



**John Herbert Sparks: Oral History Transcription**

**Name of interviewee(s):**

John Sparks

**Reasons why chosen for an oral history:** A passionate zoologist, naturalist, and filmmaker - John is one of the longest serving producers, and a former head, of the BBC Natural History Unit.

**Name of interviewer:**

Brian Leith

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:**

Longstanding colleague and friend

**Name of cameraman:**

Bob Prince

**Date of interview:**

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Bristol, United Kingdom

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**1. The early years**

*BL: Okay, John, to follow this format can you please give your name, including any nicknames, your nationality, your current job title, your last job title if retired and today's date.*

*JS: I'll start with today's date which is the 11<sup>th</sup> July 2008. My name is John Sparks, John Herbert Sparks. I used to be called Sparky at school or Herbert.*

*BL: You were called Sparky in the NHU as well, John.*



JS: Was I? That's something I didn't know. I'm British, through and through and I've held a variety of jobs. My last job was as executive producer or editor of the *Natural World* and then I went freelance for a bit with my own series. Before that I was head of the Natural History Unit for six years, between 1983 and 1988.

BL: *When did you first become interested in natural history as awareness in your life, how important it was to you?*

JS: I've always been interested in natural history in so far as I've always been interested in birds. My mother told me, obviously not then, but she said I was interested in birds even in the pram. I used to look at birds in the trees and my first bird book which is up there in my study, is Christmas 1945, called *Getting To Know The Bird*, love from Mummy and Daddy, Christmas 1945. I've always been interested, it's been a great passion of mine. I rather wish I knew more about plants and various other things but I've got pretty good general knowledge. But if you are interested in natural history it doesn't matter where you are in the world, particularly with birds, there's always something of interest to see. I'm always looking out the window, even in boring meetings and thinking the swifts have just gone by or what have you.

BL: *So how old were you in 1945?*

JS: I was 6.

BL: *A young age to have a bird book.*

JS: It is indeed.

BL: *What about wildlife films? What's the first wildlife film you can recall?*

JS: The first wildlife film that I can recall, not exactly wild but the first animal film I saw is emblazoned up here in my brain, was Walt Disney's *Bambi (1)*, which was absolutely enchanting. I remember the moment when my mother took me to the Regal cinema in Colchester, must have been right at the end of the war, very soon after that. The projector started up and projected the images on the curtains as they went back and this shimmering image, I can see it now, it's always been magic for me the cinema. That was the first one. Otherwise I can't really remember but I guess it was on television. We weren't rich, we didn't have a television until quite late, well into the 50's, but I certainly remember seeing the Cousteau's, Armand and Michaela Denis on safari, and probably Hans Hass. I'm very hazy about anything else I would have seen at that time, I was probably out bird watching.

BL: *So you mentioned the magic of the cinema, the images on the curtains. It sounds as if, like many people in the business, you were as entranced by movies as you were by wildlife. Is that right?*

JS: I'm not sure that I was entranced by movies. I had no conception that I would end up in filmmaking until relatively late. I went through the usual phase wanting to be an engine driver of steam trains. I was a trainspotter, alas, now an endangered species. My other great ambition in life was to be a warden of a nature reserve and I used to go regularly to Abberton Reservoir in Essex. I thought to be the warden of that place with all the wildfowl, the ducks, the waders and the ringing that was going on would be the apogee. At school I thought, well, I've got to earn this half decent living, it was forestry. Then I went to college, got a zoology degree at London University, then a PHD and it was only later that the thought of broadcasting really reared its head. But, even from an early teenager I was part of the Colchester Natural History Society and there were a number of people in it who were, if you like, mentors. They were very encouraging to young lads like me and I was always interested in giving talks even in those days. So I think throughout my career

I've always felt that, possibly, I was a better communicator than anything else and it's really as I suppose through that motivation to communicate, filmmaking slowly arose.

*BL: You glossed over your PHD, but actually you studied with quite another famous broadcaster, didn't you?*

JS: For my PHD I wanted to go to Oxford to work with David Lack and I was very keen on the shore and waders in particular, and wanted to do a study on the feeding habits of waders. I went to Oxford after I got my degree and was interviewed by David Lack and he said not interested in that but you can go and look at radar sets. I'm interested in looking at flocks of birds which are moving which we can detect on radar, and I want you to go and sit up in the Shetlands. I thought there's a bit more to life than that and so I went back to London and it was my tutor, Dr. John Carthy, who was an invertebrate man, who said, look, I've got a mate at London Zoo called Desmond Morris, would you like to go to see him and maybe something will come out of it?

Desmond it was, who suggested I should do a study of a little group of Indian finches in the waxbill family called red avadavats. So I had cages of avadavats and I did a big behaviour study of those and got interested in social grooming. Then ultimately when I got my PHD I went to London Zoo, where Desmond Morris was the curator of mammals and he was setting up an ethology laboratory. I worked in there on a **DSIR** Research Fellow, looking at social grooming in birds, monkeys and I had lots of rodents as well.

*BL: Desmond Morris himself, was he already at that stage, quite a well known broadcaster?*

JS: Desmond was. I'd heard him on radio because I was listening to radio more than watching television and he was appearing on a programme I was ultimately to produce called *Nature Parliament* (2), as part of the team there. Actually my supervisor, John Carthy, was a broadcaster on science programmes as well. At the zoo Desmond had a facility there for the Granada film unit. They were making films on animal behaviour and every once or twice a year a big Granada unit used to come in and produce a series called *Zoo Time* (3). While I was there I did help Desmond, I acted as a personal assistant and Desmond would say make sure the zebras are actually facing in the right direction, we don't want to see their bums when the cameras go on them, and this was an outside broadcast for children.

*BL: Was it live?*

JS: No, it was pre-recorded. I don't think it was live, no, it wasn't. Then for one series I did a little bit of presenting but wasn't great, I can't remember words.

*BL: When was that? Give me a date, roughly.*

JS: That would have been between 1963 and 1965, before I joined the BBC.

## **2. Joining the BBC and working in radio**

*BL: So tell us how that opportunity to join the BBC and get into wildlife broadcasting, how did that arise?*

JS: Desmond was doing a bit of work for the Natural History Unit and a producer at the time, Chris Parsons, got in touch with him and said I'm doing a Christmas special on penguins (4). It must have been for Christmas 1964, black and white, it was mostly a compilation film. Chris wanted to know everything there was to know about penguins and Desmond was to do the research. Desmond didn't have time with all this other activities, he was writing *Naked Ape* and painting and curating the zoo, and so he asked me if I'd like to do it. I met Chris at the Zoological Society and Chris said can you do it and I said, well yes, I'm interested in

birds. So how long will it take you to go through the library and find out everything there is to know about penguins? I said, well, I don't know. I pulled a figure out of a hat, six weeks. So he said, right, we'll pay you for six weeks to do it. I've never seen so much money in all my life. I handed him effectively a book on all the penguin research and on this basis the commentary was written and given to Alan Gibson. Then I was invited to Bristol, probably November 1964, to see the film dubbed and to make sure they got all the facts right.

*BL: Did Chris write the commentary from your notes?*

JS: Yes, or Alan Gibson did, I'm not sure.

*BL: When you saw your notes turned to life on the screen in front of you in November, what did you think?*

JS: I thought the whole process was mystical. I was based in the dubbing theatre. The commentary was certainly very good. Alan Gibson was a master at delivery and I have a feeling he might have written it and he was also a master wordsmith, excellent. I don't know that I necessarily looked at it and thought this is my future. I just found it interesting because I had research to do and I went back to London Zoo. My grant started to run out within a few months of that and I always thought that I would end up actually in a university as an assistant lecturer somewhere. I applied and my recollection I think is I got accepted in University of Khartoum and also in the University of Ibadan. Just before I accepted one of these I thought I'd phone up Chris Parsons.

I phoned up Chris Parsons and said just out of interest, is there a job going in the Unit and Chris said, yes, we need a full-time radio producer, we want someone with an academic background like you. If you're interested get yourself round to Broadcasting House, get an application form because it closes in a couple of days time. So I thought, nothing lost, so I went down to Broadcasting House, filled out the application form, sent it in and ultimately got the job as a radio producer which was quite thought provoking really. There's one person in particular I remember having a conversation with which was Frankie Reynolds, who was the wife of Vernon Reynolds, the very distinguished primatologist/anthropologist who ended up in Oxford. She said do you realise you have made a profound decision in your life? I said, no, what do you mean, and she said, well, if you'd gone to university you'd turn out to be one sort of person, now you've accepted this job to go to Bristol you are going to be totally different, and I never thought of that.

*BL: Just on that note, how do you think you could have turned out if you'd ended up in universities? How would you see the different John Sparks sitting beside you now?*

JS: I think any of those two appointments might have been disastrous because the Professor of Zoology in Khartoum University had a reputation for having affairs with all the lecturers' wives, which might not have been too good at the time and in Ibadan, certainly the non-African lecturers had to escape with their lives within a year or so because of the Igbo uprising. Peter Jewell, a distinguished zoologist, was out there. He ultimately ended up at the zoo and also at the University of London. He told me it was very dodgy, they had to escape across the river. So, who knows? I have no idea.

