what I wanted to say. I remember I did that in Heidelberg when I was on holiday there and my current partner, Vega, typed it out for me then. But it was a very long script I remember but it all got dovetailed in by James Fisher who, of course, would even script things like false mistakes, as well as the ums and aahs. He thought it should go in the right place.

But anyway, as I say, these live broadcasts were quite fun. In fact it was in *Naturalist's Notebook* (7) with Bill, I was one speaker and Bruce Campbell was another. I was the first speaker and I think Ernest Neal was next, and then it was Bruce Campbell. Now Bruce had a wonderful ability to fall asleep almost anywhere if the atmosphere wasn't outdoors and bracing. To my horror, when I was halfway through my piece which I was reading and trying to sound natural, I noticed that Bruce had dozed off. He was still dozing when the item before his was proceeding and so we all watched with baited breath as to whether he would wake up in time. But marvellously he did. He suddenly went, oop, like that and did his piece perfectly.

While I was still on the staff of the British Trust for Ornithology at Oxford, we acquired a lot of the BBC's natural history recordings because it was an arrangement made at that time that the British Trust for Ornithology and Dr Thorpe's research unit at Cambridge University would each receive a copy of every disc of wildlife recordings the BBC produced. So we had this great collection of recordings. Bruce Campbell, not being very technically minded, not that I was that much, but he wasn't quite sure how to work a record player at that time. So he put me in charge and, of course, I had the idea that perhaps we could use them in the various lectures and meetings that we undertook around the country. One of my jobs with the BTO [British Trust for Ornithology] in fact was to organise the national and international programme of meetings of the Trust.

So I did a whole series of talks around the country, at Leeds and in Scotland and so on, and many places. Talks like 'Songs of British Waders' or 'Songs of British Warblers' which I illustrated with these BBC records. I did a joint one with Richard Fitter and Richard Richardson who was a well-known bird artist. The three of us gave a kind of joint talk which we did on two or three occasions, once in London I remember at a big meeting, in which Richard Fitter would do the general talk. Richard Richardson did lightening drawings on a blackboard or on sheets of paper, and I played the recordings but both Richard [Richardson] and I of course interrupted and so on with our additional observations to what Richard [Fitter] was saying.

Actually, of course, this eventually got to the notice of the BBC. So somebody in London did write and say you really shouldn't be using these for lectures round the country. But since actually it was pointed out that it wasn't for money, these were non-fee paying talks and so on, they were all associated with BTO meetings. It was agreed that it could be done but not perhaps on quite the same scale.

Of course, at this time there was an advisory committee of the BBC's wildlife recordings because when the BBC in 1948 bought Ludwig Koch's collection of sound, because there was some fear that it wasn't being properly looked after. Max Nicholson and others were trying to find some body where the collection could be properly stored. Because Ludwig had his records in all sorts of places, they were piled up under his bed for

example in his cottage at Harrow-on-the-Hill. So anyway the collection was purchased by the BBC for, I think, £2,000 or £3,000 as far as I remember, and taken in as part of the BBC sound archives in London. Timothy Eckersley, who later became Head of Recording Services Radio, was responsible for working through the collections and transferring them to decent discs, and making a good collection of it.

But one of the conditions under which at that time the BBC acquired the collection, was that they would always make the recordings available for scientific research. That's why copies of each disc were sent both to Cambridge University and to the BTO at Oxford. So we had an advisory committee set up to sort of advise the BBC as it were on the educational and scientific use of recordings. I for a short time attended some of these meetings which, again, was one of my first visits to Broadcasting House in London to attend one of these meetings. Eamon Andrews, I've forgotten his name now, Brian George I think was then Head of Recording Services Radio because he was sat at these committee meetings. I always remember, because Eamon Andrews was a big household name, Eamon Andrews burst and said let's all go for a party. That's one little memory.

### **3. Joining the BBC**

Anyway this really is taking you through the sort of 1959, that sort of period. I'd had no thoughts of actually ever joining the BBC at that time. Of course I enjoyed taking part in programmes when I was asked but it never occurred to me to ever apply for a job. But after I left Oxford I joined the staff of Encyclopaedia Britannica (8) on their editorial staff, with a responsibility for scientific articles. But, of course, I still kept in touch with Bruce Campbell who by that time had been invited to become a senior producer at the Natural History Unit. Largely I understood because he told me, and Desmond Hawkins confirmed that, was that at the time the BBC were a little concerned that the Unit didn't have quite the standing in the scientific circles as they would like. Bruce Campbell was brought in to try to establish the viability of the Unit in this sense. It was considered very important in those days.

JB: Anyway, while I was working with Encyclopaedia Britannica (8) I was in regular touch with Bruce Campbell and, of course, I had long been a member of the British Trust for Ornithology. In fact, I still continue to do a part-time job for the BTO, in that I still ran their mass record scheme and prepared the annual report on it. Anyway one day Bruce wrote to me and said there's a job going at the Natural History Unit at the BBC which I think might suit you, and which you might be interested in, and why don't you apply for it? So I did. I mean I understood there were many applications for the job and I went through two selection boards. But eventually to my delight and surprise really got the job. So that's really how I came into it. I mean it was a surprise. Sometimes, looking back, I wish I'd thought of applying much earlier.

*Int: What was your job title?*

JB: The job title was Assistant Film and Sound Librarian because the Film and Sound Librarian was Roger Perry, and he was actually responsible for developing both the sound recording library and the film library. Of course, what was happening already at that time was the programme output was growing at such a rate, that it really became almost impossible to do both jobs. The film library was becoming more and more demanding. So the only way to do it was for him to get in, for an assistant to be appointed who could concentrate on the film, allowing Roger more time to concentrate on the recording side. Though at the same time having an overall responsibility for both spheres.

Of course, while I was there things continued to grow and Roger left, resigned in 1962 and went out to Galapagos Islands as the Director of the Darwin Research Station there. To my delight, I thought a post

would be boarded, but Desmond Hawkins summoned me and said, we'd like to offer you the job. I don't think I need to board it. I was also interested in making radio programmes of course by that time. A couple of years later or so the post came up for radio producer again in the Unit, and I did apply for that when John Sparks was appointed. But Desmond talked to me afterwards in his room and said, well John you are qualified to do it but we were rather keen to get John Sparks in. But what I can offer you is that you are free to make radio programmes whenever you wish, if you can get the agreement to them. So that was the arrangement that was made.

