Peter Jones: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Peter Jones

Name of interviewer:

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Clifton, Bristol, United Kingdom

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1. The early years - Horizon, The World About Us and The Natural World

Int: Okay, here we go then. Now Peter, you know what the first question is.

PJ: Okay, what my name is, Peter Jones, and my work involves running a Bristol independent production company called Green Umbrella which is now in its 15th year. The last bit of work I did of a serious kind though, I think, was transmitted earlier this year in the United States. A two hour film (1) about the second American President, John Adams, who was one of the great American founding fathers and this was a two hour programme (1) for WGBH in Boston, a company which I've worked for a great deal in the last 15 years.

But going back beyond that, I was born in South Wales, in Tredegar, but then brought up mainly in Kent. So my Welshness tends to come out at the great tribal gatherings of rugby matches and things, and there's a very slight accent I think. But really I was brought up in Kent and I feel really that the fatherland is a little bit remote from me at the moment, although it's closer now than at any other time I suppose, just across the river [Bristol Channel].

The story of my involvement in natural history really begins, I suppose, with the concerns which a lot of people had at the end of the 1960s. This was the first environmental stirring. It was the time when, say the Reith Lectures by Fraser Darling (2) addressed certain environmental issues. At that time I was the young working director at Granada Television, and I felt that I wanted to get involved in this in some way, to make some contribution. But the way to do it, it seemed to me at the time, was to move from Granada Television to Horizon (3). Horizon (3) was a weekly film on science on BBC2 [British Broadcasting Corporation]. It had recently shifted from a magazine format into being entirely made on film on a single subject, and really represented a very exciting challenge to filmmakers. You had three or four weeks research, about 15 days filming, five or six weeks editing, and a chance to put out a 50 minute film.

Of course, I couldn't immediately pick up the subjects that I necessarily wanted to address but the challenges were there in all sorts of ways, and one of my earliest films was in fact about the arms race. Now I had trained at Oxford in physics and mathematics and had long had concerns about the use of physics in generating nuclear weapons and the arms race. So suddenly as a filmmaker I was now able to pick up on those sorts of concerns, and to be able to research them thoroughly. You mentioned the BBC's name and you immediately had access to the Pentagon [with the permission of the Defence Department] or to, in my case, a **missile silo** in deepest Montana [mistake – meant Missouri] somewhere, or near Kansas was the first one I went to [Whiteman Air Force Base] and I actually "put my ear" to a ticking Minuteman missile [at the training facility].

I actually went on duty with two people, two controllers, and for a while as we descended into the deep concrete underground bunker, went through the first bombproof door and then the second. We were actually, myself and the film crew, with these two people at the control centre for 10 Minuteman missiles, all scattered around in the surrounding countryside, all ticking, the electronics runs constantly. They're not inert, silent things buried under the ground. The electronics is ticking over all the time so that they can be launched at a moment's notice with each carrying 10 warheads [mistake – meant each carrying up to three re-entry vehicles]. Each of the 10 missiles carrying 10 or 12 warheads [mistake – 3 warheads], each of which was 10 or so times the size of the Hiroshima bomb. So that was one of my earliest horizons (4).

So in a way, I suppose, I began to develop a view of science that this was something which we had to be very wary of. It needed to be controlled, it needed to be watched. So it was some pleasure that I then found that I was able to turn, after being on Horizon (3) for a couple of years, to something which was beginning to address my environmental concerns. It was a film which took a very harsh view of science in a way. It's called Science is Dead - Long Live Science (5). But it looked at those who were trying to bring a new approach to science, to create a science for the people, to create a science with an environmental concern.

Some of these people were having to drop out of the establishment, main establishments, universities and other places where would you do science to do it on a low budget, to do it on there own. At one point I actually showed young scientists on Cape Cod constructing a windmill. This was about two years before the energy crisis. When this Horizon [Science is Dead, long Live Science] (5) went out it actually shook a lot of people, many people thought it should never have been transmitted. Many senior people in the BBC came down on me like a ton of bricks. The New Scientist (6) raved about it. I had a wonderful review saying for once the BBC has a scoop, this is this new field of alternative technology which we're going to hear a lot about in the future. Nature (7) addressed a whole page in their editorial columns attacking it, calling it a worrying, irrational, some infection which had somehow taken over a Horizon (3) producer. But my head of department, who was concerned about it at the time and passed on the concerns of BBC's top management that this film had somehow been made at all, did say to me two or three years later, he said, "Peter, you know science is dead, long live science. It was premature, it was just two or three years too early. Well, you know premature journalism, as The New Scientist (6), said, is really a scoop."

Int: And that was Phil Daley of course who finally came to Bristol, much later.

PJ: And it was Phil Daley who very much twisted my arm to come to Bristol. He was already in Bristol. But before that happened I was involved on Horizon (3) in stumbling, because that's the only word for it, into natural history filmmaking, at least of the kind that Horizon (3) saw fit to do. Because we knew that very wonderful nature programmes were being made in Bristol. If we were going to move into this sort of area, it was going to be because there was an element of scientific thinking or scientific concepts which we felt was our job to report on and develop and present to the public. These were things which wouldn't necessarily strike Bristol as being part of their brief and part of their output.

And so typically I got to know about work on the Ythan estuary north of Aberdeen. But while Bristol would say to me, "Oh look, we've done a film about estuaries" [One of Nature's Hotels] (8), I would say "but what we're looking at here is the energetics. We're looking at the flow of energy through this estuarine system. This is an extraordinary story in which the energy is carved up into different niches and the way in which the animals all competed to find different parts of this, and interacted with this energy flow was what that film was about." (8)

At about the same time, because suddenly natural history film ideas were descending on my office at Kensington House in considerable numbers. And the other thing which happened at that time was through the post came the manuscript for something called The Selfish Gene (9) by Richard Dawkins at Oxford. So I read this and, of course, as someone mainly trained in physics and maths this was my introduction and it was like a conversion. Reading this, I in a sense fell off my donkey and saw the light and realised, perhaps more than the estuary programme, just how powerful these ideas were and how interesting it would be to develop ways of making films about these sorts of concepts.