*BL: I'm just going to sidetrack into radio for a minute or two because I'm wondering whether, looking back on it now, you were in radio for how long?*

JS: Three years.

*BL: Do you think those three years in radio influenced your later work in television, as you look back on it now?*



JS: I'm not sure whether my work in radio ultimately influenced my work in television. I think what influenced my work in radio and also in television was much more my academic background and certainly the way of looking at animals, if you like, I think I absorbed from working closely with Desmond Morris. Basically, I was an ethologist. I've always been interested in animal behaviour and although I might look back on a lot of the things I've done and said, well, I don't detect that. Nevertheless that has been very much a light motif of what I've done. You can't get rid of your experience and background in the subject and I think that's the way I'd answer that.

BL: *Did you enjoy working in radio and did you feel that it somehow led directly into the television side?*

JS: When I joined radio I didn't know what hit me actually. I'd never worked so hard in my life because effectively I had one programme a week. So coming from a slightly more relaxed background of research, lots of coffee and thinking, reading books, I actually had to contact people, put scripts together and get the programmes edited virtually every week. I was responsible for *Nature Parliament* (16). That was the first radio programme I had to produce with Derek McCulloch, Larry the Lamb in the old *Children's Hour* (5), with a very distinguished cast of people sitting on a panel, answering listeners' questions. Then there was *Birds of the Air* (6) which was all about birds, usually with James Fisher, a wonderful scholastic ornithologist sitting in a chair. The other one was the *Naturalist* (8) which was a bit more widespread and didn't deal so much with birds and then there was *Nature News*. So certainly every six weeks I had four programmes to produce.

BL: *What I was interested in is how you ended up working in wildlife film? What was your first wildlife film making venture?*

JS: How did I end up in filmmaking? After two or three years I felt that I had done radio and what I remember was that he who has the money has the power. The Unit, although it was only about 25 people at the time, I could see that radio was way down in status. No one ever listened to your programmes and in fact we had programme review boards and there would be a lot of the time discussing Jeffery Boswall's *Look* (9) series, with Peter Scott and the odd Chris Parson's special and so on. But when you came to radio Nicholas Crocker, who was editor of the Unit, used to say anyone heard any radio and maybe no one had and I thought this is no good. Then, of course, this was a period from 1965 onwards when television was very much taking over from radio. The steam radio or the wireless was declining in audiences and I sometimes used to wonder whether I was broadcasting actually to the moon.

So in the end, being slightly ambitious, I thought, well, I've got to get into television, they've got bigger budgets, they can do more things and they have slightly more impact. But nevertheless, while I was in radio I did greatly enjoy it. I rationalized the output in many ways and changed the presenters, worked very closely with Tony Soper, still an old friend of mine and actually started the radio *Nature Trails* (10), which I was told would be disastrous by various other producers because I'd never manage to do the links in the field. Out of pure ignorance I said, well, I don't see why not. I think the first *Birds of the Air* I produced, which was only about a month after I had joined the Unit. I went out to Norfolk and did a day in Norfolk, I think it was, with Bruce Campbell and we spent time on different nature reserves and we did all the links out there. The programme ended up with Bruce Campbell, arm's length from a nightingale singing and said 'Here from the depths of Norfolk I bid you goodbye while the nightingale sings'. All that was done in the field and then I did others as well.

It also, I have to say, brought its disappointments because one radio *Nature Trail* that I did was called *On the Trail of the Fox* (11) with Tony Soper, the anchorman; Devra Kleiman, an American lady who was working at the zoo, an expert on dogs; and a chap called Burrows who had written a book on foxes. We went round the countryside following foxes' trails, smelling the scat, looking at the scats and smelling and describing the perfume of foxes' urine and everything else. It was the only radio programme I ever produced which was actually settled on by the radio critics and I thought this was wonderful, I've been discovered in radio. I lovingly put this programme together and out it went and then I turned on the Home Service, as it was at the time, to listen to what the critics had to say and they discussed various things. Finally they came to *On the Trail of the Fox* and the chairman said, "What do you think of this?" The first speaker said, "What is the

Natural History Unit coming too? I've never heard such an outrageous programme in all my life. Clearly it was done in a studio. Clearly they were spinning the discs in and here they were making out that they were in the field, smelling this, looking at that, with birds singing overhead. Dreadful, they should get back to good, honest programme making". So I was utterly defeated after that. I got in touch with the producer and I said you put that right next week. Not a bit he said. That's all water under the bridge now.

### **3. Early filmmaking experiences and influences**

*BL: What was your first wildlife filmmaking project and how did you get into that?*

JS: It was while I was still in radio and I did an attachment to a new programme that was being made for BBC 2 called *Life in the Animal World (12)* which was a *Horizon* but dealing with zoology, dealing with animals. Desmond Morris was the anchorman and most of the ideas came from Desmond. There was a 50 minute show devoted to instinct or to Nico Tinbergen's work or something like, we had people like those in the studio and because of my background I was hauled in to work with a producer, Ron Webster. He obviously thought I was an arrogant young bloke and he set me up with an Ealing film crew to go and film, of all things, the animal sculptor Jonathan Kenworthy. There was a bit of art in this programme as well. Jonathan Kenworthy casting a rather lovely, I think it was a cheetah, somewhere in London.

*BL: A bronze?*

JS: A bronze, yes. He sent me off and the crew duly arrived. Frankly I didn't really know how to handle a filming operation and Ron Webster knew this. I didn't know what the board was and this hard-bitten Ealing crew really gave me a hard time. I came back and of course nothing would cut together and Ron wiped the floor with me, quite rightly, but I learnt one lesson from that. I thought, I am not going to go into filmmaking until I have been on a film course, and shortly after I was sent to London on a film course and after that was fine.

*BL: So straight in at the deep end?*

JS: Straight in at the deep end.

*BL: I remember my first film shoot, you took me to pieces and I was straight in at the deep end there about 10, 12 years later. Now, when you first worked in television you must have been suddenly surrounded by some pretty colourful, vivid characters. Who are the ones that have come through and that you remember most clearly from that era, from the late 60s?*

JS: Who I worked with?

*BL: The characters. You mentioned you worked with Desmond Morris. Presumably you met Peter Scott.*

JS: There are all sorts of wonderful characters that one came up against in the Unit. If I can just go back to radio or people that were coming into the Unit. Peter Scott was in regularly doing commentaries and a marvellous man I learnt a lot from was Hugh Falkus. I worked with him in radio and I worked with him in television a bit later. But to start with, when I moved into television, I made a series called *Wild World (14)* which was actually for Monica Sims' children output, which was a magazine show, which in many ways was ahead of its time. We dealt with conservation and all sorts of things like that, maybe a bit serious for children's hour and Tony Soper was the anchorman.

So I worked a lot with Tony and I loved working with him and we did several series with him, but the first proper film series I made was called *Soper at Large (14)* which was again for Monica Sims. Each film was

on a place. So my first film actual film was called *Seabird City (15)* and I took Tony over to Skomer, off the Welsh coast, a lovely seabird island. It was early spring when the bluebells were out. We basically did a film about the seabirds that nest on that island and how they split the island up, with kittiwake, guillemots on the cliffs, and puffins at the top. At night manx shearwaters came in, we stayed across there, had a wonderful time with shearwaters wailing like witches in the moonlight. Then ultimately we went across to Grassholme which is where they've got gannets nesting and at that time only half the island was covered with gannets so you could land on it. Now it's totally covered by gannets and you can't get on it.

We took a little zodiac dinghy across with an outboard motor, 10 miles off the shore, with a crew, in fog, to get to it and with no GPS at the time, no radio. We did take some flares and had to find it in the fog by using the sound recordist who had a gun mike, in order to try and find out where the gannets were calling from and we used this in order to get to the rock. That was the first film I made. I haven't seen it for years but I remembered and since then I've always been absolutely hooked on seabirds.

*BL: What was the name of that film again?*

JS: It was called *Seabird City* and it was in the series called *Soper at Large* and then it was subsequent films on the South Downs, we went up to the Cairngorms, one on the Ouse Washes and I can't remember what the other one was. They were nice for the time and I suppose it was a little bit avant-garde for the time, in so far that, in the modern way of making these films, with a presenter, we used every trick in the trade. We had helicopters, we had boats, and we had fast cars to give it a little bit of impact.

*BL: So you actually filmed the actuality of Tony getting in and out of boats and planes and things)*

JS: Yes, as well as the natural history. This was really my own preference because having been on a film course, I'd done three series of *Wild World* by then, I wanted to direct and to some extent you cannot direct animals. I know you can now because you hand rear them and imprint them but to some extent you must leave it to your specialist skilled cameraman to get the behaviour you want. You can't tell the animal what to do, you can only choose the best place to be and soon. But I actually liked hands-on directing, the car would come up to the lens and Tony's going to get out.