Of course, about the time Roger Perry resigned and left and I became in charge of the film and sound libraries, Bruce Campbell also resigned, felt that he wanted to move onto other things. So we were in limbo a bit. In the meantime Patrick Beech found Michael Kendall who at that time had been working at the London Zoo. So Mike [Kendall] came in and did the job I did before as Assistant Film Librarian, and we tended rather as Roger had done, I had more time to concentrate on the sound and Mike on the film. Later on, a few years later the whole area grew so much, I remember a paper on different possibilities, and in the end it was decided to cut the two completely and make the sound library separate from the film library. Mike then became responsible for the film library and I kept to the sound.

Of course, as I say, when Bruce Campbell left there was quite a problem in finding a successor. It was difficult to find somebody like Bruce who could mix the knowledge of the natural history world at large and the scientific natural history world, and brought some familiarity with broadcasting and producing radio and television programmes. For a time, should I go into this? For a time Desmond Morris was approached who had made a name for himself already with Granada Television, producing his own programmes. But there was some plan to link that with Bristol University as well, but it all fell through.

In a way I was a bit relieved because it had been rumoured within the Unit that one of Desmond Morris's conditions was that a job should be found for his wife, Ramona, and that the job that he'd suggested might be suitable was the one that I had. So I was quite relieved when these negotiations did collapse. So I liked Desmond Morris very much and, in fact, when I'd been at Oxford doing zoology he was a demonstrator and that actually helped me with some of my dissections. Of course later I knew him when I was working at the BTO because we all worked very closely with the people in the Zoology Department at Oxford, under for example David Lack and the Behaviour Unit under Niko Tinbergen. Desmond Morris was one of Niko's PhD students working on sticklebacks, and made his name for discovering homosexuality in sticklebacks, the subject of his first scientific paper.

So we all got to know each other and there were some wonderful occasions then. For example, we always used to attend each other's conferences like the first, ethological, no, it must have been the third ethological congress at Oxford I went to, when Konrad Lorenz the great Austrian authority on animal behaviour attended. And of course Niko Tinbergen was there and Desmond Morris, and it was a wonderful occasion.

A couple of things I remember really about Konrad Lorenz at that time was, of course, he was a big, imposing figure with bushy hair and beard, very strong and outgoing, very outdoor going as well. Of course when he lectured he often threw his arms around in all directions. Well, on one occasion he was actually asking a question of a speaker and he was in the front row, and sitting behind him was Hugh Boyd who was then a research biologist at Peter Scott's Wildfowl Trust. By the way, I should say Hugh Boyd had a very prominent nose, and asking his question he flung back his arms and hit poor Hugh Boyd a resounding crack on the nose which caused a slight hold up while Hugh Boyd was treated.

But the other thing I remember at that time was that Kramer, I've forgotten his Christian name now, but he was a great German authority on bird migration, particularly on the way in which birds found their way on



migration, on orientation. He was another outdoor chap, and he and Konrad Lorenz were billeted in the same Oxford college. But, of course, the ridiculous things in those days was they were supposed to be like undergraduates in their rooms by 10 o'clock. Of course, Konrad and Kramer were out late drinking and so on in the town, and of course when they came back they couldn't get into the college. So they both went out and went into one of the local churchyards, and passed the whole night sleeping on top of tombstones.

#### **4. Building up the BBC's sound recordings library**

*Int: We've got you into the Unit and presumably one of your responsibilities was to take over responsibility for the sound recording initiative with Bob [Wade] or what have you. It might be worth explaining, where does Eric Simms fit into this, I can't remember.*

JB: Yes, that's right, I should go into that, yes.

Yes, okay, I'll go back. Well, when Ludwig Koch's collection of wildlife sounds were purchased by the BBC in 1948, he was also taken on the staff to continue the development of the collection, and also to continue his broadcasts, his very popular broadcasts but using the recordings. Of course, he was also broadcasting in television at that time as well. He finally retired in 1951, I think it was, because at that time the BBC were moving much more over to using tape recordings, sound recordings. Ludwig, of course, had started his interest in recording which went right back to, well, he actually made his first recordings in 1896 when his father bought him an **Edison phonograph** from the Leipzig Fair of that year. He used it to record the birds and animals in his menagerie, in fact, made the first ever recording of a living bird, an Indian sharma.

Then he was making recordings in the field in the early 1900s in Germany and right up to the 1930s, working with various gramophone companies. He had a senior post in one of the German record companies so that's where he had the ability to acquire the disc recording equipment to make these recordings. But, of course, he was wedded to disc and the BBC wanted him to switch in 1951 to using tape recordings, and he rather grudgingly and reluctantly agreed to carry out a trial. But as one could predict he pronounced that disc was much the better. It gave a more artistic, more sensitive, it recorded the birds and other wildlife more sensitively and artistically somehow than tape did, which he felt was a bit too harsh. But anyway the BBC maintained that they must switch to tape which incidentally, of course, had been developed very much by the Germans during the Second World War. The BBC's war correspondents were using portable tape recorders and I know the BBC were astonished at the quality of German radio broadcasts, and especially their field recordings, and found they were already using tape recorders. So the BBC acquired some of this equipment and developed it themselves. So by 1951 or thereabouts they were wanting to switch over entirely to tape.

So it was decided to persuade Ludwig to retire, again somewhat reluctantly I think, well I know he was. He was reluctant to, but anyway he retired but still continued to make some recordings off his own bat. He carried out an expedition to Iceland when he was nearing about 70 years old I remember, with his daughter, and brought back many good recordings including a very famous one of the great northern diver.

So the BBC had to find a successor for Ludwig and they chose Eric Simms who had been a former schoolmaster but was a well-known ornithologist and a very good field ornithologist. So he was appointed to run the small sound unit in Broadcasting House in London which was attached to BBC sound archives. He had a permanent wildlife sound recordist called Bob Wade who actually already had a distinguished war career as a BBC engineer, having made recordings at Arnhem, for example, in the Second World War. He'd also been dropped with a war correspondent behind the German lines in Yugoslavia, and worked with the partisans and so on.

Anyway so he had this very experienced BBC engineer to work with and they really made a great many recordings. They mounted a number of expeditions all over Britain and indeed further a field into France and Spain and so on, and built up the collection in a big way. At the same time in the same way that Ludwig continued to broadcast about all his new recordings, so Eric regularly broadcast, made many programmes and always had a regular spot. What was that programme called from London? Gordon Glover was it who produced it? Yes, it was a programme The Countryside (9) in whatever month it was, The Countryside in May (9), The Countryside in June (9). Eric always had a regular spot in that in which he introduced his latest recordings that he'd made.

