

Leslie Jackman: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

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Name of interviewer:

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1. The early years

Int: Well, Les Jackman, biologist, naturalist, teacher, everything really, aren't you? What were you doing before television?

LJ: Teaching really. Not a lot when I look back, Tony. I had the idea that television offered an opportunity to spread the gospel as you might say. Hence teaching, you encourage children into whatever beliefs you're studying at that time.

Int: So what was the gospel?

LJ: I think basically I saw in television a broader audience and we had at that time, well I was running the aquarium [Paignton Aquarium] at that time of course, that's right. Memory, you know. I think the - how can I put it? We had some cuttlefish and they were performing in the big tank and they were rather wonderful the way they performed. It got to me and I thought I'd like the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] to come down and film this, and I thought how can I get about that? Well, it so happened that we got involved with Winwood Reade and she said, "Well, I don't know, I don't know what to make of it really. You'd better just play it by ear and see where it leads you." So she rang up one day and she said, "Further to our conversation about these cuttlefish, would you like to come and speak to Patrick Beech?" Who was then head of unit. So I said, "Yes, certainly." So I went along to Whiteladies Road, met Pat, all full of it I was, you know, big stuff. I

started asking about imitating how the cuttlefish behaved and he thought it was wonderful, Pat Beech did, and that was my in. And then he passed me on to Winwood and told Winwood to use me a bit. They'd send — what was the cameraman called — the regular cameraman, anyway they sent him down to film.

Int: I remember the cuttlefish very, very well indeed. I think you know, you should tell us exactly what it was, what you did and what they did because you used to feed them, right?

LJ: Yes. Well, they are amazing creatures, there's no doubt about that and the two of them used to perform round in a sort of mating circle. If you fed them, if you dropped a prawn in the tank the prawn would go down and settle on the [indicates bottom of tank], the cuttlefish would spot it from a distance, get itself up in this pose and come down. All its claws or tentacles would go together and here's the prawn, and suddenly [indicates feeding technique] it would send out and capture the thing.

Int: It was a stunning bit of film. I mean I remember it very well indeed, and was that the beginning of your relationship with Winwood then?

LJ: Yes.

Int: So what did Winwood propose?

LJ: Well, she would, you know, "Have you got any more of this sort of stuff?" to me and I said, "Well, come and have a look" and it just developed slowly from there and then she said she was starting this programme Out of Doors (1), wasn't it, that one?

Int: I can't believe you don't remember that. Tell me, what was the name of the programme that Winwood Reade suggested you get involved with?

LJ: Out of Doors (1).

Int: And Out of Doors (1) was the first natural history programme for children if I remember rightly.

LJ: Yes, that's right. Yes, absolutely right. Yes, it was definitely the first because we believed in getting children involved with the programme, a thing that the BBC had never done. I mean they'd never had audience participation.

Int: There was Blue Peter (2).

LJ: No, not then there wasn't, it was before Blue Peter (2).

Int: Okay.

LJ: Because that's the astonishing part. When after five years our time came and Pat Beech came down and he said he was very sorry but he was cutting us. And the very next week Blue Peter (2) started and the interesting thing is - please don't misunderstand me, I'm not trying to claim any, you know, benefit from it, it just happened. But the thing was that we believed in child participation. We gave them badges, they had badges and they used to present stuff, exactly the same Blue Peter (2) went on to badges. Blue Peter (2) went on to participation but, of course, what they did so much better than us, they had more money and they performed better. They had some very good performers in those days. I can't remember her name, the girl.

Int: Well, you've got a better memory than me I think.

LJ: No, that was what happened there.

Int: Certainly Animal Magic (3) followed it.

LJ: Yes, Animal Magic (3). You were involved in that.

Int: That was when I first became involved because when we were working on Out of Doors (1) I was a studio manager [SM], right. I was an SM working on Out of Doors (1) because I remember so clearly very often you would be rather like a lab [laboratory] experiment thing. You would be behind a table with an experiment on it.

LJ: Yes, exactly right.

Int: Can you remember the sort of things you did with the lab table?

LJ: Yes, all sorts of things wasn't there? There was unimportant things like I'd arrive with a display of fungi and talk about them, and the little dog sat on the —. Do you remember?

Int: Yes.

LJ: Girlie. Or another time it would be maybe some grass snakes or whatever. We used to bring them along and I used to talk about them on this table with the hut behind which was called the club room.

Int: That's right. And as I remember it, Maxwell Knight was involved in those days.

LJ: Yes, that's the funny thing that I've got a blank about, Tony. I can't make that out.