*BL: Can I ask a technical question? Did you film at night and did you have lights or how did you manage to do that, because films stocks weren't very good at that time were they?*

JS: We had early **Eastman colour stock**. We didn't need lights in the field, except a basher, a handheld light, may be just to lift the face and it was all done outside, so we wouldn't have needed lighting set-ups at all. Some of the natural history was filmed in the studio by people like Roger Jackman, insects and so on.

*BL: Close ups?*

JS: Some of the long lens stuff was Hugh Miles and Ron Eastman, people like that.

*BL: How long did you film in the field for that, if you can remember? Was it a few days, was it a few weeks?*

JS: All of one week.

*BL: That was for a half hour, a one hour film?*

JS: Half hour, 25 minutes.

*BL: We're coming back to this aren't we no, because somewhere in the middle there films like that would have taken six months or a year to film.*

JS: Yes sure, it wasn't the budget.

*BL: Tell me about one or two of the other characters. In fact, when I spoke to you a couple of weeks ago you mentioned one or two other interesting characters that were in your world at that time. Maxwell Knight, tell us a bit about him.*

JS: In radio Maxwell Knight was part of the panel of Nature Parliament and he was the amphibian man. I didn't realise at the time of course Maxwell Knight was our chief spy in World War 2 and on which 'M' in the James Bond series was modelled. I'd love to have known that at the time. He was very avuncular, with a pipe in his mouth and he wouldn't have told me anything but it was only subsequently I was told and occasionally you see his name mentioned in some book or other.

*BL: He was a rather unassuming character.*

JS: Totally unassuming and he would answer questions from people who had seen frogs spawn or whatever. He wrote a book on amphibians, a bit like the current Mayor of London, I suppose, in a different respect, interested in newts, but that was Maxwell Knight. L Hugh Newman was the offspring of his famous father, a great butterfly collector and had a butterfly farm. James Fisher was really quite formidable, a great scholar. I did programmes with him and I went to the Bass Rock, again to do a *Nature Trail*, all done out in the field. On the boat going across from the little port where one goes to get over to the Bass Rock while I was recording James broke into, I think, Anglo Saxon quoting a famous poem where gannets were mentioned way back in 13<sup>th</sup> century and I couldn't stop him.

I think the person that, in a sense, most influenced me in those days and I worked with him in radio, then later in television, not a great deal but enough in television for it to rub off, and that was Hugh Falkus who was the most extraordinary man. If I can say that he is one of the people who having known him, has made my life richer and not many people one can say that. He was a filmmaker, he was a Battle of Britain pilot, got shot down in the war, he was a great fisherman. He lived up in Ravenglass in Cumbria. He had a stretch of river, he was a great expert on salmon and sea trout fishing, he was a hunter. He had lost his wife making a film in Northern Ireland but he was also an actor as well. I must just say he was apparently shot down in a Spitfire over Belgium, or was it France, during the war and was still in his pyjamas. He said you had no bloody time to change into proper flying gear when you had to go, and he was shot down there and was taken into custody by the Vermacht, the German army. The story he told, was he was rescued from a firing squad by a Vermacht officer who happened to be a fisherman.

Many, many stories, but what I learnt from him was, here was a man who was totally eloquent, who was very good in the field, he was a wonderful wordsmith. In radio I just looked at the agony that he went through in order to get the right words in order to express something. Everything was scripted, which he did and he was also a wonderful storyteller. He always said to me and I used to say come on, Hugh, let's go and he said Johnny, and I'd say what is the key to your success, Hugh, in writing because his writing is magic. He said, "Three things. One is simple sentences, you don't need complex words or long sentences. You need a bit of rhythm in your writing, the words have to flow nicely and you need a touch of alliteration" and I've always remembered that. Something else that I learnt from him when I used to direct him for filming, I used to sometimes say, "Hugh, can you look at camera". "Johnny, why do you want me to look at the camera? If I look straight into your eyes all the time that is an aggressive look so you don't need to look straight into the camera. When I'm talking to you naturally I just occasionally look at you to see that I've got your attention". He's dead right and I've always remembered that.



So I learnt a lot from his absolute professionalism and I think arguably one of my top wildlife films that I would choose if I just had to take one on a desert island with me would be *Signals for Survival* (16), which is a great classic of natural history. Simple filming done on a **Bolex**, no artifice, but with Hugh's fantastic storytelling, presentation and script.

*BL: So you produced this and he wrote it?*

*JS: I didn't produce *Signals for Survival* but I worked with him on a number of films. He actually took my script. The first and second 50 minute films that I made which was actually for the old *World About Us* (17), one on the Wadden Sea on the North of Holland, rich in wildlife, rich in culture and marine culture as well. Hugh wrote the narration for that and narrated it. The second film I made, *The Day of the Zebra* (18), which was the private life of the zebra, I made in East Africa. That was the first time the unit had gone into making a full length film on a given animal. Hugh took my script and worked his magic on that and he narrated that one too.*

*BL: What date was that, Day of the Zebra?*

*JS: They must have been about 1975. It was before I went to work on *Life on Earth* (19).*

*BL: At this time, before you started *Life on Earth*, were you aware of David Attenborough?*

*JS: Only vaguely. I had met David Attenborough once when he had a period in London University studying anthropology. Every week at the zoo, in the ethology department of London Zoo, under Desmond Morris, we had weekly seminars on animal behaviour for part of the year and he came to a couple of those. I think the last time I met him, he was a friend of Desmond's anyway, he had just been appointed and bought back to the BBC as the new controller of BBC 2.*

*BL: So that's what, about 1967, 66?*

*JS: That must have been. No, that was earlier than that because I was still at the zoo.*

*BL: So you were aware of him. Was he a big character in the field? Was he seen, because even then he was making wildlife films, wasn't he? *The Zoo Quests* (20) for example. Was he seen as being in competition with the Unit or just a different set-up altogether?*

*JS: I was aware of David but I can't say that I felt he was a great luminary of natural history. His output, of course, was coming out of London, his *Zoo Quests* and so on. In the early years when I joined the Unit, there was a feeling that Bristol would cope with the United Kingdom, the British Isles, and would be very much making programmes locally, whereas the rest of the world would be made by London. I think that they obviously had bigger budgets than we did. I was partly in radio at the time but certainly in my early years in television from 69 to 72, 73, if I remember correctly, it was only *Life* (21) which actually got producers like Richard Brock to East Africa in any big way. There were one or two editions of *Life* which were devoted to the Serengeti Research Institute, where Nico Tinbergen was the director of research. He was based in Oxford but he had a lot of people out there, Hans Crook and so on, studying hyenas and whatever.*

*BL: Before we move on, I was just wondering if you had any contact in the late 50's, early 60's with Johnny Morris because he was quite a big character at that time. He was certainly big in radio and wasn't *Animal Magic* (22) on the air at that time?*

*JS: *Animal Magic* had very high profile from the Unit. There were a number of programmes which had high profile in television. One was starting with children, so Johnny Morris, *Animal Magic* was the only thing that was made. Johnny was a big character and for a lot of its run actually *Animal Magic* did wonders in*

presenting animals to a younger audience. I still meet people, even today, who say I remember Johnny Morris and then I have to admit that I actually axed the series later on, but doubtless we'll come to that.

Then there was *Look* with Peter Scott and that was on BBC television when there was only one channel anyway, and then Chris Parsons was working with Gerry Durrell and to some extent the Durrell programmes were in competition with maybe Attenborough's *Zoo Quest*. They were the same sort of thing. Gerry ran the Jersey Wildlife Trust and a lot of the expeditions that Gerry was on and which Chris tried to film were to bring animals back. Gerry was also tried out in the studio but was not very good. Those are the only ones that I recall now and of course, when BBC 2 came along there was *Life in the Animal World* with Desmond and Desmond was a terrific television star anyway.