Then, of course, 1956 - 1957 was it, the plans were being made to formally establish the Natural History Unit in Bristol, and there was a desire to bring to really all natural history under the same umbrella in Bristol. So there were negotiations to bring Eric Simms down to Bristol as a member of the unit, to continue his recording work there. Eric was actually reluctant to do this because he lived in London, and he really felt he had more freedom to pursue his recording work in the way he thought best. But in the end it was agreed that a recording post should be established within the Unit and that that one would be transferred from London to Bristol. But Eric wouldn't come or decided not to come, so in fact they found him a post as a producer in educational television and that's what he concentrated on.

Of course, the other thing was that Eric didn't want to do, at the time they wanted to combine this sound post with running the film library and this Eric wasn't interested in. He foresaw that it would mean it would be very difficult to carry out the recording work on the scale that he was used to do and wanted to do. So a vacancy was therefore in Bristol and Roger Perry was appointed and, as I say, I eventually succeeded Roger Perry. Does that cover it?

*Int: Yes, that's fine. Can you talk a bit about your experience in recordings?*

JB: Yes, that's right, I'll come on to that. Yes, well, I arrived in the Natural History Unit in Bristol in May 1960. I must say it was a very enjoyable atmosphere I found there but I'd always found in my previous visits to the BBC, there was a very pleasant atmosphere. There was almost a club like feeling. Well, in fact everybody was enthusiastic. Bristol then perhaps, although there were a lot of people working there on various programmes, radio and television, it wasn't quite so big and everybody somehow had time to, whether it was natural history or not, be interested in what other people were doing and to help whenever they could. We often used to watch other people's programmes when they were produced, and of course within the Unit the staff was relatively small and we really needed to be pretty ambidextrous. I mean we had our particular responsibilities but there was a great flexibility which was promoted by Desmond Hawkins and Patrick Beech. So that we pooled our ideas, our information, and therefore I found myself helping with research on other programmes being made, in addition to building up the sound library and making recordings for it.

Well I remember you, Chris Parsons, you were the production assistant at the time when I first came but I think you virtually did every job going in the Unit, in that you produced programmes. You directed them and assisted the producers in directing them and, in fact, they relied on you very heavily, especially on the television side. In which I think the two television producers we had at the time for the main programmes were really still learning the job.

But it was a very enjoyable time because there was always the chance that you, Chris, for example, would say to me, John, could you come and help? I've got a film and we need to find certain birds or we need certain insects for this. Could you spare a day to come and help, and that was fun to be able to do that and,

of course, to get to know the countryside, particularly around Bristol.

Now one of the things I found when I came to be involved in the sound and film library was that by this time sound recording was becoming available to amateurs, wildlife sound recording. Portable tape recorders were becoming more available and obviously people who loved listening to the recordings they'd heard on the BBC. So more and more naturalists and others who weren't initially naturalists bought tape recorders, portable tape recorders, and started to make recordings. So I soon found a large part of my time was looking and listening to recordings sent in by outside contributors. I mean many of these amateurs, of course, were making good recordings, others not so good. But they all wished to sort of perhaps supply them to the BBC and see if we would buy them for our collection.

So these tapes began to pour in, and in fact it was quite difficult to get a balance between doing one's own fieldwork and working through these recordings. I had a certain amount of money to buy ones which were useful for the collection and, of course, it was a shortcut. One had to weigh up if somebody had already got recordings of a species or a particular atmosphere, then it was rather pointless going out at more expense and trying to make them oneself in the field.

Then of course by this time as the television was growing, I mean I'm talking through the 1960s and 1970s, every television production team was taking it out its own sound recordists and they were making recordings on location. These provided a lot of material from areas which otherwise would be too expensive for me to go to off my own bat. So this was obviously another useful, a very important source of material for the collection. Indeed, of course, we didn't have to buy it, it was already BBC copyright.

So really in the time I was in charge of the collection of wildlife sound, in charge anyway from 1962 up until I retired in 1998, the whole really grew in many directions. Of course, one also felt that one wanted to exploit the recordings oneself in ways perhaps in which they weren't being done. Well one of the early developments was of course the setting up of Radio and Television Enterprises, and Radio Enterprises were keen to market a lot of our recordings on disc to be sold commercially to the public. I did some of these but of course I found that if I took on as many as they wanted at that time, it would be at the expense of other aspects of my job. So of course I then suggested they commission Eric Simms who by then had more or less gone freelance. But was still making programmes as a freelance and also enjoyed making recordings and in doing jobs like this, putting together discs from the BBC's collection because it gave him an opportunity to use a lot of his own recordings again in these discs. So that was one thing.

## **5. Producing Sounds Natural**

Well, one thing Desmond [Hawkins] he wanted me to be encouraged to do some radio programmes. One of the ideas I got I realised that there were a large number of well-known personalities, I mean film actors and politicians and other people very much in the public eye, who'd become interested in natural history. Many of them actually really through watching or listening to BBC programmes. I sat down at my desk one morning and I just made a list of those I could think of, and I found without any effort, within 10 minutes I'd a list of about 20 or more. So I sort of put up the idea to Stuart White who was then in charge of the BBC West region. My idea was that each programme should interview one of these personalities mainly about their interest in wildlife and how it arose, and what they did, did they go on bird watching holidays and all this sort of thing. It was rather nice because so many of them had been used to when they were interviewed, being asked about their private lives, whereas these interviews didn't touch on that at all, only as far as their periods of relaxation were concerned.

At the same time the idea was initially to play, rather like Desert Island Discs (10) which the idea owed something to, that they could choose recordings they would like to hear from the sound library. But it soon became clear the best thing to do was when they talked, they talked about birds or wildlife that they'd encountered and heard, and it was quite natural to slip in a recording and let them sort of comment on it, which is what tended to happen.

Anyway I put this idea to Stuart White and he said it sounds a good idea, so he gave me a small sum of money to do a pilot. So we chose Rolf Harris for the first one. Most of these had to be recorded in London because it was easier for these people to get there. The way I used to do it because I always wanted to let them hear the recordings in the studio, so they could react to them and comment over them as it were, or at the end of them. Whereas if you recorded their talk first, as I think Desert Island Discs (10) do and playing the recordings later, you don't get that spontaneity. This worked really quite well. What it meant was that I used to have a preliminary chat with them in which we would talk about their interests and I would make notes. From this I would do a kind of skeleton script so that we knew where to play the recordings in. So this on the whole worked well for most of them.