Int: But I mean the amazing thing was that Max Knight had been in MI5 [Military Intelligence, section 5] and by all accounts he was 'M'. He was the James Bond character in MI5 back in the war.



WILDFILMHISTORY

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LJ: Yes, so strange.

Int: And then we knew Max as a naturalist. But I remember so clearly he brought an African cane toad, one of those thumping great toads right, and he was showing it live as you say, behind his little desk —.

LJ: Yes that I remember

Int: And it died in his hand. Sorry you tell me about that then. Do you remember the big toad that Maxwell Knight brought in?

LJ: I remember him bringing it him but I don't remember any details about it at all, and for some reason Maxwell Knight eludes me, isn't that strange but it does.

Int: It was one of the great days on Out of Doors (4) because he had it in his hand, a bloody great toad in his hand it died on him, live on the thing. Anyway, go on.

LJ: Of course, we had a lot of things with – what was his name, with the seal you know?

Int: H G Hurrell.

H. H G Hurrell. H G.

Int: Yes, tell me about H G Hurrell, was he in the show?

LJ: He was in anything in those days, H G. He had his seal that he kept in his pond. He did a wonderful film of some little animals dancing (5).

Int: Pine martens.

LJ: Pine martens, yes.

Int: He had a raven roost in his little wood. It was a grey seal in - they actually had a swimming pool.

LJ: A swimming pool yes.

Int: Where did the seal come from?





LJ: He must have got that from a stranding in those days because he reckoned it was very intelligent and that he could communicate with it, didn't he?

Int: Yes, he did. He went off his nut a little bit with the seal.

LJ: No one quite believes that, no, we didn't. But what I was telling them was, that's right that in those early days you were trekking round the world with Peter [Scott] and I was in this hut filming mice.

Int: But you did do some fieldwork.

LJ: I did a lot.

Int: I remember you being on the beach. What kinds of things were you doing because that was very much your patch, wasn't it?

LJ: Martin Saunders came out with me some nights. We used to go and film at night. Yes, it was. We made a film about life on the shore (6), made seven films actually but they were all different subjects as you know.

Int: Razor shells I remember was one of your subjects.

LJ: Yes, they were wonderful things.

Int: What were?

LJ: Well — Torquay beach, when the tide went out on a spring tide was an absolutely wonderful place for all these things that we were interested in. Digging up razor fish as you say, found them sometimes washed up on the beach of course, didn't we? And then we decided we'd build a studio down at the harbour and the BBC, never let it be said, but they sort of funded it really because we couldn't have afforded it. And then from then we did a lot of filming there, close-ups mostly of natural history, of sea life.

Int: So were you working with the fishing vessels out of Brixham then?

LJ: Yes, a bit - especially the boats at Paignton, they were very good, very helpful to us. Used to bring the stuff, this is what you need. People who supply the goods are the ones who help you make your film.

Int: So you say that you were specially keen to get the programme (1) involved with people, that there would be some kind of feedback from your listeners. What sort of form did that take? How did you react? How did your listeners come back to you? How did you get involved with them? You wanted to get them involved in the programme, right?



LJ: Yes, through what we called the club room and the table, as you say, that I sat in front of, you used to be over there [indicates right hand side] whenever you could having a go at me to keep me awake, and that was how it worked. And I used to say with this fungi we're talking about, right. I'd explain all about it to them and then I would say that, "Right, that this month's competition and I just want to hear which of you can make the nicest job of it." And they used to send in their results, all different ways - some were written, some were drawn. I suppose there was about 30 or 50, a very small number of entries, and that was how we developed with them. Go on.

Int: So how long did the programme (1) run and would you regard it as a success?

LJ: I would regard it as a minor success in those days, it ran for five years, 60 programmes which is a lot, isn't it? But, no, it was only successful in a small way.

Int: You were pioneering.

LJ: Well, that's true and of course when you pioneer you don't have the same big remarkable successes, you just don't have them.

Int: You didn't have the money either.

LJ: Too b....y right. No, there wasn't the money.

Int: Well, you didn't have much in the way of film time, of film days of time with crews, did you?

LJ: No. For each programme we were lucky if we had two days.

Int: So it was basically a studio programme, right?

LJ: Yes.

Int: In the one little studio at Bristol. You must remember it very well?

LJ: Yes, I remember that very well. Ray Kite used to be on the floor and it was all very friendly and nice and —. So in terms of realising an ambition or was it successful, I find that very difficult to answer. You would be better qualified to answer it than me.

Int: It was a big success and it led the way to other programmes, don't you think?

LJ: Yes, it did that.

Int: I mean it ran for five years, Animal Magic (3) ran for much the same I expect —.