#### **4. Life on Earth**

*BL: Did you ever visit an area in your filmmaking years, I'm thinking now pre Life on Earth, after you started working in the Unit in television. In fact you can extend this over your whole career if you like. But do you in a general sense, think of places where you filmed in very difficult places or faced difficult situations or insurmountable problems where you thought, what am I doing here, this is just ridiculous. What were the most difficult or dangerous situations you found yourself in?*

*JS: The only time when I felt that probably I was in danger was actually doing Life on Earth when I had David Attenborough and film crew, Martin Saunders and Dickie Bird, sound recordist. We were in Rwanda and when we came off the mountain having filmed that sequence of the gorillas, we were shot at actually. The vehicle that we were in suddenly went through a road block, which didn't look much of a road block but we drove through it. We were on the back of a lorry and suddenly these Africans started shooting. I don't think they were shooting to kill but at least they were letting off their guns and then we were finally stopped. Basically our film was taken from us and the hotel where we were put we were told we were effectively under arrest. The following day, David and I were whisked off to Kigali by plane and taken to a military or police compound which was really quite nasty. We were made to stand in the sun and there were lots of Rwandans walking around with dark glasses and toting M15 rifles. All this occurred because word had got out that we had been filming 'guerrillas', i.e., people with guns, up in the mountains. This had been stirred up by a note sent down by Dian Fossey, who was beside herself in grief because one of her best gorillas that she was most fond of, Digit, had got poached. We found her in a really very low and poor state. I think she had pneumonia, she was spitting blood, she'd cracked a rib and she was beside herself with anger and grief, and I think she had sent down a note to try and get at the Rwandese authorities to say the BBC had come here and they were filming a story about how incompetent they were in protecting their gorillas. I think that's what happened.*

So when we came off the mountain these people thought we were going back and broadcasting on the BBC a story which couldn't have been further from the truth. We were there to film a natural history sequence about how gorillas use their hands, which we did. For a time I thought it looked rather sinister. They wanted to take our film away from us and they wanted to develop it in Kigali, Eastman colour film and at one stage they wanted to rip the cans open and hold them up to the light to see what we'd been filming. I got very obstreperous about this and luckily it didn't happen but that's the only time. I've got myself into silly situations. I once walked half way across Ngorongoro Crater, lions around there and I was by myself but I thought I could do it, to go up to a hotel to get some sugar, I seem to recall. All I had was a little sheath knife. We'd been filming lions and I thought I knew where all the prides were but after I'd been out for bit you start seeing little lion ears poking up over the grass, or you start imagining it or I could have run into buffalos. That was a bit silly.

The other silly thing I've already talked about, which was really taking out a rubber dinghy on a 10 mile trip, in fog, to go to Grassholme with a crew. At least we had life jackets but no one knew where we were going and all we did was direct reckoning and timed it. We had this big **Avon Zodiac** which we borrowed with a big 60 horse engine on the back and we timed it, 25 minutes, we should be there. Then we used the **gun mike** in

order to home in to where the gannets were actually calling from. We found it in the end, but then we came back and we missed the peninsula altogether and the sea started getting rougher and rougher and rougher. Then suddenly there was a fog horn and a bloody great ship came out and we realised that we'd gone too far south and we were actually belting towards Milford Haven. Anyway, that was a bit silly. Health and safety would never allow such things these days but it was good fun and it makes a good story.

*BL: I'm going to pause at this moment and I'm going to come back to one thing later, but I'm going to get on to Life on Earth as a whole little episode in your life. Tell me when you first became aware of the idea of Life on Earth and did it come from the team, you and Chris? Did it come from Attenborough? How did it arise?*

*JS: Life on Earth* I think must have come from David Attenborough, who felt that when he was controller of BBC 2 he started off a series of epic series like *Civilisation* (23) and *America* (24) and felt that he wanted to do one about natural history. He was desperately hoping that no one else would come up with the idea. So I think he must have brought it to Bristol because he felt that was the best place to do it. I was not in on the very, very initial discussions because those must have taken place between Chris Parsons, Nicholas Crocker, who was the editor and David, but I was very shortly brought in. I was called in to see Chris and Chris said we're going to do this big series and thought maybe you would like to be one of the producers on it and I said, yes, love to do it. That was how it started.

There was a certain amount of controversy, as I recall, because London felt that Bristol couldn't handle it and that it ought to be done, presumably out of Science and Features in London. I think Robin Scott was the controller of BBC 2. David was very firm that he felt that Bristol was the best place because of our expertise in wildlife filming. I only know this because when Chris Parsons was on a **recce**, I think it was to Australia which I was shortly going to join him on, the head of Bristol had just retired and in the meantime Tom Salmon, who was the head of Plymouth, was acting head of Bristol. He came to see me one day and said I've had a hell of a battle, John, I've had a hell of a battle. I said, oh, really and he said I've just been in this meeting in London and they want to take *Life on Earth* from us but he said over my dead body, over my dead body, they're not going to have it.

Anyway, we ended up with it and I think that was a very, very crucial step for the Natural History Unit, because for the first time we got a big budget series which could have gone badly wrong. It could have flopped in terms of audience and yet it was a huge success. We brought it in on budget, as I recall and from that moment onwards, I think the princes in the sixth floor of the Television Centre looked upon the Unit differently. You can almost divide the period of the Natural History Unit into pre *Life on Earth* and post *Life on Earth* and after that time co-producers came in, we got bigger projects and we were away. Before that, David had done a series in Bristol with Richard Brock, called *East with Attenborough* (25) I think probably doing that David began to have confidence in the fact that if he wanted to do this big 13 part series, with filming all over the world, then Bristol could indeed manage it.

*BL: Now the editorial spec for Life on Earth wasn't all that straight forward was it? In fact I remember you telling me years ago that you came in, for example, with strong academic history wanting to do something a little bit different from David. Tell us how that evolved.*

*JS: I have to say that I and an assistant producer had great reservations about the storyline of Life on Earth. Life on Earth* was quite simple, it was a trip through the **taxa**, starting with the **protozoa** if you like and then going up through the insects, into fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and then birds and ending up with Man. Overall it gave a feeling that somehow the whole of the evolutionary process roadmap was leading to the ultimate, Man. We felt that this was actually a very, very wrong impression at the time and would make a laughing stock of us. I got down and I devised another treatment with splitting the episodes differently and it received a certain amount of support from some of the other members of the team, and so it had to be put to David.

Now Chris Parsons very wisely found himself away when we had the meeting with David. We confronted David and David knew there was something up because he was very careful to sit opposite us, I seem to recall, which is a very good behavioural ploy. I stuttered out our objections to the original storyline and he said, well John, I don't know, what do you propose. So I said, well David, what I've got is this, look and we went through the programmes as I saw them, which were very much along the lines of single cell, bodies are better, sex. They were topics that went across the whole spread of the animal kingdom. David looked at it and said, well, that's not the way I want to do it. So I said, David, I think we're going to be a laughing stock. He then looked at me, and this is where David, a wonderful chap, looked me straight in the eyes and said, well John, all I can say is perhaps there's no place for you and me to work on the same series together but I'm going to do it my way. So I thought right, okay, maybe this is the time to withdraw and I have to say David was right.

If I have to look back on a criticism I might make of some of the things I've done is they've always been a little bit complex. There's nothing like having a simple storyline that people can follow and everyone could follow *Life on Earth* because it went from the simple up to the complex, and there were enough commentary points to indicate that the process was not directed towards us.

*BL: What I wanted to ask you about John was that I remember when I joined the Unit, which was just at the time when Life on Earth was about to go out, there was a sense that the BBC had missed an opportunity. It was being hugely well received generally but the BBC had been really reluctant to pay for the whole thing. What I'm hoping is you can give us a perspective on funding in the BBC for those big ideas.*

*JS: Yes, I can do that. You see the interesting thing is, looking back, it's unbelievable but we did not know that Life on Earth was going to be a success. It was new. First of all the Unit had never tried a big 13 parter before. Furthermore, David had never done a 13 parter before. We actually used to discuss, are people going to take 13 hours of David on the screen? Although not fully on the screen but presenting it and as for the subject, some of the programmes were not exactly about totally charismatic animals. So we were still biting our nails for a lot of the time, wondering whether we were doing right. Furthermore, this was reflected in the way the funding was put together, the BBC Television Service could not afford to pay the full budget and so we went to BBC Enterprises, the commercial wing of the BBC, they marketed it on the continent of Europe. We had to bring in co-producers to make up the funding. In the end the BBC Television Service only had UK rights and even today the BBC only has the right to show it in this country.*

North America was sold off either to Time-Life or Warner Bros. and that was a fairly hard sell because, even today to some extent, it's crucial to get the North American market on board because that's where the money is. They contribute quite a big slice of the budget. In order to secure North American co-producers, Chris and David went to New York to chat up, I think it was Warner Brothers to start with. The story was that they went in to this boardroom and there were these Warner Brothers executives with their fat bellies and braces and cigars and they did a pitch and said what the series was going to be about and their eyes glazed over, animals, 13 hours on animals. The story goes that actually David tried a new pitch on them and he said, "Well look, what this series is going to show is all sorts of wonderful things about animals". So one of the executives says, "So what?" and David said, "Do you realise that kangaroos have got two penises?" Cigar drops from his mouth, apparently, "Yeah really, you're gonna show that?" So David said, "Well yes, certainly we're going to show that and do you realise crocodiles have as well, they've got two". "My God, this is gonna be shown?" Whereupon the executives looked at each other and said, "We're in!" Now whether that's apocryphal, because I have to say, David sometimes doesn't let fact stand in the way of a good story but that was the distinct impression. It was a very hard sell in the States and Warner Brothers came on.

Then on the continent of Europe, Reiner Moritz Productions had all the rights. So the BBC ended up with virtually nothing except just the ability to show it in this country. From that they learned, never again, and all subsequent series, in fact, were differently funded with BBC Enterprises coming in for a bigger slab so that at least the BBC gets the income from it.