It was quite exciting, of course, trying to get the recordings in at just the right moment, so it was almost like doing a live programme. But we had a great number of people and eventually, of course the Rolf Harris programme was a success so I got a series of seven, and that was soon followed by another seven and some more series after that. All the time, and even now, I still make a note of people I come across who are in the public eye who have this interest in wildlife.

Well, I mean, we had Sir Alec Douglas-Hume for example who was by then Lord Hume who was very keen on birds and indeed on butterflies and moths. There was Susan Hampshire I remember, and then we had at one time Miss World, Eva Reuber Staier. She actually decided to come down to Bristol to do the programme on a Saturday morning. So I took her into the canteen after we'd recorded the programme in the morning and there were quite a few people there, and of course there was some interest among the younger male members of the staff and so on. It turned out that she wasn't in a hurry to get back to London but it so happened I was wanting to go and watch a football match between Bristol Rovers and some other team. So I asked if anybody would like to look after Miss Staier for the afternoon. Well, there were several offers and it turned out that Des Chin, who was our designer was there, and her husband was a relative of his in some way. Well, Des happened to be there so of course they met and Des was very happy to take her home in the afternoon which worked out well. So I was able to go and watch Bristol Rovers.

Then I mean I had people like Prince Bernhardt of the Netherlands. That was one where I went to the palace in Susdyke to record that with Derek Jones who was the interviewer on all these programmes. Dave Tombs was usually the engineer on these few occasions where we went away to record it. But this was one of the cases where I couldn't really get him into the studio and play the sounds live, so it was one that we just had to record it all and play the recordings and drop them in subsequently.

Bing Crosby was another example. I was really delighted to get Bing because I think he was the first singer I became aware of when I was a very small boy in the 1930s because he had a few gramophone records, and most of those were of Bing Crosby. So I always liked his songs, his voice and so on, and I'd discovered that he was interested in natural history, particularly birds. But mainly because he did a lot of hunting as well, and duck shooting and so on. So when he was coming to England on one of his golf playing occasions, I discovered he was coming, I asked an agent who said, well, if you phone Gleneagles Hotel, you'd better phone about seven in the morning because he goes out early and plays golf, and then he comes back and rests. So I came into the office early and phoned him and got him straightaway on the phone, and to my surprise he said, yes, I'd love to do it. In fact, I'm coming down to London to record some records, a recording session, so we could meet up then. I'm hiring a house in Holland Park so perhaps we could meet



up there. So Derek Jones and a London engineer and I went there.

I mean one of the first things when Bing opened the door to my knock was that as he opened the door, a whole lot of golf clubs fell across the doorway in front of us. Anyway we had a very nice recording with him, session. Of course, it so happened that I discovered that he was actually a remarkably good mimic. I mean he was very good at mimicking the calls of birds, particularly game birds like the 'Bob White' and so on and the meadowlark. So I had found that among the records he'd made in the past were songs like Mister Meadowlark and Mr Bob White and so on. Actually I realised when I played the records of course the melody was onomatopoeia, based on the calls of these birds, and that he could mimic them and did so in the records. So, of course, in the programme, though I wasn't able to dip the recordings in so he could hear him, nonetheless we'd play a snatch of, say, one of these records and then would come the bit where there was the whistling like that of the meadowlark. Then from the record Bing mimicked it for us, so we were able to follow it straight afterwards. You can compare how close his mimic was. And the birds, sorry, and we played the sound of the bird as well, so you could see just how close Bing's mimicry was to the bird. So this all went well and he was happy to chat for sometime after we finished the recordings. So we had a very interesting three-way conversation, the engineer, Derek Jones and myself. Fortunately the engineer was kind enough to actually keep the tape running so we have a recording of this informal conversation with him.

That's one of the things when I was trying to remind him of a song because I mean he sung so many songs, that some he couldn't quite recall. So, for example, I wanted to use his recording of a song, When Whippoorwills Call, and he said, "Now how did that go?" So I sang, "When whippoorwills call and evening is nigh, I'm coming to my blue heaven.", "Ah", he said, "Well we ought to have got together," but then it reminded him so we were able to use that.

Well, I mean I've many anecdotes I suppose about some of the people we had in the Sounds Natural (11) series which I may not have mentioned but that's what the series was called, Sounds Natural (11). It was great fun and unfortunately a lot of the people in these series have since died, like Eric Morecambe and Nigel Stock.

*Int: What was Eric Morecambe like? Was he fun to work with?*

JB: He was very good —

JB: Well, I'd learned that Eric Morecambe, after he'd had the first of his heart attacks which unfortunately, eventually, I think the third one killed him, that he'd been advised by his doctor to take up some sort of outdoor interest but not an exhausting one, a fairly relaxing one. So somehow he thought, or the doctor I think it was, suggested bird watching and that's what he did and he became rather keen on it. He used to, he lived out in Hertfordshire with quite a good rural outlook from the French windows, and he had quite a lot of birds, a nice variety of species of birds would come into his garden. I mean one of his anecdotes in the programme was about a green woodpecker that came there. Of course, unfortunately I can't recall exactly his jokes but, of course, he had this very humorous way of putting it. Like you say, "Well, the green woodpecker come into the garden, it called 'ooh, ooh' saying hello Eric, hello Eric, I'm here," this sort of thing. But apart from the humour, of course there was a lot of nice anecdotes and about what enjoyment he got from bird watching on holidays, and sometimes fitted in even when he was appearing in television productions. So there was that.

Then, of course, Eddie Braben wrote the Morecambe and Wise shows (12), and himself used to have his own sort of comedy programmes. So I did also a programme with him and Eddie came to Bristol to do that.

But of course he was a real gag writer and for the first 15 minutes of the programme he went almost like a machine gun, with a whole lot of sort of what you might call ornithological jokes and so on, which took all the wind out of poor old Derek Jones. We actually had to pause after 15 minutes of this to give Derek time to sort of recoup as it were. It was just one joke after another like "I got a bird box for my garden. My mother-in-law said if you think I'm going to live in that you've got another think coming" and this sort of thing.