LJ: Much the same, yes.

Int: And was followed by Wild Track (7) and then the Really Wild Show (8). Can you remember the sequence of them as they followed, all the way to the Really Wild Show (8) which comes off the back of a cornflakes packet I always think because it's so whizz-bang?

LJ: No, I can't remember now.

2. Current output and working with Peter Scott and Chris Parsons

Int: But in terms of style would you say that the programmes have changed since your time?

LJ: What now?

Int: All the way through.

LJ: Gosh yes, they have changed, yes.

Int: But given that you started off, you were actually a pioneer in this particular form of broadcasting which obviously has changed and evolved in time. How would you look at your legacy if you like, to use a boring word?

LJ: I don't know Tony. I think that things change, things develop, things grow and inevitably when they grow they grow away from their source. There's no future in repeating ad infinitum and I think that growth is about change, and today things are very changed.

Int: Well, generally speaking in those early days they were studio based programmes, weren't they?

LJ: Yes, that's right.

*Int: Whereas now it's pretty much all film really, a very different affair. What do you think of, for instance, the major **blue-chip** film programmes that they're doing now, Planet Earth (9) for instance?*

LJ: I don't know. I wished they'd do more local, English stuff to be quite honest. I think it's fine getting up in the mountains and watching something chase something across miles of open space, I think that's great. I think it's just as great to study intimately the habits of a grass snake and I don't think enough of that is done today.

Int: Do you think that some of it is perhaps more simulated than it should be, less genuine fieldwork?

LJ: Yes, a lot of it must be, inevitably. You know that as well as I do.

Int: Do you approve of it?

LJ: No, I don't really, much of me doesn't. But I don't suppose I should be like that really.

DKB: Alright.

Int: It's wonderful film, it's fantastic material isn't it, unbelievable material.

LJ: Thank you for the —.

Int: But they're not movies at all and the scripts are terrible, banal. Such fantastic, stunning film and you get a banal. Anyway, don't let's go on about it.

LJ: Well, this is the point I really feel strongly about today. I don't think cameramen are given enough time, space and credit, I just don't. I mean when —. Do you know what finished me with film making? I'd got an idea to make a film about a field and the life in it, and I put it up to Chris [Parsons] and we were discussing it. He came down here, sitting very much like we are today and I started telling him about my ideas for this field film. And he said, "Well you know Les, you've been a naturalist a lot of years now but it's grown." He said "If you haven't got a" – what do you call lens, not sky lens a – special lens anyway "if you haven't got that you're wasting your time making films today." And with that I shut up and finished because there was no way I was going to go in for all that expensive stuff. And I don't think you need it do you all the time? You want some of it, of course you do. You ain't doing a lot of thinking.

*Int: A **Box Brownie** was a wonderful thing.*

LJ: Well, no, perhaps not but —. We made all our films with a **single-lens reflex** [inaudible] and that was it, it was all we had. Chris [Parsons] was going up through Totnes [Devon, UK] one day with Ron Peggs and I, we were going down to do some filming down at Slapton [Devon, UK]. We were going up through Totnes and Chris said to us, "Thinking of making a new sort of film. I'm wondering if you two would like to be involved with it?" So we said "Well what it is it?" So he said "We're filming in colour." And that would have been the first colour film in natural history." I think he said it was **Eastman colour**, I don't really remember that.

He said "So it's going to be the story of an oak tree called Major." He said "I've got Eric Ashby on it and I'd like you to do some of it, how do you feel about it?" So we said "Yes" and we did it, and that was the first natural history film in colour (10).

*Int: Yes, it was, *The Major* (10), I remember it.*

LJ: *The Major*, that's right, yes.

Int: You went on and made a film and I think you were involved on the Exe, on the Exe estuary. What was that?

LJ: I can't remember the title.

Int: Three Men on the Exe (11) or something.

LJ: Yes, it was, that's right. I didn't have so much to do with that one, that was a bit out of our thing. The Oak tree (12), Town mouse, Country mouse (13), Clay Pit Story (14) that was to do with Peter Scott. Winter storm (15) - that was that terrible winter we had back in 1964.

Int: Tell us- you're still rolling. Tell us about the thing you did with Peter Scott?

LJ: Which one, The Clay Pit Story (14)? Well, it was just that Peter came and performed as he always did, he was very good. I mean he helped us with Clay Pit Story (14), Winter Storm (15), The Lake (16).

Int: How were you involved with the great storm?