Well, The Selfish Gene (9), this manuscript arriving led to a meeting with Richard Dawkins who flatly refused to appear in the film. But I knew by then that I would very much need his collaboration, his insights, his understanding, and he agreed with me that he would join me in London from time to time. For example, to look at a lot of the existing natural history material which in essence he felt in a way needed interpretation because something profound and significant had taken place, in terms of how one understands animal behaviour. And people who had thought in the past that they were interpreting behaviour on a **Darwinian** basis were, Dawkins pointed out, quite, quite mistaken. They were actually suggesting that animals might do something, say, for the benefit of their species and that this was **Darwinian** thinking. But it's not of course because selection operates at the level of the individual in most cases.

Int: I mean this would be people in Dawkins' own department who would be at that stage

PJ: Oh yes [Dawkins dealt with the debate – and confusion surrounding this subject in his book The Extended Phenotype, especially in chapter 14 (10)].

Int: Because they would be the advisers to Bristol at that time

PJ: They would have been.

Int: Pre-Selfish Gene (9).

PJ: Absolutely, and in fact the reason that this work was so revolutionary and had such impact is that the originator of this thinking was a young and [rather withdrawn] young researcher, Bill Hamilton, at University College [meant – Imperial College's Silwood Park Field Station]. Had published his first papers in '64 and earlier than that '63. John Maynard Smith had accepted one of his papers for publication in the quarterly Journal of Theoretical Biology (11). Maynard Smith himself had also published an attack on **group selection** in the form of a review of a Professor Wynne Edwards' book (12) which, in a way, took up the ideas of **group selection** and suggested this was an explanation for all manner of behaviours that needed to be accounted for in some way.

But basically this work had remained in some obscurity. The first person really to take it up was Bob Trivers at Harvard in the early 70s and then quickly following him Richard Dawkins. Dawkins initially thought, I think, in terms of a popular treatment, The Selfish Gene (9) as we now know it. But as we also know now that had a profound impact on his fellow professional, academic researchers because his brilliant elucidation of the ideas and the thinking behind this new way - well, it's not so new. It was really bringing us back to a true **Darwinian** interpretation. But a **Darwinian** interpretation now which could account for, say, **altruism** in a way that had perhaps defeated Darwin at the time. We know there were some hints of his understanding of this, and this is what Bill Hamilton had done. He'd shown that **altruistic behaviour** is generally speaking for the benefit of kin. So when you find ants giving up their lives to protect the queen you find they are sisters, and they are as successfully passing on their genes by giving up their lives for their sisters, as if they had offspring themselves. That sort of crudely characterises it.

So The Selfish Gene (9) set me on track to tackle animal behaviour in a fresh kind of way and, as I said, we began by looking at some of the output of the Natural History Unit and Maynard Smith and Dawkins would occasionally stopping me and saying, "Hold on, that narration there is not right." I mean this is really what we're dealing with. We're dealing with existing material that we can use perhaps in this Horizon (3) programme to actually create enumeration [meant – new sequences] based on this new interpretation. But beyond that we also went out, so for the first time I actually was involved in filming natural history sequences, and filming them with people like Brian Bertram using the Serengeti lion material. Tim Clutton-Brock who'd been studying the red deer of Rhum for just a few years. But studying them on the basis of individual animals because this was going to be the way in which you would understand truly the **Darwinian** selection pressures which act on individuals. So you would see through their reproductive success why Saggy [a mature stag] was going to be so successful and why Beauty, one of the hinds, was going to be so successful as she had perhaps a successful birthing later on in that early summer.

So we followed that through and in the meantime I'd also become involved in a controversy which broke out in the United States because there the publication of these ideas in a book called Sociobiology (13) divided biological science. It was perhaps the most significant argument and conflict, out-and-out conflict, between very, very good scientists, often in single departments that perhaps occurred in the last half of the 20th century. Nothing can compare with the way in which people like Stephen Gould and Ed Wilson and others just literally stopped talking to one another, with the publication of Sociobiology (13). People became openly hostile to one another. Those who hated the new thinking felt that there was a kind of determinism here of biologists trying to find a way of accounting for all sorts of things that were part of human nature, they would say that they found unacceptable. I mean the rigid, say, division of labour in certain tribes between women gathering and men hunting. There was a suggestion that Sociobiology (13) was going to provide a powerful account of this. The anthropologists were somewhere up in arms about it. Others said, "well yes, this is now tying in with our ideas of kinship." So I was thrust into this controversy, often having to interview Ed Wilson then tiptoe out of the fourth floor of the biology department at Harvard, down the fire escape, to go and see Richard Lewontin on the third floor, or Stephen J Gould because these people were not talking to one

another, they felt that deeply.

So suddenly I was aware that biology, this subject which in a way had evaded me for so many years in the course of my training, I was learning from people who were very patient with me, like Richard Dawkins and Maynard Smith and looking through lots of footage. I spent time with Bill Hamilton. Within a year or two, by the way, of this recognition [which came slowly], he became professor at Oxford. He went straight from being an obscure, low paid researcher at University College to becoming professor at Oxford [Bill took up a Royal Society Research Professorship at Oxford in 1984].

So it was a time of tremendous change and what this did was to create the necessary academic interest and excitement in the study of living creatures in the field. Studied now as individuals because the reproductive success of individual animals was the key. But obviously feeding into that were literally the ways in which those animals fed, and therefore aspects of their ecology. Aspects of the way in which they involved their mates in parental care or the mating systems. So the study of animal behaviour became informed by very powerful new thinking.

Now we weren't going to immediately see the impact of this. The Selfish Gene (9) and The Extended Phenotype (10) which was Richard Dawkins' second book and for the professionals in the subject. Obviously dealt with existing material, re-interpreting it, re-examining it. In The Extended Phenotype (10) Richard actually attacked the Natural History Unit for its kind of cosy view of nature, of saying everything is for the good and that animals are doing things for the benefit of their species. So I knew that I'd stumbled on something and that something very profound had happened in the study of animal behaviour, and that I very fortunately had, as it were, got my foot in the door and I could see that beyond this were all sorts of promising avenues to continue to explore.