*BL: A wonderful story. Talking of the financing, I remember also when I first joined the Unit at that same sort of time, there was a sense that, and this is a sensitive one, I'll let you answer or not as you feel. But I remember sensing some certain amount of resentment that David was the front man for the series. He was the guy who stood up in front of the camera and in the end of *Life on Earth*, I think we heard that the advance royalties on his book was, like, \$1,000,000. Yet there was the BBC team on BBC salaries, a fraction of that. Did you ever sense at that time or later, a slight tension there that, how come David gets all the kudos and the money and we're sort of seen as being the backroom boys?*

JS: I think that was possibly true, yes.

*BL: Do you want to say anything more or not?*

JS: A bit difficult that one really, isn't it? Okay, let me answer it.

The series was an outrageous success, it really was. A fascinating thing was, I think I'm correct in saying, that when you looked at the audience figures because the first one went out with quite a lot of publicity and we avidly wanted to know how many people had watched and yes, it was good. I can't remember the audience figures now. But then the following few programmes the audience did drop a bit and we thought, oh golly, we've got 13 weeks to go and if it's going to fade to nothing we've made a boomer here. Then I think there was a point about three, four, five programmes in, they started to build and up and up every week and, of course, the critics thought it was absolutely the best thing since sliced bread. The reviews were absolutely wonderful.

I remember when my primate programme went out, I was in the States doing a lecture tour for the Audubon Society, so I didn't see it go out and I got this phone call. I was staying in Virginia, close to Washington, and I got this call from my hosts and they said it's Chris Parsons on the phone and I thought he's going to tell me that *Primates* (26) is dropped. Anyway, Chris said "Congratulations mate, you've got an audience, 13, 14, 15 million it's topped so far, great, wonderful" and I thought, thank heavens for that. Then, I think the last one I produced which was the one on Man (27) did very well too. So in fact it got a classical build with a dip in the middle and built week by week by week. So we had this great success and with thoughts there would be another one, which turned out to be *Living Planet* (28).

I think we did feel that may be the production side did not get quite the accolades that it could do. I think this was slightly re-enforced when, for example, the BBC put it in for a BAFTA and my recollection was the series got nowhere but David got a personal BAFTA for it. Then the BBC put it in for the Prix Italia and two or three of us went to the Prix Italia ceremony in Italy and when the judgement was made we absolutely got slaughtered. There was, I think, a Swedish lady judge who said, "The BBC could no longer be expected to win with a perfect, wonderful wildlife series like this. What do they think they're doing?" We sat there open-jawed because actually, we had an expectation that we'd possibly get it and she was really very insulting and really put the series down. We thought, what's going to win it? Actually, what won it that year was a documentary made in Scandinavia about a rape case but by a man that was tied up, raped by a woman (29).

So we came back with our tail between our legs and *Life on Earth*, I have to say, was the great un-awarded series, it virtually got nothing, nothing, despite the fact that it was the first and in some ways, I would argue, probably had the best storyline going through it and was a significantly different sort of series than anything which had gone before it.

## **5. Filming Gorillas**

*BL: One of the sequences that you famously filmed for *Life on Earth* was the sequence with David and the gorillas in, was it in Rwanda?*

JS: Rwanda.

BL: *I was just wondering if you could tell us, because there are one or two stories floating around about what happened that day. What's your recollection of what happened in that famous sequence?*

JS: My recollection was that David had written the scripts, the draft scripts for all of the episodes. When *Primates* (29) came in it was actually about the opposable thumb which was a wonderful, anatomical tool, that we primates have got as precision grips and what he suggested was that the apogee, virtually the final sequence of that programme should be of gorillas using their thumb. Again my recollection is that, in brackets it said, buy sequence off National Geographic. National Geographic had film with Dian Fossey, amazing film showing Dian sitting among her gorillas. I thought, you don't want to do that, buy the stuff, let's try and do it ourselves.

It was Mike Salisbury that wrote originally to Dian Fossey, who we knew was a lady who you had to deal with with kid gloves on. She was awkward, she could be bolshie, she could be terrifying and we maybe didn't have a great expectation that she would allow us in to her camp. But back came the letter, yes, great, come and film. So we thought, fine. Well now, Mike couldn't do the filming because he was going off to Madagascar, so I was in East Africa and was doing some filming on lions and it fell within my parish, as it were. So I went off with a crew to film this sequence and finally we get up to her camp and yes, we were taken around and shown the gorillas.

It's difficult maybe to transport yourself back to the mid 70s but at the time gorillas still had a slightly fearsome reputation. There was still the King Kong image which has been dispelled now over the last 20-30 years. But you never quite knew what you were going to see and it was really, up to a point, quite a daunting experience. These big primates, you are crawling on the ground and they are big and they're behind giant stinging nettles and it was really quite interesting. My expectation was that we would get David in such a position where he could say, "These gorillas behind me" and we see gorillas somewhere in the distance chewing wild celery and that we'd do the sync piece which it called for, the sound piece which it called for, with this background.

I was and every one else was, totally unprepared for the fact that you could sit with these gorillas and they would come and investigate us, and they would come and look into the camera. They would come and feel you, they would look into your eyes, you could smell them. I remember one situation. I went off while there was a bit of filming going on and I crawled away down a sort of alleyway into a little clearing of giant stinging nettles and there were two sub-adult males having a thumping match. I was lying on the ground looking up at these two animals, which were beating the dust out of their skin. They were so close. I had my camera, I had no chance of getting a photograph they were so close. I was looking up at them, looking almost between their legs, the most amazing experience.

So the whole thing had to change my ideas as to what was possible and in the end of course, well you know what we filmed. But one of the most extraordinary things about it and the thought did go across my mind, that this was so fantastic and unusual, that the thought did go across my mind that actually people would think we'd done it in Bristol Zoo or something. There was nothing intrepid about the filming, particularly with David being surrounded by these things. It reached a conclusion as it were, on the final day when Dian took us out herself to group five, I think it was, and it was siesta time. Luckily gorillas get up late like we do and they have a siesta in the middle of the day in the tropics, like we do as well, so you can catch them when they're all sitting on the ground, wonderful. You can crawl in the middle and you're surrounded by gorillas.

We'd been filming some of this and we'd filmed all the opposable thumb stuff, that was all in the can and we were just getting close-ups with Martin Saunders. Suddenly, well the story goes, that these two young ones come out and sit on David, they up-end him and David is sitting behind this big female that's chewing away on wild celery and they up-end, they bite his knee and he grimaces and we film that. I did say to Martin, "I

don't want you to film too much of this because we're going onto Tanzania to film the big sequence", which was actually the final of the programme on chimpanzees. We were running out of stock it was so good. We were getting through film stock like it was going out of fashion. I said, "Look, just film a little, a hundred feet", whatever it was and when Martin had done that I said, "Look, you better check the gate". This is a purely technical thing whereby film tends to attract little slivers of hair or dust gets caught in the gate of the film and your film gets a nice big tram line down it. Every now and again you take the side of the camera off, unthread the film, look at it and blow the gate out and put the film back again.

Blow me, just as Martin had done what I said, took the side off the camera, unthreaded the film and was just using his brush to wipe it out, this big female behind David suddenly lent forward and grabbed his head and yanked him forward, because her babies were playing about on him and if a big female gorilla just does that you've got to go with it. I had a number of thoughts in my head, one of which, God his heads going to come off or something like that and the other was, Martin, get the camera operational again. Martin was putting back while this female was looking into David, she was looking first into one eye and then the other. Martin just got the gate back and readied the film and she then gently put his head back and grabbed another stick of celery. I thought, missed a wonderful sequence there, you know because I asked Martin to check the gate just at that moment. It's one of those things.

I got two or three stills of it, the days of the old **Pentax Spotmatic**, manual focus and everything. I was so panicked I forgot the focus and got the exposure slightly wrong but I got a few photographs of it, it was an amazing moment. I think somewhere, haven't I seen a Victorian statue which came out just after Darwin published the 'Evolution'. Wasn't it a monkey looking at a human skull, or a chimp? Something like that. That struck me as, here was one of our relatives examining us closely and I have to say, I filmed, not as much as some, with chimps and with gorillas and you kind of look into their eyes. You can look into the eyes of a lioness or a lion and you just see an infinity of heartlessness and just cold, pure efficient hunting machine. You look into the face of a gorilla or chimp and you know you're looking at something, maybe with a few crazy human thoughts going through its head. Amazing experience and I don't think David has ever wanted to go back because it can't be as good next time.

*BL: You may have missed something but it is still, as it stands, probably the most memorable sequence of the whole series.*

JS: Yes.

*BL: Life on Earth, looking back, now nearly 30 years later, do you have any perspectives on it and what it did for your life and your career and the things that followed from it, because it really was a turning point in the fortunes of the Unit, wasn't it?*

JS: Well I think in a sense, it made everyone that worked on it and shortly after that I became the head of the Natural History Unit, when Chris Parsons left. I'm sorry, it wasn't shortly after that it was several years after that. Now that David has finished making the blockbusters, the big epic series, I still look back on *Life on Earth* as having the best storyline, and in some ways all the series since have simply been expanding on each of the programmes. I just wish that maybe we'd have had modern filming techniques when we made that because you look at some of the film sequences they're not as good as could be managed now but for the time it was something serious. I think to some extent, from my own point of view. It was a terrific experience, travelling all over the world, actually working with David. I did learn a lot working with David.