LJ: Well, I was teaching at the time and the school packed it in, shut up, the schools were shut for nearly a fortnight, and you can imagine what it did to wildlife, everywhere it was suffering, suffering badly. So we decided to make a film about it. It was just really recording what we saw, that's all you could call it, it wasn't working to a script. We just wandered around with a camera – "oh, look, there's a poor old avocet in trouble" and took pictures of it.

Int: You also made a movie about a field, didn't you? I've got it in my mind that you were very much involved with a field.

LJ: Yes, well that's what I wanted to do. That was when he told me [Chris Parsons] that if I didn't have this special lens I couldn't do the film, and so I packed it in and that was the end of it for me.

Int: So you wrote a book about it instead?

LJ: That's right I wrote a book about it, yes (17). That was quite interesting. Then we went out to Africa and did *Seafari* (18) which was quite interesting. We were very involved with Peter [Scott] or I was, he was very good. I remember sitting with him up on Corman's Head, that was when we were making *The Seashore*, *Rock Pool Story* (6). We sat in the car, Peter in the front and I was driving, Ron Peggs sitting behind.

Int: You haven't told us which Peter this is incidentally.

LJ: Peter Scott. And he suddenly said "I've had an interesting letter this morning." So we said, "Oh yes, what's that?" He said "I've just heard that I've been asked to captain Britain's entry in the American yacht race." That was a big thing in those days, and he said "I can't make my mind up whether to take it or not." That was the sort of chap he was, Peter, he talked very freely, not bragging or anything like that.

Int: No, he was inspirational.

LJ: Absolutely, yes. Well, I mean you must know him better than anybody because I always remember you went round with him, didn't you, around the world.

Int: Pretty much, yes.

LJ: Pretty much. You did that all right.

Int: So looking back on it all, Les, you were very much involved, really seriously involved for one very important building up time in natural history programme making. How do you feel looking back on it all? Was it worth it?

LJ: Yes, I think so. I think it was worth it. I think the ideas we —. The very good thing was that the producers, not just the producers, but people like Peter Scott listened to us. We hadn't got all the ideas, obviously we hadn't. But it was a time when the innovative freelance had an opportunity. You wouldn't get it today in the same way I don't think. Well, of course [David] Attenborough came, didn't he, then.

Int: Looking back on it, I feel myself that we were both lucky, we were in the right place at the right time. Would you agree?

LJ: I absolutely agree, yes. Absolutely. They were developmental times, they were very good, and when I look back and consider the opportunities I was given as a freelance, you know, let's face it, I didn't know very much about BBC technique and organisation and all that. Yes, I'm sure we were. Well, weren't you?

Int: Well, neither of us were qualified at all.

LJ: No, well, precisely, that's right and that's what was wonderful about it. Often you get better results if you don't go too much for the qualifications.

Int: Well we cared.

LJ: Yes, well that's more important than anything, isn't it, that you really care and believe in what you're doing, which we did. You used to enjoy having a go at me I remember, I thoroughly enjoyed that part of it, but that's you.



Int: I think we're done.

LJ: I think so.

Int: Very good Les, very, very good.

END

Glossary

Blue-chip: A prestigious style of wildlife documentary which can be described as a depiction of mega-fauna, following a dramatic storyline, using only images of visual splendour, giving a sense of timelessness and with an absence of reference to controversial issues.

Box brownie: A simple camera made by Kodak featuring a basic rotary shutter and meniscus lens.

Eastman colour: Single-strip multilayer colour film.

Single-lens reflex: Is a type of camera that uses a movable mirror placed between the lens and the film to project the image seen through the lens to a matte focusing screen.

1. *Out of Doors* – children's programme
2. *Blue Peter* (BBC, 1958 - present)
3. *Animal Magic* (BBC, 1963 - 1984)
4. *Out of Doors* (Maxwell Knight and dead cane toad episode)
5. H G Hurrell - pine martin film
6. SEASHORE (Look) (BBC, tx. 23 June 1960)
7. Wild Track
8. *The Really Wild Show* (BBC, 1986 - 2006)
9. *Planet Earth* (BBC, 2006)
10. THE MAJOR (BBC, tx. 20 May 1963)
11. THREE MEN ON THE EXE (World About Us) (BBC, tx. 09 June 1968)
12. The Oak tree
13. THE TOWN MOUSE AND THE COUNTRY MOUSE (Look) (BBC, tx. 16 November 1964)
14. Clay pit story
15. SUDDENLY LAST WINTER (Look) (BBC, tx. 15 November 1963)
16. THE LAKE (Look) (BBC, tx. 30 January 1963)
17. Jackman, L. (1972) *The Field*. Evans Brothers.
18. AFRICAN SEAFARI (BBC, tx. 12 June 1970)





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