Well, that might have been the end of it. In fact, after that Horizon (3) got me involved in a different sort of evolutionary story, the evolution of the universe. So I went off and filmed a story about the big bang (14) in which I met the Nobel Prize winners, Penzias [Arno] and Wilson Robert, in their original horn telescope at Bell Labs, where they were studying signals they were picking up from space, and they were getting a low, curious hum. They actually thought they'd stumbled on the cause of this when they found lots of pigeon droppings in the horn antenna. Anyway they scraped out the pigeon droppings and the noise was still there, and that was when they realised that this noise was there, was constant, it was coming from everywhere. And that this signal was coming in at a particular signature which they identified as a three degree kind of radiation.

Now by then within a few days I'd met some scientists at Princeton who'd interpreted this, and who had realised that when you get a big bang with a tremendous heat and instant release of energy, that as that is the source of the universe and as that expands, as that radiation expands, the wavelength gets longer and longer. They calculated that after 18 billion years that radiation would have a temperature of three degrees above absolute zero. But what Pensiaz and Wilson were listening to was —.

Int: The sound of the big bang.

PJ: The sound of the big bang, yes. So at that point, finishing that film, Phil Daley who had moved to Bristol.

Int: I'm not sure whether he had quite gone then, had he?

PJ: Yes, at that point he was here in Bristol and of course Chris Parsons who'd built up the Unit in many ways as its editor was —. There were changes afoot in Bristol.

Int: I didn't meet Phil Daley, I think, when I was faced with doing The World About Us (15) job. That was never a discussion with Phil Daley actually. I don't think I've ever met him, so he must have come just a bit after.

PJ: This was 1979 now we're talking about. So in June 1979 I was asked by Chris would I be interested and Phil Daley I knew was in the background, was already in Bristol. Would I be interested?

Int: Yes, because I only met Stuart Whitton and dear old Tom [Poore]. Yes, Phil I hadn't met. No, that's right.

PJ: Literally you're talking about people who were there just a few years earlier. So by 1979 Phil Daley was head of broadcasting [Head of Broadcasting South West] in Bristol and knew of my work on Horizon (3). Chris Parsons, I think, had noticed it as well.

Int: And Michael was leaving, Michael Andrews.

PJ: Oh That's right.

Int: Michael was your immediate predecessor on there.

PJ: Let me just start again then. Yes, essentially the editor of the World About Us (15) was Michael Andrews who at last had got funding to go and do three films about the Andes (16). He was a great traveller, knew the Andes as a student [he made his first film there].

Int: That's right. He'd got to the end of his three years as series editor as well.

PJ: He'd got to the end of his three years. Chris Parsons was keen to have someone succeed him [Mike Andrews] and obviously to keep running the strand.

Int: Well, Mike had succeeded Chris. Yes, Mike had succeeded Chris because Chris was there and then the job was offered to me. I turned it down and Mike Andrews took it and then he got to the end of his three years. Then they said to me, "Now it's your job, for goodness sake you've got to it now" and I said, "No, I don't want to do it." So then, of course, it then went wider.

PJ: Well, all I knew was that in June 1979 the phone rang on Horizon (3) and it was Chris Parsons wanting to speak to me, might I be interested in this. Well, of course, it's a very significant step because you move from being a producer, a creator of individual programs, to assuming responsibility for about a dozen other people making programmes under your editorship, and becoming more of an executive. Are you going to remove yourself from the creative process? Does that alarm you or not? Is it perhaps time to put something back into

the business because in a way I had seen in 10 years on Horizon (3) how wonderful series editors had sort of pointed me in a particular direction, or suggested certain things. And played a very interesting role in helping one develop as a filmmaker.

Int: Yes, it's a very important job.

PJ: Anyway, I weighed it up and I thought, well, I'll think about it. In any case this was something I would have to go on a board for, I'd have to board it, such is the BBC way of doing things. But as an appetizer they said, well look, in the meantime would you be interested in going to Africa and directing a film with Sir Laurens Van der Post. It's basically a film in which he's going to go into a wilderness area on foot, the Black Umfolozi. You'll be there on foot with him and the crew, camping wild, under the stars at night. It's something which Sir Laurens has written about and talked about but now he wants to do it and wants it recorded. He's going in with a wonderful Zulu guide, a ranger Ian Player that he'd got to know over the years and who'd done so much as a conservationist, and he's also going to have his granddaughter with him and it's going to be her experience of wilderness.

So I said, "Well, I can't resist that", so off I went. And so this was altogether now a different, an utterly different way of experiencing the natural world. This wasn't informed by argument, academic debate, discussion, analysis. Well, to a certain extent I suppose The Red Deer of Rhum (17) had involved me in many, many hours of observing nature and animals on Rhum, and to a certain extent to the estuary film (8). But this took it a stage further and with Sir Laurens I picked up something else too about this way of looking at animals. For him there was some very deep spiritual fulfilment to be had in this experience, and there were many, many times when, far from discussing or debating or analysing behaviour - he wanted us to be quiet, he wanted us just to experience this particular piece of wilderness in all its sounds and noises and the calls, and just to watch and to be there. So with that experience I went back to Bristol to start editing it and —.

Int: Can I just ask you about him? I mean, as we learned later, he was a slightly different character from the one that we actually had thought was Laurens Van der Post. Did you sense anything yourself about him at that stage? He had this great image as the guru and whatever which was somewhat exploded later.

PJ: I had no sense of that. All I was aware of was that he was also very much part of the back team of Margaret Thatcher at Lancaster House. He'd be leaving the cutting room after looking at a rough cut with me and rushing back to be part of that team as the discussions, negotiations were taking place to produce the settlement in Rhodesia as it once was and as Zimbabwe as it was to become, of course. So I was aware of that side of his life at that point in time. Of course, it was just a year or so later that he became particularly close to Prince Charles. But, no, I mean I met him in Africa, met him occasionally at his apartment in London. But, no, it was in Africa that I saw through him in a way one side of nature and enjoying nature and appreciating it, which wasn't necessarily going to be something which I felt I was going to really take forward very much because by then I knew that really what I'd learnt on Horizon (3) was going to give me much more substance in terms of finding stories. Because I felt that there was a way indeed of filming wildlife in which people had very often gone into a wilderness area, and they literally almost filmed everything that moved. And brilliant editors then got to work on this material and found structure and stories based in the seasons. There were a whole series of genres based on seasons, days, a year in the life of, and so forth.