So there were great characters, I can't seem to think of them all. Yes, I remember when we did Prince Bernhard at the Sissdyke Palace, I actually combined it with a few days break and Derek and Dave Tombs and I we went in his caravanette and did some bird watching. Then going on to the palace at the end to record the programme. Derek Jones arrived the night before in Amsterdam, we met him there and stayed the night there. So Dave and I were going around in his caravanette bird watching. I remember one evening when we were not so far from the Sissdyke Palace but we were parked near an interesting lake, so we were really sort of camping. We were both sort of standing having a wash outside the caravan down to our trousers when the Dutch police arrived and said you can't camp here. So one of the stupid, those things I did, I sort of pulled out the letter I had, but I'm visiting Prince Bernhard tomorrow at the palace and he knows we're bird watching here. They said, oh, well, that's all right then, you can say but try to keep out of sight so the public don't see you.

Well, I've never been a real film-goer, so my knowledge of film stars was really rather fragmentary at the time I joined the Unit. Soon after I arrived Brandon Acton-Bond was producing one of his dramas in the Studio A, and I knew that the leading actress in it was Margaret Lockwood but I didn't know what she looked like. But I knew she was a well-known British film actress and she had her daughter appearing in the play as well, Julia who was 19 at the time. It was the first time the two had worked together in a production. Anyway I was in the canteen for a mid-morning break and there was this quite attractive woman in front of me. Of course, one tended to chat to people very freely in those days. So I said "Hello, I haven't seen you here before, are you a new secretary here?" She said, "I'm Margaret Lockwood, I'm appearing in the play here". So I said, "Oh, there's a play on is there?" Anyway but later of course we got to know her daughter. In fact, I was of course in my 20s then as well, so I did actually go to parties at which Julia was there as well, and Margaret, so my education proceeded.

## **6. Early BBC contributors and more Sounds Natural (11) stories**

When I was responsible for the film library as well as the sound library we were all the time searching for new films to support our television output, which was extensive. In fact, as Chris Parsons has written in his book True to Nature (13), we at times were almost scraping the barrel in the early years when the supply of good amateur film was running out, and we had to really search the world for films we could buy. So that was one of my jobs to really try and find films that would be good for our television programmes, especially the Look (14) series.

I came across this German film maker Eugen Schumacher and so I had actually written to him and got over some of his early films which he'd made in the 1930s. Incidentally, he'd made them, he'd started making them during the Third Reich in the Nazi period and these films had attracted the attention of Goebbels who was Propaganda Minister. During the war Goebbels gave him money to continue to make wildlife films so they could be shown in the cinemas as some sort of relief from the war films and so on, at the same time as saying this is the kind of beautiful countryside and our natural heritage that we're fighting for and so on. So Eugen Schumacher worked away at these films and even right in 1945 he was filming a film about birds and marsh and moor, virtually when Germany was collapsing around his ears. Where he was filming was about the last bit of German territory that hadn't been overrun by the Americans. There he was still working on with Goebbels' money while Goebbels himself was dead.

Anyway it so happened, as I say, I found these films and then Desmond [Hawkins] had been over to Germany to Munich, I think probably to see Heinz Seilmann and had come across Eugen Schumacher. Eugen had said to him, oh, you're from Bristol so I imagine you're working for John Burton, are you, which was a bit embarrassing for me. So I hastened to assure Desmond I never led him to think that. But Eugen became a very useful source of films for us subsequently. He always filmed in 35mm, sort of professional film scale, so a lot of his early films were very well shot and so on, and very good quality. Then he set on making a whole series of films about the last paradises of the world (15), the last wildlife paradises. Also later for him a good book (16). Nicky Crocker by then was Head of the Unit and he produced these as a series of television films. I think they were 50 minuters as far as I recall now.

Early on in 1962 I did go to stay with Eugen in Munich because the plan was we would travel together to the Beolabeiger Forest on the Polish-Russian frontier. He wanted to film bison and elk and so on, and I thought at the same time I could make sound recordings. I stayed with him about a week or two and he was waiting for a permit from the Polish authorities which never came in the end. I felt I couldn't wait any longer and I had already the necessary permission so I went on alone to Beolabeiger, so managed to make recordings of bison and elk myself and a few other things. But unfortunately Eugen never got the permission to come and film there at the time, though later on he did succeed.

But we kept in very close touch, Eugen and his family. He died some years ago. He was a very well-known television personality in Germany. Quite recently I had contact with his family because Richard Brock, one of our BBC television Natural History Unit television producer colleagues, made a film called The Winners and Losers (17). Really he was rather comparing the subsequent fates of those animals which back in the 1970s Eugen was saying were in danger of extinction and so on. Richard made this follow-up series using a lot of Eugen's film and plus more of his own recent film, saying which did fail and which didn't, actually their fortunes have recovered. But in order to use Eugen's film I went with Richard to Munich, that was long after I'd retired, in order to talk to his, I knew his family, his wife was still alive, and his daughter, to negotiate with them that Richard could make use of their film which we succeeded in doing.

Well, before I joined the BBC and as a birdwatcher I was aware of the bird impersonator, Percy Edwards, who I regularly heard on light entertainment programmes like Music Hall (18) and so on, where he came on and did his bird or animal impersonation act. Like scenes from a country farmyard and so on. Then, of course, he also sometimes did imitations where required of species in films and other programmes. I must admit as one is in one 20s rather purist and so on, I thought he wasn't that good. But I did change my opinion later on when I got to know him because he was one of the people I decided to have in my Sounds Natural (11) series. In fact, I invited him the first evening to stay with my wife and myself and two children at home, and we would record the programme the next day.

Well, the first thing I discovered about him was not only did he impersonate birds and animals and so on, but also he was a very good ventriloquist. It was amazing because we were sitting in the lounge that evening after supper and my daughter in particular was very young at the time, about six or seven maybe. Anyway she was showing off somewhat and she kept picking up a clock from the mantelpiece and my wife was saying put it down, Verena put it down. Then suddenly this voice appeared to come from the clock saying put me down, and it took her so much by surprise she nearly dropped it. I mean that opened the floodgates because my two children wanted him to make everything talk, and so for about an hour or so he was doing all these marvellous, exhibiting his ventriloquial powers.

Anyway the next morning we got up early and went bird watching along the sea coast at Cleveland where I lived, and again discovered really what a good actual field observer he was. I mean he was actually, and of

course I learned more about his life story, that he was genuinely interested in wildlife and he spent a lot of time in the field watching them and their behaviour. It's just that he wanted to have a career in animals, he couldn't quite see that there were jobs that would be available to him in other spheres. So, knowing he had this ability to mimic them, he really went into variety theatre and also, of course, got some auditions with the BBC and found outlets there in the BBC, on the radio in particular.