Again it all comes down to simplicity, David is very clear, don't try and say too many things, just simple messages in terms of sync takes, of sound takes and easily understandable script. Don't make things too complex. The interesting thing was that after *Life on Earth* there was confidence in all the staff. I got my own series which Chris Parsons, who was then head of the Unit, asked me to do, on animal behaviour (30) (31). I made it a bit too complex and David made his own animal behaviour series a bit later called *Trials of Life* (32) which was in a sense, simpler and understandable. I took a historical view. To some extent, it's the

series I'm arguably the most proud of, in terms of it's my origination which was the discovery of animal behaviour which looked at the whole subject of why animals behave and how they do. But through the eyes of people who had made those discoveries, with a certain amount of dramatic re-enactments in them. Reconstructing some of the classical experiments for real. Everything you see in that series is actually for real. There's nothing coddled up because it was just the way I wanted to work at the time.

## **6. Environmental film-making and becoming the head of the NHU**

*BL: I'm going to skip on over a few shorter questions now. When you're with friends or at a party or reminiscing with people who perhaps don't know wildlife filmmaking as well as you, what's the funniest story you might tell about your experiences as a wildlife film maker, a thing that might have happened to you or to your friends or colleagues?*

JS: At the expense of sounding rather dull, I can't think of anything that's outrageously funny, but I suppose lots of things that happened in Russia were sort of laughable but nothing terribly springs to mind. A story which generally raises a few smiles, it concerns when I was head of the Natural History Unit, one of the things I was very keen on was to continue our outside broadcasts. We mounted one on the Bass Rock which was a series of broadcasts over the course of a week (33) certainly over a Sunday, and we'd recce it and set it up for end of June when the gannets had young and there was a lot of activity bringing food back. The Bass Rock is just the most stunning place anyway, this great pinnacle of rock in the Solway Firth with now, about 35, 000 pairs of gannets on it and you can't go wrong, it's a honey pot. So now what there is, there's going to be birds to look at and lots of behaviour.

We thought we'd actually covered everything but on the day in question the first broadcast with Tony Soper, who was the presenter of it, on the Bass Rock, with among others, Brian Nelson, who was the great expert on gannets and other members of that family. They sat up on the side of it and of course, with any outside broadcast, particularly in this country, you are biting your fingernails over the weather. What's the weather going to be like? Luckily, a great high pressure had descended over the country on the Saturday and we're due to go out on the Sunday and so the weather was going to be calm, it was going to be wonderful. So it was over most of the country, where it was a glorious day.

The first broadcast was due to go out at midday as a kind of a teaser with Tony Soper standing there, gannets all around. About five minutes before the broadcast went out suddenly the sky went hazy grey and coming in from the North Sea was this wall of grey. It was sea fog and literally seconds before we went on the air the presenter in London said, "Now on this glorious summers day we go to the Bass Rock in Scotland to join Tony Soper". At that point fog enveloped him and Tony said, "It might be okay over the rest of the country but actually we just got a whole lot of sea fog coming in". Birds were coming in and out of it. But not only that suddenly, interrupting his opening sync piece was a foghorn, and of course the sync piece was right underneath the biggest foghorn in the country which is based on the Bass Rock and so this broadcast started. Luckily, some pre-recording had been done and by the time the second broadcast went out about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, it actually had cleared, so it was alright. You plan everything but what we hadn't appreciated, of course, at that time of year you get banks of fog coming in off the relatively cool sea.

*BL: I'm going to have another little side track into the period when you were head of the Unit which is what, about 85?*

JS: 83 to 88.

*BL: 83 to 88, yes that's right. In fact before we go into that I just want to talk for a moment about Nature (34) because you created Nature and I worked on it with you, and in some ways I think back on it as being one of the first environmental series the BBC ever made. Were you proud of that at the time? Did you feel you were doing something a bit different? What was your feeling then about beginning to get into that whole*



*environmental area?*

JS: Certainly when I devised *Nature*, I felt this was an important area that the Unit should get into. I'd already tried in a very, very, minor way with *Wild World* which was a kid's programme anyway, but we did things on leopard skin coats and mink and stuff like that. But here was an adult series on BBC2 and, of course, the whole conservation movement had mushroomed with the increasing pressures on the environment. There were so many things that ought to be dealt with, not necessarily from the current affairs way, but actually from the natural history point of view. I think we did a fairly good job at the time, whether it had any impact, I don't know, but certainly we covered stories like the fishing for sand eels which was a real problem to the seabirds around the country and it still is here in 2008, they're still catching far too many sand eels. The Danes are still catching sand eels to put in power stations and to feed pigs.

At least as an expanding part of the editorial spectrum of the Natural History Unit, I felt it was important. Tony Soper was again the chairman, the presenter, it was studio based. Maybe Tony was not necessarily the best person at the time to do it and of course later on Peter Salmon was drafted in from London. I went to see Peter Salmon and he took over and he had a much harder current affairs edge. I think the programme then after I left it evolved a much more current affairs approach as you'd expect with Peter Salmon there and of course, Peter Salmon ultimately became controller of BBC 1.

BL: *You took over the NHU at that time, and I'm just wanting you to think back over those year, because the world of wildlife filmmaking was at a particular stage, Life on Earth had been a huge success. What was that job like? Was it stressful for you? This was quite a big high profile job suddenly, wasn't it?*

JS: No, I loved it. I loved being head of the Unit. I've been, I suppose, arrogant enough or ambitious enough to always reckon I could do it better than anyone else or at least I could do aspects of it better than anyone else. I think that I succeeded. I was very lucky in a sense, I succeeded Chris Parsons and Chris got the structure of the Unit right. He was important in getting it well funded in terms of the library and the archive and that was terribly important. Chris said to me at some stage and I felt that somehow the editorial side of the Unit had not been addressed too closely. I think Chris would be the first one to say he concentrated on enterprises and getting the libraries underway. So when I took over the job I reckon I didn't have to do much on the management structure of it. I tinkered about with it but I concentrated much more on what the programmes were up to and there were a number of things I wanted to do, one of which was to get rid of the increasingly sclerotic *Animal Magic* which was clogging up our children's output.

We couldn't do anything else, there were no resources to make anything else, it's *Animal Magic* with Johnny Morris, like *Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men* (35), in the studio, a very tired Keeper Morris. So I wanted to get rid of that. I wanted to divorce the Unit's output from the *World About Us* (36) series, which was, up until that time, managed between the Natural History Unit and London, Travel and Exploration. To start with it worked quite well, way back in the 70s when David Attenborough commissioned it really, to coincide with the coming of colour on BBC2. But Travel and Exploration had increasing lost the bare-breast and grass skirt aspect of travel and exploration and become much more sociological. So they were making films about Turks in the Ruhr or an Indian wedding in Bradford and what we were finding was that their audiences would drop. So we would get decent audiences but then it would drop the next week when there was a Travel and Exploration one coming out.

So in the end I went to Graham MacDonald, the controller, and said, we want a divorce. He agreed to it. He gave us *The World About Us* title but then London kicked up and they wanted to have two series back to back: one travel and exploration, one natural history and I said, out of the question. He wouldn't let me have the *World About Us* so we came up with *The Natural World* (37) which is still running. I wanted to make sure that outside broadcasts continued and they flourished under me and are still doing well. We went to the Bass Rock, we went to the Camargue. The pinnacle of success really was *Reef Watch* (38), where we did an outside broadcast from the coral reefs off the Red Sea. I went to programme review board after I'd been out one Sunday. We co-produced that with North America. They had their own presenters underwater, we had underwater cameras with Martha Holmes. I went to programme review board in London on Wednesday, like

all heads of department do and they virtually all stood up and clapped as I went in the room. I said, "What's all this about?" "Reef Watch, fantastic! Why didn't you get a front cover Radio Times?" I said, "Well, I didn't want it".

So anyway, there was that and also the Attenborough series continued with *Trials of Life* and other things. I also wanted to make sure we were part of the *Nature of Australia* (39) which was a bi-centennial series largely produced by our partners in Melbourne. Dione Gilmour and John Vandenbeld, lovely John Vandenbeld, alas he died shortly after. There were various things like that I wanted to do but it's the kind of job you do for five years. On the Board there was Aubrey Singer and Phil Daley, who was the head of Bristol, I've forgotten who else there was. Aubrey said to me, "You've got the job for three years. You learn it for one year, you enjoy it for one year and then you have another year to find yourself another job". Well, I did it for six, so two, two, two.