And so our task in a way was to find fresh stories, to move away from many of these ways of telling stories. And I felt that more than anything it was going to be through the stories that these researchers, inspired by Dawkins [Richard] and Wilson [Edward] and Hamilton [Bill] and others. They'd gone into these wilderness areas of the world and they were going to come back, and were indeed starting to come back, with new

kinds of stories that they were going to tell. Stories based on individual animals and my hunch was that that was going to be important. The other thing too was that we would perhaps turn rather more to people. That we would need to find the particularly good naturalists as had been done in the 70s but we would need to constantly renew the search for the gamekeepers, the naturalists, the gifted cameramen who could actually move from behind the camera to in front of the camera or occasionally at least speak of what they had seen, in a natural, convincing and communicative way. So —.

Int: Do you have anybody in mind? Is that Hugh Miles?

PJ: Well, Hugh Miles in particular, yes, in that there was one particular film. Well, he did a number of films. I was lucky enough to have him do a number of films for me when I was the editor of the World About Us (15) and then the Natural World (18). A wonderful film about the wild otters in Shetland (19). Another lovely film about a leopard (20). And I worked with him on getting a new kind of narration for these because and it had come about quite naturally as part of the editorial process at the rough cut stage - I was executive producer, editorially responsible. So I would say, “well you’ve been in the cutting room now four weeks, time I actually came along to the cutting room and you can talk me through it.” I wasn’t expecting a fully written narration but I wanted to see the images, see how the story was structured.

And It occurred to me as Hugh was talking me through - the leopard film(20) in particular was very striking - was his involvement and engagement in every moment of the film because he had actually been there just five or six or seven or eight weeks earlier seeing this creature with its young. He was living it in the cutting room. And I actually said to him at a certain point, and this concurred with his own thinking, was that we should find a way of moving on to instead of actually having a narrator —.

Int: So you started to do me out of work, did you?

PJ: Well, I was going to come to you in a moment. But there seemed to me to be a role for this kind of narration. It wasn’t easy to achieve because as soon as someone untrained writes and then reads, it has a read quality which a professional narrator, such as yourself, would always avoid. There's always a sense with a very well performed narration that somehow the words are being spoken for the first time, and they do not have a read quality. For someone embarking upon this that’s very, very difficult to achieve. And in fact, the way we did this was to put aside the written script and in fact in the next door room in this very house, we set up a VHS recorder. We didn’t want to go into a studio, that was too formal, and we just ran little bits of the film and I had a recordist with me and we recorded little bits and pieces of Hugh, just a few paragraphs at a time. Occasionally I could sense that he was picking up his notes and a script and started to sound somewhat read, and I said “Put it down, you know what we're going to do.”

And so Leopard in the Grass (20) went to air with this narration recorded in the room next door [study at Peter Jones’ house], in this particular way. And it, I believe, captured something of that quality which I was seeking, of someone who had become so engaged in watching and pursuing, in tracking this animal in the course of the filming, that it actually lent a particular quality to the narration, that would help an audience also to become engaged in the story of this leopard and her young.

Int: I think it would be right to say that Hugh developed that into recording in the film as he was filming, didn’t he?

PJ: I think he did, yes.

Int: Yes, the mountain lion (21) for example.

PJ: That came much later, yes.

Int: Much, much later but obviously he was sewing the roots of it here, with you in particular.

PJ: That's right, yes. So the World About Us (15) then was something which took me, not totally, but took me in many ways from being the individual producer crafting films to being an executive in charge of perhaps 16, 20 films a year. But I managed to actually keep my hands on perhaps one or two films a year. And a very good photographer friend Mike Herd came down from Scotland to spend a year in Devon, doing a film on an English farm (22). Just looking at the relationship through the four seasons of the activities of the farm and the wildlife that was managing to find a living for itself, despite the industrial farming activities of modern farming. And that was reassuring in fact in a way. I mean we were obviously setting out in a way to also define a problem which was the way in which farming perhaps was going to, in its new form, present problems for wildlife. But we felt in a way by showing how some wildlife at least was finding a way to co-exist, we were beginning also to see that there was some prospect of a relationship developing to the benefit of both.

Now this is where in fact other people in the Unit became involved. So someone like Mike Kendall would come to that location with me as my adviser and consultant. Mike was the librarian and responsible mainly for bringing film work and running a library based on our own work, and so forth. But as a wonderful naturalist you couldn't have someone better than him to be with you for, say, a couple of days on a Devon farm with the farmer, and also just interpreting the wildlife to you and perhaps hearing things that I had not heard or not seen.

He played another vital role too which was that, as librarian, he was aware of the work of other natural history filmmakers throughout the world and of broadcasters. And he would draw my attention to areas that we might have neglected or were neglecting, or where we simply hadn't risen to the challenge that might be involved. And in particular, he began to draw my attention to work that Canadian filmmakers were doing in their Arctic regions. The Norwegians were nibbling away. And he said, "Look at these films, don't you think we can do very much better?" And this is where I thought, well yes, especially if someone like Hugh Miles gets to work on it. But this was a very tough challenge and it needed more than Hugh just working alone because you're dealing with obviously an extremely dangerous as well as challenging environment. But, of course, this was under development actually probably for about 18 months.

PJ: So two years then into being in Bristol and on the Natural World (18), I was aware that quite a few of us, yourself Barry [Paine], Sheila and other members of the staff.

Int: Sheila Fulham.