Anyway that morning we went out early bird watching and I really found how good he was. For example, there were some linnets migrating down the coast and he just mimicked their calls, and they circled round and landed right by us, so that was good. Anyway in the programme we recorded in the afternoon, what I particularly wanted to do was compare his recordings with actual recordings of the birds and other animals he imitated. I mean he was particularly good on mimicking birds with strong voices, like crows and jackdaws, rooks, and squirrels, foxes and that. The whole thing, with us playing in the recordings and him mimicking, and then we played in a recording for comparison, Derek Jones as the chairman found it almost difficult to interpret which was the recording and which was Percy Edwards, he was so good. So really I think we all ended up that programme with a remarkably enhanced opinion of Percy's ability to mimic birds.

Which reminds me of a story that Spike Milligan, I think it was who told me that Percy doesn't drive a car and he happened to be appearing in the theatre in Manchester along with Peter Sellers. Percy had to get back down to London so he said to Peter is it possible when the show's ended that you could give me a lift back to London. Peter says, yes, that's fine. Now Peter had a chauffeur driven Rolls Royce and so they were driving down the motorway and after a while Peter Sellers dozed off. Percy noticed shortly after that the chauffeur appeared to doze off at the wheel. So he woke Peter Sellers and said "I think your driver's tired, he keeps dropping off" you see. So Peter Sellers tapped the chauffeur on the shoulder and said, "Look, we're not in that great a hurry. If you want to rest just pull off and we're rest for a while and then drive on". The chauffeur said, "No, I'm all right" so they continued on, and eventually the chauffeur did fall asleep. They rolled off the motorway and turned over and were sort of flung out somehow through the windows, so I understand. Anyway Percy was thrown fairly high up the bank and Peter Sellers a bit below, and as Peter picked himself up he saw Percy Edwards going around, [bird noises], making all these sounds. He thought, God, he's been hit on the head, he's gone mad. So he got up to Percy and said "Are you all right Percy?" and he said, "Oh yes, I just had to make sure I could still do my imitations."

Spike, I had two of the Goons in my Sounds Natural (11) radio series. I had Spike Milligan first of all because he's long been very interested in conservation and very serious about it. He has very strong feelings about the threats facing wildlife as well as ill-treatment of animals. But of course he's quite difficult to get really because I mean he does suffer, as he himself says, that he says he's a manic depressive, so he has these bad spells. But I did find his agent, Norma I think, very helpful in that she told me just exactly how to handle him. She said it will be necessary to send a car for him when we do the recording and then if you make sure you get him to the studio it's okay.

Anyway before we did that I had a meeting with him in his office which was rather fun because this room was terribly sort of crowded with all sorts of objects. The table was full of all sorts of things all over it. He sat in a chair and he wore that little sort of old hat that he wore as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (19) type of hat. I had my secretary with me, Lorna Worthington, and there was a chair which Lorna sat on and then the other chair was actually a deckchair. So I sat in the deckchair and we chatted along with Spike and, of course, my secretary who was actually a very quiet girl, never said a thing. So suddenly Spike turned to me and said "Does she speak, if I press her will she speak?" So a lot of humour and then what amused me I noticed on the wall he had a notice surrounded with this plain woodwork, such as you see with fire notices, in case of fire break glass and take hammer. In this case he had framed a cheque for a million pounds, and the notice said in case of financial emergency break glass and take cheque.



Eventually the day came when we got him to the studio in London and, of course, as luck had it we were placed in a basement studio with a piano. Of course, the moment Spike saw that he was at it, playing jazz and so on. Then the other bit of bad luck we had in a sense was the studio manager discovered a fault, some sort of hum on the line, and so we had to find that. So he was searching round the studio and of course Spike followed suit, and was crawling around the studio floor sniffing and saying "We're hunting the sound." Of course crept out the studio and was on the way down the corridors of Broadcasting House doing the same thing. Anyway, eventually the fault was discovered, we got Spike back and the programme went ahead very nicely, with a lot of typical Spike humour. I had fortunately found a lot of recordings and we had serious aspects of the programme but we also had some amusing recordings I'd found, which rather sparked his humour too.

When we'd finished we went up to the canteen there to have some tea and cakes, and of course found a particular cake that he really rather liked. So, of course, he pretended that he was a drug addict and absolutely hooked on them. He was rather embarrassing the ladies behind the bar by constantly going over, "Must have another one of those cakes, I'm absolutely hooked on them." So we really had a hilarious afternoon, I think, doing this programme. I must say I've lost touch with him since I've been in Germany but we did maintain a relationship, friendship afterwards, corresponded.

I remember once he appeared in the Hippodrome in Bristol with his one man show, though he had one or two others appearing with him, and he invited me down for that. So we had a very convivial time in his dressing room in the breaks and afterwards, in which he was saying all the time he was trying to search for a new type of humour, a new type of zany humour, which I interestingly saw him mention on television the other evening. So he's still searching for it I think at 80 odd.

Then Harry Secombe, of course, very sorry to see that he died just the other day. As everyone said in the programmes, in tribute of him, he really was an extremely nice man I must say. I had my provisional chat with him but before that he invited me to the London theatre in which he was appearing, as his guest and so on. He also gave me a copy of his first novel called *Twice Brightly* (20) which he's inscribed it "To John, hope you enjoy all the naughty bits, Harry". But he was very interested in nature conservation and he had been on to East Africa and some places, I think Australia, as indeed Spike had been. So he had a lot of interesting anecdotes about that.

Another person who I've since always remained in touch with is Frank Thornton, who at the time we did the programme was well-known as Captain Peacock in *Are You Being Served?* (21). But who's a very interested birdwatcher, I mean quite a serious birdwatcher. He lives at Barnes so he's very near the Barn Elms Reservoirs and so on, and well we exchange letters every Christmas at least. Keeps saying we must meet up again and I'm afraid we haven't met. Of course, he's still going strong on television. He's now one of the lead characters in *Last of the Summer Wine* (22).

Then Andrew Sachs, of course, was an interesting person to have had, because again I discovered he was very concerned about wildlife conservation. I phoned him up and said would he be interested in doing the programme. He said, "Yes, on one condition, I can come down and do it in Bristol because I've such admiration for the Natural History Unit that I would just love to come and see the Unit in operation." So, of course, when he came down after the programme I introduced him to several of my colleagues and, of course, he mentioned then he would love to do voiceovers and commentaries. As a result of that he got invitations from some of my TV colleagues to do commentaries. In fact, he was one of our very regular commentators on television wildlife films for some years.