*BL: As Head of the Unit you must have had some difficult decisions to make and difficult moments to confront, where you have to impose your authority. What was it like axing Animal Magic which was a kind of a national institution?*

*JS: Axing Animal Magic was one of the first things that I did. It sounds awful the word 'axing', but in fact, it was as much Johnny Morris as myself, as I said the series itself had become very slow. Johnny was getting on, they'd been going for a long time and we had another producer in the Unit, Mike Beynon, who had got some very good ideas. He wanted to develop another series which ultimately came up, was the Really Wild Show (40), got three BAFTAs in a row, so we must have been doing something right, but we couldn't do that and Animal Magic. So I went to see Edward Barnes, who was then Head of Children's Programmes and said we want to do it. He said that's fine, yes, great. He said I'll leave it to you to talk to Johnny Morris. So Mike Beynon and myself, we set up a meeting with Johnny over lunch at Hungerford, near where he lived. We went to see him and we said, "Look Johnny, you've been in the chair a long time, we would like to do things differently, we can't do it with Animal Magic there. What we would like to do is to take the best of Animal Magic and with Edward Barnes' agreement", which I had, "we would like you to do a series of Keeper Morris". "Oh" he said, "that sounds all right". "Yes", I said, "kids love Keeper Morris, that's what you're very good at and your own series". So we left there, agreeably surprised that Johnny had actually taken it so easily.*

I thought that was great, so I phoned up Edward Barnes and said "I think we've got this series, we want to do the Really Wild Show. "Great" he said, "fine. Do it, budget it". Next thing I know is that Johnny says, "I'll do Keeper Morris but I want my own producer". So I said, "Well, who's that?" It was someone I had no knowledge of who he'd been doing stage shows with and I said, "Unacceptable, not going to do that, so you accept who we've got in the Unit". I can't remember who was going to produce it in the Unit. So he said, "Okay, fine". Next thing I know, the following day it was in the Daily Mail or the Daily Mirror, there were headlines which effectively said, "Those bastards at the BBC have given me the sack". So I thought, this is interesting and I went down to read it. "The Unit has now been taken over by heartless scientists like John Sparks who doesn't understand the first thing about animals. Only people like me understand animals and they've given me the sack after 25 years."

So there was a lot of flack but Edward Barnes stood behind me and said you're fine, do it. So Johnny then went off. I only saw him once after that and there was quite a lot of flack. But even today, when I occasionally meet someone of a certain age, who says I was brought up on *Animal Magic* and I say, well, I sacked it. They say you rotten thing, I do miss it. There comes a time in any series where they go through a period where they're fresh, new, exciting and they're doing a good job and then they become routine, and *Animal Magic* had long since become that, very tired.

*BL: I worked on the last series of Animal Magic as a researcher and all I know is that you had to do any filming with Johnny before lunch because after midday he was pissed.*

JS: I'll tell you something else, as I say, my wife worked on it and she will actually confirm this, that Johnny Morris didn't have much love for children either, which is really quite interesting. When they were filming at zoos, a number of times she had to keep the kids away because they all saw Johnny being splashed to death by an elephant, and they wanted to come and get his autograph.

BL: *Enough said.*

JS: Perhaps I ought to just say. Nevertheless, over a period of time that *Animal Magic*, and I can't remember how many years it ran, a substantial number of years, it did have a very important role to play at a certain stage. It got a good audience and it introduced a lot of kids to wildlife television, and some of the classic sequences of *Animal Magic* with Keeper Morris are just wonderful. The llamas spitting at him and the gorilla thumping him and they're always wonderful.

## **7. Reflections on natural history output**

BL: *In the last section of the interview, I'm just going to ask a few general questions about what you've learnt over the years and what your feelings or opinions are. Who do you admire these days, at the moment 2008? Who do you admire the most in wildlife film making in terms of presenters or producers? Who would you say you rate highly today?*

JS: I would have to say that I admire Alistair Fothergill as a film maker because I think he's had, not only because the series that he's been responsible have been successful, but because I think he's had tremendous courage, perseverance and application. I can say this with some authority because I was the first one in the Unit, I think, to go to Antarctica. I went there for my series on animal behaviour in 1978 and I went down to Ross Sea and I saw Antarctica, I saw what an incredibly beautiful place it was and I filmed the Daley penguins. I went to the dry river valleys, I saw Erebus, I saw the icebergs, and I saw Emperor penguins. I don't think a series like *Life in the Freezer* (41) would have been possible then but it didn't occur to me that it would have been possible at a later date.

I often look back and think, why didn't I just store that away and wait till communications and things were better and do it. But having been to Antarctica, and now I've been many, many times on boats and seen what an extraordinary, difficult place it is to film in and the logistics and so on, I think that was wonderful. Then the second big series he did, which was on the *Blue Planet* (42), I think that took tremendous courage. A, because it was a huge budget, but also and again I say it with one qualification., I was trained as a marine biologist, I love the ocean, I love the shore, I've kept up to date with a lot of things that happen there. I wouldn't have had the courage to make it because a million things could go wrong with it. The fact that 50 stunning minutes on what's down there and yet he pulled it off quite gloriously. It just had a big budget and so on I admire his enterprise and vision, and I always say that he's got the sort of vision which in the end he'll make films and project them on the moon so everyone can see them.

BL: *Who on the screen do you rate as a presenter?*

JS: If we can forget about David. David has such a dominating position as a wildlife jockey, as a natural history presenter, so if we can put him to one side. There's no doubt in my mind, a person that I think is very good is actually Simon King. He doesn't strike me as being part of the celebrity cult which I hate. He's good in the field, he has authority, he's always been interested in wildlife, from the time he was that high. He's got a lot of experience and I think he's just very good at getting across the information without behavioural tics, just calmly and telling me what he wants to communicate. I think for my money he streaks ahead of others, invidious to mention them, but I think people like Oddie and I think Kate Humble's not too bad, but Simon seems to me in a league of his own. If one was looking for a David Attenborough replacement, and I don't think you should do because there is no David Attenborough replacement, Simon would be my choice in that

respect.

*BL: It's interesting that the Radio Times came out with that front cover a couple of months ago more or less implying that.*

JS: Yes that's right, very well written.

*BL: You've seen countless wildlife series and films made over several decades. What story do you think has not been told that should have been? If you had money no object, the team you wanted to put together and you had one final film that either you wanted to make or you would like to see made, what would it be?*

JS: I can't give you the name of a film I don't think. Yes, one can easily put out the private life of the giant squid or something like that which is fine. I think I wouldn't necessarily choose a film because there is a fantastic spectrum of animals and plants, for that matter, on this planet which are worthy of having films made of them which would be fascinating. But I think I would pick out a subject and I do not think there has been a modern, up-to-date series about evolution. Done sensibly, with someone, I'll just pluck a name out of a hat, with someone like Dawkins who can nail this idea that somehow evolution is a made-up story, will actually get rid of the creationists once and for all. Not that I think you'll do that, but I think there's so much which is fascinating about it. There have been attempts but the details that you get in a book like *The Beak of a Finch*, the amazing precision with which natural selection works and to have the money and the time to be able to do it properly. The finches of the Galapagos, if you want to indicate that story you would have to do it over 7 years, probably on an El Niño cycle and show how the composition of evolution is happening in front of us. That's one that I would probably think about.

*BL: If you were asked to choose your all time favourite film or series from your career to take to your desert island, not of your own making of course, what would you choose and who have you admired the most, the filmmaker you've perhaps admired the most of the others?*

JS: I don't think I admire anyone. There's a raft of people that I admire or have admired. I don't think I would choose one as being outstanding because their talents are all different. But ones that I would pick out, one has to pick out Alan Root, for not only his big game films but smashing films like *Castles of Clay: Life in a Termite Mound* (43). There are wonderfully skilful filmmakers who I've always admired like, David Hughes, *Namib* (44) and various other things and also David Parer in Australia. One of David's last films was on *Dragons of the Galapagos* (45), a very fine film, took a long time, but with lovely behaviour in it, without the use of artifice. There's a kind of fashion these days with a certain amount of artifice, with cameras on the backs of animals, which I'm uncomfortable with.

Also, in this country, the craftsmanship of people like Hugh Miles and someone no longer with us, Dieter Plage, fell out of his balloon, and in his time, one has to say, Ron Eastman, who died sadly young. His film on the kingfishers (46) was, for it's time, absolutely mind blowing. Showing the kingfisher diving under water with a fish's eye view just using a little bowl and a camera underneath.

I think, there's a particular kind of film I admire more than others and it's no reflection on the filmmakers but I have to say I get slightly tired of yet another film on sharks, yet another film on big cats, yet another *Big Cat Diary* (47), elephants. Although I think the series *Echo of the Elephants* (48) is fascinating in so far as it follows the fortunes of a group of animals and shows them as individuals rather than just a plain blanket species. I enjoy the sort of film which shows the complexity of life and behaviour. Thinking back in the past, films like *Castles of Clay* is a good example, by Alan Root. There have been *Sexual Encounters of a Floral Kind* (49), films that probably couldn't afford to be made now where OSF concentrate on pollinating mechanisms of a whole range of flowers with wonderful creative photography. I'm trying to think of other examples now, *The World About Us* that goes back a long time. But in more recent times, *Heliconia Hotel* (50), just what goes on inside one of these tropical pepper plants in terms of the hummingbirds, the bats that roost in it, and the ants which live in it.