PJ: Sheila Fulham. We were very unhappy about the basic partnership which ran the World About Us (3), which was a London department providing some stories, some programmes, and on alternate weeks the natural history output coming from us. Now we felt we were providing the programmes that that audience

really wanted and appreciated, and there was a case to be made now for the World About Us (3) being run under one editorship. Perhaps dealing with some human subjects but human stories which might relate, say, rather more to the natural world than perhaps a story of a Turkish lorry driver crossing Asia. Which in a way had its place but the World About Us (3) coming from Bristol had something to it. Our audience appreciation figures were much greater, the audience figures themselves were much better. So the argument was to put Brian Wenham, the controller of BBC2, that there should be a change. Well, the battle was fought out between the London department —.

Int: Travel and Adventure I think was the name.

PJ: Yes, Travel and Adventure they were called and us, and it wasn't resolved. Brian said —no, he couldn't see anyway in which this output could be split and go into two separate programmes, he wanted it kept together. Well, a few months went by, there was a change of controller and Graham McDonald took over as controller of BBC2. We decided we would try and again and this time we were more successful. The argument was now even stronger, based on recent successes that we'd had. Wonderful programmes, some of which you had made, some of which were made by Keenan [Smart] and Michael Andrews. It was a wonderful team in Bristol now contributing to The World About Us (3).

So Graham said, "Well yes, but what are you going to call it because the London end said they were not going to give up The World About Us (3)." Travel and Exploration in London was going to hang on to this title. I think the threat was designed to make us give up and agree to continue in harness with them. But we didn't give up and I think there was a crucial meeting with the producers in Bristol on The World About Us (3). I think you were there Barry, Sheila Fulham representing the PAs [personal assistants], she was the wonderful senior PA on the team who kept us all in good shape and good order. The thought came up, perhaps from you, that it should be called The Natural World (18).

Well, this was actually really putting our head on the parapet now because there was every prospect that with this we would be setting our stamp upon something which was then going to run perhaps, if it was successful, for many, many years. At that next crucial meeting with Graham McDonald he said, "Yes, I like this idea, The Natural World (18). Peter, you'll be the first editor. You'll have your World About Us (15) team now who will become producers of The Natural World (18) with you. London Travel and Exploration, well, they can go their own way, they can keep The World About Us (15)." Which they did and it only ran for another two seasons. They lost their audience, the programmes weren't quite as good, they were taken off the air. So The Natural World (18) had survived, was the new strand, the new Sunday strand and we built up the programming from 12, 13, 14 hours to one point to round about 21, 22 programmes a year. Because we had also moved into some specials. We realised that geology and the study of the Earth's land forms could be part of our brief. So Making of a Continent (23) became a three part Natural World (18) special and we did a follow-up to that (24), another three hours, such was the appeal of that subject matter, and the beautiful photography of the team, and the way in which Mike Andrews had produced these programmes with Paul Reddish as his wonderful researcher. Following that we took on the world's oceans as an extra three specials, attracting a lot of funding from America to do this.

Int: The Atlantic (25), wasn't it?

PJ: Yes. We did the Atlantic (25) and, of course, the three hours that Hugh Miles and Mike Salisbury had gone off to tackle in the Arctic, Kingdom of the Ice Bear (26), had also been a trilogy arising out of the operations of The Natural World (18). But standing alone as a very distinguished and brilliant piece of natural history.

Now in a way combining the best of the natural history work that the Unit had always done but with much of the new science which I'd been keen to contribute and which someone like Mike Salisbury in any case was bringing to the subject, and Mike Andrews. Keenan Smart was very much someone in touch with the new, young behavioural scientists who now, of course, called themselves behavioural ecologists, this was the new term. These were the people who looked at animal behaviour in this way that had simply not been anticipated in the early 70s.

So a new generation of them were out there looking at animal behaviour from the standpoint, it sounds terribly boring, of reproductive success. But by concentrating on that you had a very good scientific basis for examining the success of feeding strategies, and looking and interpreting a whole range of feeding strategies or mating strategies and home building strategies. So that became very much the kind of acquired agenda for our work. Alongside some pretty overt conservation programmes, the likes of which do not easily find their way into the schedules at present or certainly not in the 90s.

But in the 80s Neil Cleminson could go and look at feast and famine in the North Sea, the problem of the fishing stocks (27). That was perhaps The World About Us (15) actually, no, that was a Natural World (18). Mike Andrews could actually look at the various very serious problems of land erosion, water shortages, across the globe in three films which went on to take the first Prix Italia for Ecology (28). Following that, it sounds very far fetched I know from The Natural World (18), but this connected with my earlier work and his earlier work on Horizon (3), and we did the nuclear winter [On the 8th Day] (29). Here was a time when in fact it seemed as though the greatest threat for the natural world, as the arms race accelerated to the point at which there were now 10 times as many missiles as in the early 70s, lined up on each side of the Iron Curtain. And with 10 times as many warheads, each of which was smaller and very much more deadly and the world —. If that lot had been fired off, it would have led to extinction of everything that we loved and knew and enjoyed, including ourselves, through a nuclear winter.

So The Natural World (18) did a special on the nuclear winter (29). Now interestingly Mick Jackson in the Science Department was also doing a dramatisation of that (30). A dramatisation which took an extreme view and you followed through the lives of individuals and their experience. Mike Andrews did something which was very objective, very powerful, analytical, speaking to scientists, and in fact we thought we were in competition. There was always competition between Horizon (3) and The Natural World (18). Once I'd been on the other side, now I was in Bristol on the side of the Natural History Unit and thinking, darn it, we're doing this, we're going to still do it and they're doing it.

Well, you know in the end the Controller looked at what he had and he said, “These programmes do complement one another. One certainly engages you emotionally and so does the other but Mike Andrews' film also is devastating in its analysis.” And in fact, as with all such subjects, a Home Office screening was vital. Well, you know the dozen or so grey suited civil servants and officials filed into the viewing theatre to see the two films. The thought was that they were going to give us a hard time, that they would actually find ways and means of not allowing perhaps these films to go out. This was a very sensitive subject at the time no matter how you treated it. Well, the two films came to an end and there was just total silence, and the 12 grey figures picked up their briefcases and went towards the door. Yes, these two films may go out. They were totally silenced by, I think, the combination of the two.