So I mean I could go on for some time about quite a lot of the people but perhaps I'll leave it at that now.

*Int: Frank Thornton. I know Frank Thornton because --*

JB: Yes, well, I'll come on perhaps when I talk about studio. I had Bob Dougal, of course, in the series and then later one of the first stereo radio programmes I did was with Bob at Minsmere where he fell in the dyke.

*Int: Frank Thornton [inaudible - over speaking] interested in wildlife art.*

JB: Oh, is he?

*Int: Yes. They collect quite a lot of wildlife art, so we see him occasionally when we have art exhibitions which the Wildlife Trust are involved with. I've been trying to get him and his wife down to see the nature in art in Gloucester which I'm involved in, the exhibition up there.*

JB: I see, great. I mean we keep saying in our letters we must meet up but somehow when I'm here I find it difficult to go up to London to see them. You'll probably see them before I do, remember me.

*Int: I will be in touch with them again, yes.*

JB: That's right but we always exchange letters at Christmas and so on, and I send him things of interest and he sends me photographs he's taken of this and that to identify.

## **7. Recording techniques**

*Int: Maybe you should go back and talk a little bit about film techniques and what have you, and what the state of play was when you came into it. I mean I'm thinking we can mention things like **parabolic reflectors** and things like that. Coming into much more wider use than I think, weren't they?*

JB: They were. Well, they've been used from the early 1950s. As soon as Eric Simms started he started using a parabolic reflector which the BBC had developed really for sports, outside broadcasts covering cricket for example.

*Int: Well lets talk a little bit about then, about your experience in the field and the techniques you had to use.*

JB: Yes, well, of course I was doing this job with the BBC from 1960 till I retired in 1988, so I did see some developments of my own in the wildlife recording sphere, as well as the growth of interest in the subject far and wide, and the introduction of stereo for example. But when I first took over from Roger Perry we basically used a **Nagra 3B tape recorder** which, of course, was an extremely good machine and very robust, produced very high quality recordings. I thought simpler to use than the Ewers which most other people were using, the reporters were using for broadcasting. So that was a useful machine and much cheaper than the **Nagra**.

But the other piece of equipment we used a lot in those days was the parabolic reflector. Now as I understood this had been in use by the BBC ever since they switched over to tape because it was something that had been developed for sports events, such as cricket matches. I'll explain the parabolic reflector in a moment but they could actually focus this big dish, as it was, on, say, at a cricket match on the wicket which maybe some distance from the recording point. They could really pick up all the sounds at the wicket including the crack of the ball on the bat, and so on. So this was a big dish rather like a satellite dish and the microphone, which was the standard S&TC microphones, apple and biscuit types, well that sort of microphone anyway. The microphone pointed into the reflector not outwards, it pointed into the dish. So that sounds that were coming would be received by the dish, and because of its curvature they would rebound and focus to this point. At this focal point that's where the microphone was placed. They had a big 36 inch reflector which really could pick up sounds from a very long way, and this is the one particularly used on the sports events. There was also an 18 inch reflector which on the whole we used more in wildlife recording. We sometimes took the big one but really because it was more easier to carry over rough country and so on, we usually used the smaller one. Of course, we were often actually going into fairly difficult country so weight was quite a problem, so we didn't want to carry too much. Later on some of the people outside, like Richard Margoshish who was a very good amateur wildlife recordist also a practical engineer, developed a lighter weight reflector. Indeed, there was also another lightweight reflector available from another company which I did buy. I bought them for the Unit because they reduced the weight problem and worked very well, and these other reflectors tend to be two feet across and not just 18 inches. That gave a better response, it being intermediate really between the very big reflector that the BBC otherwise used and the small one.

Of course, one of the developments that I was involved in starting, as far as wildlife recording was, was recording in stereo. Some stereo recordings had been made elsewhere, wildlife ones. For example, Sten Volstrum in Sweden had been experimenting with making stereo recordings of birds very successfully. Of course, my colleague Jeffery Boswall was very keen on stereo and also badgered me a bit to start recording in stereo soon. Of course, I suppose one slight worry I had in a sense was that it looked as if, having built up quite a large recording library of recordings in mono, we would have to replace it, start all over again as it were, replacing them with stereo. But nonetheless, working particularly with Dave Tombs, who was then a BBC engineer in Bristol who was very keen on wildlife recording and came up with all sorts of innovative ideas in the kind of equipment we could develop. He developed a **stereo reflector** of his own which had a dividing barrier down the middle, with a microphone on each side, and that gave us a good stereo effect. That enabled us to record again like the other reflectors sounds at quite a distance.

Also he got a pair of Stenhausen **gun microphones** which by experiment found the best angle to mount them, and developed a mount that meant we could very quickly put the microphones on and they would be already set up at the right angle to give a good stereo effect. This equipment we really used for almost all our stereo recordings. We also developed a very good mixer that enabled us in the field to mix from a number of different microphone points the sounds that we were picking up. We used that for the first time I remember at Minsmere. In fact, our first recording trips were to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserve at Minsmere which gave us a good variety of species of birds, for example, to work at and also a variety of habitats, a variety of locations.

It was soon after we'd started recording in stereo that I thought it'd be nice to start to do really what I think was the first BBC wildlife stereo programme to be done in the field. Perhaps we developed a better technique later but at that time I did it as a sort of nature trail type. But we actually got Bob Dougal, who was the BBC newsreader at the time on television and was a very keen birdwatcher and a keen member of the RSPB. In fact, he became for a time their president. So we chose a hide, one of the hides at Minsmere, that gave us the best variety of subjects and a variety of species coming and going. So there was a lot to talk about. Now what I did, which was slightly cheating, now what we'd done earlier, which was slightly cheating I think, was really making a lot of recordings of things we saw there and happening because we couldn't get Bob there all the time.



So we then had Bob Dougal and Bert Axel, Herbert Axel as he likes to be called, the warden of the RSPB's reserve at Minsmere, in a hide. We played the recordings to them while they were looking out at the scene where they were recorded. But they recorded a commentary not only to what they were seeing —

JB: Well, having made our first attempts at stereo wildlife recordings around 1970 1971, and Dave had learned from his experience and being very inventive had made this very good mixer, for example. As I say, he developed the best microphone set-ups and so on. We then went on an expedition to the Camargue in Southern France to make as many wildlife recordings as we could from there and atmosphere recordings. But also to make a radio programme (23) in stereo about the trip at the same time and we took with us Eric Simms for two reasons. One that he'd actually been on such an expedition back in the mid-1950s making wildlife recordings. He also was a good commentator and so on, a good speaker and he was very interested himself to make comparisons with the differences between around 1954 and 1973. So there was a lot for him to comment on and certainly it had changed a lot. Of course by 1973 it had become much more of a tourist location than it was in the 1950s.