I feel that *Life on Earth* is complex, it is not red in tooth and claw like so many programmes you see today which reinforce the tension and the predation and trying to escape being killed. There's so much more to it than that and I think that if films manage to show that it's the behaviour, it's the relationships which animals strike up. Some of them are commensal, cooperative, ways they conduct their behaviour, the way they court and so on. Films like that I appreciate, rather more than just yet another lion film with a lot of pulling zebras down or wildebeest.

*BL: What do you feel about the current wildlife output that you see on television, compared to what it was, say, 20 or 25 years ago? Do you feel it's improved? Do you feel it's deteriorated in general? What's your sense of the overall picture?*

*JS: In general, I think, wildlife films today compared with 20-25 years ago are dumbed down. The stories are so much simpler and yet the photography and the images captured are so much better. The one that always springs to mind is the *Herring Gull's World* which was filmed by Nico Tinbergen, Professor of ethology at Oxford University, had a field study centre in Ravenglass and using a Bolex with little 100ft rolls of film shot behaviour of the gulls, the gull colony. Basically how they arrived, how they courted, how they set up their territories, what they fed on, how they reared their chicks, and how they communicated all these different things to each other. Basically, their behaviour and it was all shot at eye level without artifice. The film making by modern standards is dull, it's all shot at eye level from a hide on lens probably made partly of bottle glass but nevertheless in focus, with a damned good story, wonderfully presented, with a smashing soundtrack. The thought of going to any editor today and saying I want to make a 50 minute film on lesser black backed gulls, they would show you the door. Well they would, they would absolutely show you the door. Probably in today's multi-channel setup they'd be quite right to do so but it would also cost a lot of money, take a lot of time. So broadly speaking the intellectual level of say the 'Life' programmes, *Life in the Animal World* on BBC2 was streaks ahead of anything you see, even coming out of Science and Features today. It had a good audience, with good people in the studio, good film to illustrate it as well and so on.*

*BL: I'm going to ask at this point at least, a final question and then we can stop and see where we stand. Looking back over your career in wildlife film making, is there anything you regret, anything you would like to have changed if you had to do it over again, in the things that you've done or the world that you encountered in wildlife film making?*

*JS: There is no way I can grumble about the career that I've had. I've had a wonderful career in the Natural History Unit. I've seen things that in my wildest dreams I wouldn't have thought I would see when I was younger. I've enjoyed making films and one regrets maybe certain things. I sometimes regret, having made a series called *Realms of the Russian Bear (51)*, which was looking at the natural history of what was then the Soviet Union, I travelled all over the Soviet Union, that I didn't come back and explore some of the places that I'd been to and subjects that I'd come across when I was in Russia and make single films of them. I think I was so exhausted, no, I was so fed up at having to deal with Russian bureaucracy and there's the Russian mentality, I don't think I wanted to necessarily pursue that. You learn as you go through life and maybe I've treated some people a bit harshly and I would go back and maybe do that differently, but I can't honestly say that I would have done anything differently.*

#### **People, films and organisations mentioned**

Alan Gibson

Alan Root

Armand Denis

Aubrey Singer



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Bill Oddie  
Brian Nelson  
Bruce Campbell  
Charles Darwin  
Chris Parsons  
David Attenborough  
David Hughes  
David Lack  
David Parer  
Derek McCulloch  
Desmond Morris  
Devra kleiman  
Dian Fossey  
Dickie Bird  
Dieter Plage  
Dione Gilmour  
Edward Barnes  
Frankie Reynolds  
Gerry Durrell  
Graham MacDonald  
Hans Crook  
Hans Hass  
Hugh Falkus  
Hugh Miles  
Jacques Cousteau  
James Fisher  
Jeffery Boswall  
John Carty (Dr)  
John Vandenberg  
Jonathan kenworthy  
Johnny Morris  
Kate Humble  
L Hugh Newman  
Martha Holmes  
Martin Saunders  
Maxwell Knight

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Michaela Denis  
Mike Beynon  
Mike Salisbury  
Monica Sims  
Nicholas Crocker  
Nicolaas Tinbergen  
Peter Jewell  
Peter Scott  
Phil Daley  
Richard Brock  
Richard Dawkins  
Robin Scott  
Roger Jackman  
Ron Eastman  
Ron Webster  
Simon King  
Tom Salmon  
Tony Soper  
Vernon Reynolds

1. BAMBI (Walt Disney Productions, 1942)
2. NATURE PARLIAMENT (BBC Radio, 1947 – 1966)
3. *Zoo Time* (Granada Television, tx 1958 - 1968)
4. penguin film
5. TOYTOWN (Children's Hour) (BBC Radio, 1936 – 1978)
6. *Birds of the Air* (BBC, 1958)
7. *The Naturalist* (BBC Radio, 1948 – 1965)
8. *Nature News*
9. *Look* (BBC, 1955 – 1969)
10. *Nature Trails* (BBC Radio)
11. ON THE TRAIL OF THE FOX (Nature Trail) (BBC Radio)
12. LIFE IN THE ANIMAL WORLD (Horizon) (BBC, tx 1964)
13. *Wild World* (BBC, tx 1968 – 1988)
14. *Soper at Large* (BBC, 1971 – 1972)
15. SEABIRD CITY (Soper at large) (BBC, tx 1971 – 1972)
16. SIGNALS FOR SURVIVAL (The World About Us) (BBC, 1968)

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17. Wadden sea (The World about Us)
18. THE DAY OF THE ZEBRA (The World About Us) (BBC, tx 1976)
19. *Life on Earth* (BBC, tx 1979)
20. *Zoo Quest* (BBC, 1955 – 1961)
21. *Life* (BBC, 1965 – 1968)
22. *Animal Magic* (BBC, 1963 – 1984)
23. *Civilisation* (1969, tx BBC)
24. *America* (BBC, tx 1972 – 1973)
25. *Eastward with Attenborough* (BBC, tx 1973)
26. *Life in the Trees* (Life on Earth, tx 1979)
27. MAN (Life on Earth) (BBC, tx 1979)
28. *The Living Planet* (BBC, tx 1984)
29. Prix Italia winner 1985
30. *The Discovery of Animal Behaviour* (BBC, tx 1980)
31. *Animal Behaviour* (ABC, tx 1981)
32. *Trials of Life* (BBC, tx 1990)
33. *Nature: Nature* (BBC, tx 1983)
34. *Nature* (BBC, 1983 – 1994)
35. *Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men* (BBC, tx 1952)
36. *The World about us* (Natural World) (BBC 1967 - )
37. *The Natural World* (BBC, 1983 – present)
38. *Reef Watch* (BBC, tx 1988)
39. *The Nature of Australia* (BBC/ABC/WNET, 1988)
40. *The Really Wild Show* (BBC, 1986 – 2006)
41. *Life in the Freezer* (BBC, tx 1993)
42. *Blue Planet* (BBC, tx 2001)
43. *Mysterious Castles of Clay* (Survival Anglia, tx 1978)
44. NAMIB... STRANGE CREATURES OF THE SKELETON COAST (The World About Us) (BBC, tx 1976)
45. DRAGONS OF THE GALAPAGOS (The Natural World) (BBC, tx 1998)
46. *Kingfisher: Secret Splendour of the Brooks* (BBC, tx 1982)
47. *Big Cat Diary* (BBC, 1996 – 2004)
48. *ECHO OF THE ELEPHANTS* (The Natural World) (BBC, tx 1993)
49. *SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE FLORAL KIND* (The World About Us) (BBC, tx 1981)
50. *Hotel Heliconia* (BBC, tx 2001)
51. *Realms of the Russian Bear* (BBC, tx 1992)

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Audubon Society

BAFTA

BBC 2

BBC Enterprises

Bristol Zoo

Colchester Natural History Society

Daily Mail

Daily Mirror

Granada Film Unit

London University

London Zoo

National Geographic

Natural History Unit

Oxford Scientific Films

Radio Times

Regal Cinema, Colchester

Reiner Moritz Productions

Serengeti Research Institute

Time-Life

University of Ibadan

University of Khartoum

Warner Bros

Zoological Society

**Avon Zodiac:** Inflatable boats

**Bolex:** Swiss motion picture camera manufacturers

**DSIR:** Department of Scientific and Industrial Research

**Eastman colour stock:** Eastman Kodak Company is a multinational company that produces photographic materials and equipment

**Gun mike:** Audio recording equipment

**Pentax Spotmatic:** Incorporates a range of 35mm single lens reflex cameras produced by the Asahi Optical company, later known as the Pentax Corporation

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**Protozoa:** Large group of single celled organisms that are distinguished through a membrane bound nucleus but vary widely in size, structure and form and include Paramecium and Amoeba

**Recce:** an assessment of an intended filming location to ascertain its suitability and any potential logistical problems

**Taxa:** A term used to denote any group or rank in the classification of organisms

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