So this was a departure for The Natural World (18) into an area which might be unthinkable now but we could do it then and we did it. It was part and parcel of giving our audience, because we had a dedicated audience of three to four to five million, something occasionally which was quite unexpected and yet related to their love and pleasure and enjoyment and interest in The Natural World (18).

2. The Trials of Life – natural history stories derived from science

Well, I've spoken now of this division between natural history and science, and I suppose you could say it also extended to ideas about spectacle and description. And obviously if you're dealing with nature and the natural world then spectacle and description is going to be a vital part of it. So we knew we had to find ways of combining these things. But something happened which began to push me again more and more towards stories, stories based on science and derived from science. And that was when in November 1986 David Attenborough called me up and said, “Look, I've been looking at some of the work that's been coming out of the Natural History Unit. People like Marion Zunz and Mike Salisbury and Keenan Smart. I think you know that following Life on Earth (31) and then Planet Earth, Living Planet (32) rather, we can now move on and tackle animal behaviour, and I'd love to meet you just to talk about it because I'd like you to do it with me.”

So he and I met and he'd sketched a few ideas by then on paper, and these ideas were essentially about finding a mate, finding food, finding a home, arriving in the world, mating and passing on your genes. I thought to myself I think David has actually really in an extraordinary way just picked up on this marvellous work and research which has been going on. So I said, “Well look, I think this framework is very, very interesting. I do want to talk to some of the people that have been advising me in recent years, just to see really if these are the headings that we can all settle on.” So he said “Fine”, and I actually went off to Oxford and Cambridge and met up with Nick Davis in particular. I think I also met up with Tim Clutton-Brock.

And you know, the first year undergraduate lectures in Cambridge that Davis told me about actually dealt with finding food, finding a mate. So in other words, I said, “Behind these headings we actually also have a very good scientific framework which presumably,” I said, “is now starting to link up with the work that your students, not first year undergraduates but postgraduates are now starting to do in the field.” “Well, yes,” he said, “and the papers, just look in the journals. You will see that the volume of work is just increasing by leaps and bounds because since that revolution in the 1970s ushered in at a popular level by Richard Dawkins and others, and John Krebs and myself and others, and Bill Hamilton's work and Ed Wilson and other people in the States, at Harvard and Princeton, we're now benefiting. We're now beginning to see the results of this work. So the initial studies on, say, lions in the Serengeti and the red deer of Rhum. I mean to those pioneering studies we can now add dozens more, perhaps hundreds more.

So I went back to David and I said “This is something, right this is it. Right, let's actually just go ahead on this basis with these ideas.” He by then had polished them into a proposal and while those 12 headings weren’t quite the ones that we did, they were pretty much what he'd initially talked to me about. There were one or two others. We learnt in January, I think, or February 1987 that funding would be available. I would have to obviously give up running The Natural World (18) which I did probably round about March or April and I began to look for a team. I began to talk to people on The Natural World (18), people like Keenan [Smart], Marion Zunz. I needed one or two people to come and join me because there were a lot of people like yourself, tied up now on a new part of their careers, writing and narrating. There were —.

Int: I was freelance by then, of course.

PJ: Yes. There were other projects underway in the Unit. But one of the very interesting things was that very early on in recruiting people, very bright young Oxford based postdoctoral fellow. Now this is someone pretty far on in the academic world to agree to come to Bristol as a researcher. But Nick Upton's interest in getting into filming was such that he thought he would do this, it was a big career change for him. But, of course, he came from these two crucial departments, Cambridge initially where he did his doctorate, Oxford where he

was a postdoctoral fellow. He came with all of the hot topics absolutely at his fingertips.

And so we thought, right, he and I would start together, we would just get the ball rolling. And the thought then was, well, how to do this and it sounds so obvious now that you would use computers to create a database that it seems a bit mundane to mention this but remember the IBM PC had only really been invented and put on the market initially in America for the first time in 1983. There were other computers around of a simpler, more rudimentary kind.

Int: Basically they were the big mainframe jobs, weren't they?

PJ: Yes, the big mainframes which would organise all the accounting for the BBC.

Int: And the behaviourist were using those in the 70s actually.

PJ: They were but this wasn't the sort of thing that we could use. But around about 1985, I suppose, the first cheaper little clones had come out. These were manufacturers basically imitating the IBM PC and using the chip and the software, and then they developed in '86, and in '87 Nick and I ordered up one of these. I can remember now we didn't even have an office but the box arrived. We borrowed somebody else's office, open the box, got this thing out, connected up the monitor and I said "how does it work?" Well, he sat down and got to work on it.

So Nick and I sat there puzzling over this computer which we'd just got out of the box. We knew it was going to take a little while to get to grips with this. But in the meantime I'd gone onto my son's Atari which he used for composing music, and I know with a little printer attached to it I could type out some basic outlines and headings, and I still have those here. These headings were the basis of things which we sent out. Of course, we couldn't email scientists but we could send them out the main headings for our programme ideas, with little gaps so that all these young scientists hot footing it back into Oxford or Cambridge, or Harvard or Princeton, or the University of California or whatever it was, we covered the world, could just scribble in their ideas or their most recent work.

And so from this came the first simple headings into our new computer which by then Nick had mastered. With the package there was a word processing package and there was a funny little database, you could only put in about five or six lines. But he started that database and it built up week by week, and within a few months was perhaps at several 100 items. It was all being gathered together under these various headings, such as feeding or hunting and escaping and these sorts of headings.

By now, of course, we'd had another meeting with David [Attenborough] because knowing that there was so much material to be gathered in, I thought it was vital to see him again, to give him some feedback So I think Keenan [Smart] came up with me and Nick. We met David in Richmond in his wonderful study on the top floor of his house, fantastic library and all the lovely African sculptures around. And I began to talk about this work and I said, "Well David, going about this" - I mean I wasn't sure whether to mention the computer to him because I think generally speaking people of his generation and mine would run a mile. Because it was Nick by now who was the only who'd actually mastered this. So I thought- well —. He said, "Look, don't worry about the treatments or the stories." I said "I've got my library here, I'll get to grips as always with the stories but I said there's a huge amount of material." He said, "Well, you gather the material." So we went away but I knew that in order to gather the material, we needed a finer kind of mesh than the programme titles because

you can break feeding down into many, many different aspects of feeding. You can break arriving down into many, many different ways of arriving in the world, whether you're a fish in an egg or a reptile, or this, that or the other or whatever, you know. So I knew we needed a new kind of framework and that Nick in a way, along with Keenan and Marion Zunz, by being in touch with the new research we could create a net of ideas within which we could gather the ideas.