Eric was, we recorded various parts of the programme obviously in different locations - in the marsh, in various marshes, by a lake, also on the seashore and so on, and on the salt pans. Eric was I found remarkably good in that you could say, well, here are and this is what we've seen and what we want to talk about, so just give me a couple of minutes. He would plan out something to say as a link and really I don't think we ever had to re-record the links, they were always done straight off.

Well this worked out very well because we did produce a really genuine stereo programme, where everything that we were talking about was actually happening there and then. I only was responsible for two or three stereo programmes like this but certainly Dave and I did a lot more recording in stereo, right up to the time I retired. When about this time, in the late 1980s, already stereo was becoming, well, not redundant but it was being supplanted by digital sound recording. Sony had developed there **ADAT recorder**. I'm not terribly familiar with the technical aspects of it. As I say, I only went out once or twice with Dave where we tried out an ADAT that we obtained from Sony. But it was later when I retired and Nigel Tucker succeeded me in this respect that he and Dave mounted other expeditions and recorded entirely in ADAT. ADAT recording is digital recording. You could make recordings in which you could really cut out the background sounds that so often plagued our recording activities.

Of course when I look back over the years making wildlife recordings was often very frustrating, I think possibly even more frustrating than trying to film. Whereas a filmmaker might be able to film, say, birds at a nest right close to a busy main road or railway and so on, and just keep the road out of shot, at least they weren't bothered by the noise. But if we, for example, wanted to supply film sounds to go with such a film, we often had to choose a location completely different with the same species where we could get away from the sound. This was sometimes very difficult and of course in Europe, especially in Britain, such quiet places were getting fewer and fewer year by year. I mean aircraft were always a constant problem and then, of course, milking machines was another problem in the country. Wherever we seemed to set up, everything beautiful, the birds behaving, singing beautifully, and the countryside was right and there was no wind because wind was another problem. But the wind wasn't a problem on this occasion but then you'd hear way away in the distance a milking machine or tractors and so on.

But sometimes it was really this Murphy's law or sod's law would come into effect. I can remember one occasion, for example, we were set up at a buzzard's nest in Devon and everything was in position, and the buzzard was just coming in nicely. Just at that moment, right on cue, and we hadn't heard it, suddenly round the corner came a tractor, right into the field, and pulled up right beside where we were. I mean this sort of





thing happened really quite often. Sometimes you'd be like on Exmoor, listening to the headphones say to the bustle black-cock there displaying and making all these wonderful sounds, when suddenly a couple of jet planes would fly whizzing low over the hills and, of course, nearly burst your eardrums. You had to tear off your headphones quickly.

It was amazing how often these things occurred on cue. Again, once in the New Forest when we were trying to record herons away from the nest, that lovely [bird noise] call and so on they make when they're alighting. We were there in the early hours of the morning and there hadn't been any real activity up till then, nothing really to bother us. Just a heron came flying in over the lake, just calling beautifully, we'd just started recording and a helicopter appeared from nowhere low over the trees.

In a way it was really quite a relief when I retired to actually be able to go out bird watching without worrying about if there was aircraft around or there was traffic noise. I mean I started as a bird watcher and as a naturalist, and so I get great joy from just going out and watching. As I say, if we were recording it was such a worry. You always had to be conscious of the sounds around and, of course, sometimes you'd perhaps go out in the field, perhaps with one of my TV colleagues, producers, and they'd say, "Look, there's a skylark singing up there, isn't it lovely. Why don't you record it?", and we say, "Well, now listen, listen to the sound around. Put your hands over your ears, can't you hear all the traffic noise and the aircraft?" Of course your brain tends to shut these sounds out when you're not particularly conscious of them.

Well, when I first took over responsibility for the wildlife sound recording in the Unit from Roger Perry, he'd mentioned to me that when he first started Tim Eckersley, who was as I say in charge of sound archives and therefore still maintained a strong interest in the development of the sound library, had said to Roger "We need a good tawny owl recording." So Roger got out on one of his first expeditions to make tawny owl recordings. So as far as I was concerned there were good ones in the library, the typical hoot and so on. In addition, I'd obtained other recordings. I bought some very nice ones in from a leading amateur wildlife recordist, John Kirby. About this time of course Tim Eckersley said to me again, "What we need is a good tawny owl recording" and I said, "But look, we've got these that Roger made and that I bought from John Kirby. This is the typical tawny owl hoot." So he said, "Alright, okay, if you think that they're okay" and I said "Yes."

But then a year or so later I really discovered the reason for this. I received a call from a drama producer saying to me we want a good owl recording in this play. "You haven't got any in the library?" I said but, "Yes, the typical owl is the tawny owl and, yes, there are very good recordings. There's also, of course, the barn owls, the other species you might want but there are other species too." But I thought it was the particularly the tawny owl and he said, "Well there isn't." So I said, "Well, what is wrong with the recording?" and he said, "Well, they don't say to-wit to-woo, to-wit to-woo." Then of course it occurred to me that that was it. They expected the popular conception such as Shakespeare's description of a bird that calls to-wit to-woo. What it is, of course, the to-wit to-woo are actually two calls of the tawny owl which have become joined together in popular conception. The to-wit comes from the hunting call and the woo is the hoot. So of course what you usually get is usually the bird does either one or the other, though we had recordings where a pairing was involved. So you heard one giving the hunting call in the background and the male giving the hoot in the foreground.

So that's when I realised this was why Tim Eckersley and others kept saying there isn't a good recording in the library because they expected there was an owl that actually called to-wit to-woo.

*Int: Fascinating, lovely story.*

**END**

## **Glossary**

**Edison Phonograph:** The phonograph (or gramophone) was the most common device for playing recorded sound from the 1870s through the 1980s.

**Parabolic Reflector:** Parabolic reflectors can either collect or distribute energy such as light, sound, or radio waves.

**Nagra 3B Tape Recorder:** Reel to reel sound recording device.

**ADAT Recorder:** digital audio recorder.

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