So that's what we did. We actually developed, if you like, an intellectual framework which would enable us to gather ideas into the database and then actually analyse the database. But then actually the ideas could be merged in the word processing package which came with it, for it to produce a document. And by the end of June '87 Nick had actually taken the first ideas in the database and merged it into our first research document.

Well, built into this were quite extraordinary concepts as well as fantastic examples of behaviour. That went off to David and he responded quickly by saying, "Well, I've not heard of half of these ideas and I'm not even sure that a fraction of them are filmable." But anyway he said, "Look, this is wonderful work" and I said, "well, it's Nick's work." But he said, "Look, I can now work on this." And within five or six days we had his first script because he now had material, the likes of which he'd not seen before, which Nick and the computer and the team had produced. Sometimes he would ignore one or two of our ideas but say, "Look, at this point let's make it accessible. If we're dealing with arriving or growing up, for goodness sake let's actually get some wonderful material involving lion cubs or something." So in other words, we were in the luxurious position of being as arcane as we would like, or care to be, but the ultimate test in writing the script was that he was keeping our feet on the ground, in terms of making sure it was accessible. But he said, "Look, I mean because these examples are now so interesting and compelling, and I can see I may have picked up which for geographical or financial or other reasons, you may not be able to capture." In which case, he said, "I see from the document that basically there are other comparable examples and, of course, it's understood that we will go for those instead."

So we had a new and a different kind of framework for tackling our work, and then within another three to four weeks another database had been turned into a document and so we went on until the 12 ideas were produced, or the 12 programme ideas had taken concrete form with David's script. But on the way we did something very important because in a way this produced a tremendous appetite for ideas. Having gone from a position where we wondered how we might handle them, we suddenly wanted more and more, we were hungry for more. So the entire Trials of Life (33) team went off to the big conference in Madison, Wisconsin, that August. It was the conference of the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour. And what we found there were three or four lectures taking place concurrently, all day, each lasting just 15 minutes, so you can imagine how many there were. There were posters and this, if you like, reflected the first great wave of researchers who had studied at the feet of Richard Dawkins and Krebs [John] and others at Oxford, and others at Cambridge and Wilson [Edward]. Had learnt that there was a new way of looking at animal behaviour. They'd learnt this from Clutton-Brock and others. They went out into the field to actually study animals in this new way, looking at them as individuals.

So as we sat down, say, to a 15 minute lecture we were getting some hard data, the usual graphs and all the rest of it. But there were also stories coming out and we realised that Trials of Life (33) could be a story led series in which, if you like, once the stories are about life's trials, it's not totally dissimilar to a bit of a soap opera really. But the stories in this case were rooted in what animals actually did and, of course, we then had to be sure, as David had been careful to point out to us, that having made such claims to such bizarre and strange behaviours, that we could actually get out there and film them. And indeed, we didn't film them all but we filmed a lot of them. And if we failed on something, then we knew from the database that, "Oh, let's do that instead and actually geographically that will work because basically we've got a crew there at the right time", and there was a financial consideration. So finance, geography, seasonality, all of these things. When does this behaviour happen? All of this had to be integrated so as to tackle this series and put on the screen

quite unprecedented levels of animal behaviour because we weren't taking a taxonomic journey or taking a journey to different landscapes, we were hitting a particular place where a particular behaviour was going to take place at a particular time, and it wasn't just the general behaviour of that animal, it was a particular piece of behaviour which we had to get. So that was how in a way the computer and I suppose air travel getting cheaper and more efficient helped make Trials of Life (33) a possibility.

Int: Something that occurs to me, we're talking about computers being used by accountants first, that you must have seen a huge change in the amount of money being made available to projects like this. I mean World About Us (15), for example, never had a lot of money for programming at all, did it? But as we moved through the Life of Earths (31) and the Living Planets (32), whatever, up to your Trials of Life (33), money was being made available for those big, big projects. There's a whole different dimension of the operation coming in, isn't there?

PJ: Yes. Just talking briefly about budgets. It would be silly to mention figures now because inflation has just made a nonsense of everything. But you could typically say you know, that a Horizon (3) would be made at that time with perhaps 16, 17 days filming and six weeks in the cutting room. A World About Us (15) might be rather different because you would not have a full film crew, you might have a single photographer perhaps filming in the wild for 10 weeks or 15 weeks but it would be a package with his equipment. And there'd be a producer who would set it up initially, go through the treatment with me, keep an eye on the cameraman's rushes as they were coming in. And perhaps also be setting up another project as well at the same time. And then in fact it was the same sort of edit schedule. You know four weeks rough cut I'd be expecting, five weeks a proper narration dropped in, and we'd be locking it off at about the six week. Woe betide anyone who went over because Sheila Fulham's wrath and the production manager's wrath would be visited upon them.

Int: Yes, overtime frowned on.

PJ: But, in fact, obviously with something like Trials of Life (33), as we took on very ambitious filming sequences, then there was no question that this kind of budget could operate. Because a single sequence, such as that of the killer whales coming up on the beach off Patagonia, will not only involve the intricacies of diplomacy in getting permission there in the first place, and they were considerable. I mean in a way, I suppose, as executive producer you're making certain key decisions which you know at the time, and £60,000 a lot of money at that time because that was a good chunk of a World About Us (15) project, and that was just one sequence for Trials of Life (33).

So Marion [Zunz] was despatched to sort out the permissions and I think she almost frankly had to seduce the Argentinean governor of the province of Patagonia, in order to get permission but thank goodness she didn't have to but instead she had to just applaud the fact that Argentina had after all won the World Cup. And on that recognition of Argentinean football supremacy, basically left him beaming and he said, "Well of course we can come and film." In a way this wasn't so long after the Falklands or the Malvinas, sorry, we had to refer them in that particular programme. So a lot of work went into getting some of those permissions and then, in fact, the only way to succeed in something like that and also to do it safely, was for two experienced photographers to go in with a lot of marine work under their belt. So that was Mike and Paul.

Int: Mike de Gruy and Paul Atkins.

PJ: Yes. And they went in and the timetable involved just getting into the water very gingerly, very carefully to begin with, plotting the movements of the seals on the beach. Sometimes just moving between the seals

and the killer whales, sometimes just getting into the water, going in a little deeper. Just becoming a regular presence and yet always ensuring that they were going to be distinguishable from the seals so there was no confusion. And it took six weeks, one or two weeks of very gingerly and carefully and methodically plotting movements, plotting the time of day when the attacks took place and then moving into the water. Gradually becoming bolder and bolder, resulting in the extraordinary sequence which ensued.

Int: Now you did have rivalry at that time there with that sequence, didn't you, which is going through my mind at the moment? Somebody had been down there filming that because I found myself writing a commentary to the film, what was that?

PJ: Well, I think all of those films followed actually. I mean think we were more or less first to air.

Int: I couldn't remember if the World About Us (15) got that sequence out or something like beforehand. But I mean it was still that great, not Horizon (3) to the west country, it was within the Unit actually, there would be rivalry.

PJ: Yes, we were first to air. And I think the too about that time was the way in which, say, come back again and again to the way in which digging into the science led to the breakthrough sequences. So I actually visited a number of the European centres as well as the American, and I was actually with Hans Kummer in Zurich, [Professor in the Department of Ethology and Wildlife Research at Zurich University who supervised the research of Christophe Boesch into the nut cracking behaviour of wild chimpanzees in the Tai National Park, Ivory Coast] coming to the end of an interesting get together, reviewing a lot of work going on. But only right at the end of that conversation, for some reason did he say but "Yesterday I had a young student here who is working in West Africa, and is just starting to observe chimpanzee interactions hunting as a group." Well, that hadn't been seen before. So we made haste to this young student's home just outside Geneva, knocked on the door, it was pouring with rain, tried to get the attention of a neighbour. "Oh, sorry, yes, he was here yesterday but just called in late last night and went straight off to the airport, he's on his way back to West Africa." So we'd [Nick Upton and Peter Jones] just missed him.

But on my team when I got back I had a very energetic young researcher who had joined the team, or associate producer, that was what his position was, Alistair Fothergill. And I told him this story and he said "I know that area where he's doing that research." He said "I'd love to take on responsibility for this and continue to track him down." I said, "Well, it's not going to be easy because he's now out in the field." But I said, "Look, make it a priority, just mail him, get in touch somehow or other" and I said "you can take that one through."

And so we had monthly updates and eventually I got to hear that contact had been made and, of course, that eventually led again to an absolutely stunning sequence (34) [Trials of Life Episode 4], accomplished through tremendous determination by Alistair but also in the field.

Int: You had David [Attenborough] in the field for that one, didn't you?

PJ: David was in the field for the last section of it after we'd made two earlier visits so that became — [meant – it became a defining sequence for Trials of Life, bringing David Attenborough into the sequence and able to comment on and react to the final stages of the chimpanzee hunt]. So in a way science was giving us the stories. Scientists were actually seeing things and observing things for the first time. It was our job

sometimes to weigh this up very carefully because if a scientist had seen something very obscure which might happen only rarely, then we would have to say to ourselves, well, is anyone ever going to see it again and if so, are we ever going to be able to film it? So that was what we had to weigh up. And sometimes —. But on the whole we were successful in tapping into the work of science in, I think, a way which led to very powerful new stories being put on the screen involving animals and understanding them.

3. Establishment of Green Umbrella

PJ: Well, here I am coming towards the end of 1990, Trials of Life (33) had started to go out and had got tremendous audiences, tremendous reviews. It had in a way fulfilled one great ambition which I had had which was to see all this wonderful work that I'd been aware of, since I'd first stumbled into natural history in 1975 reading Richard Dawkins' manuscript. Here it was at last on the screen and getting praise from the scientists as well as the public. So I thought, well, maybe this is a time for some kind of departure because who knows what kind of future there will be. And maybe this is the time to put some energy into creating an independent operation in Bristol that will be part and parcel of hanging on to the expertise, and make sure that the work remains here.

So with that thought I discussed my departure and the head of broadcasting [John Prescott-Thomas] and head of personnel at the time, were open to the idea [1991 Broadcasting Act created a 25% opportunity for independent production]. I mean they knew that although it hadn't happened at that time, that broadcasting was going to change, that the ecology was going to have to change. There were some extremely critical things being said in the press about the BBC, its bureaucracy. There was a sense that the partnership between the BBC and independents, light of foot, working in slightly different ways, more entrepreneurial, that there would be cross-fertilization. That the BBC could benefit from this process as well as obviously the independents being supported. But the general thesis being that the monolithic nature of broadcasting had to change in some way, and that there should be more entry points, and the independents were the first step in that direction.

Of course, in the Broadcasting Act of January '91 the 25% factor was introduced and Green Umbrella was launched. And I teamed up with a very experienced editor, Nigel Ashcroft and filmmaker, based in Bristol, running a **post-production** operation through good times and tougher times but always surviving. And I thought, oh well, this is potentially a good partnership, he's a survivor and I thought this is what we need as independents because no one was guaranteeing us anything. I had very good friends in America, WGBH and Discovery, and they were encouraging and said, of course, as soon as you're an independent they we'll have work for you. But we had to go out and win it, of course, once we did become independents. We did and we formed into a company in April '91. I think we probably had our first company bits and pieces, and statutes and scrolls and things in May, and we've been going 15 years of course since then without fail, always something in production, always going through. At one point we employed about 40 people but that was when at that size I found there was no room for me to make my own films. I was constantly running around looking for the next commission.

And bit by bit I realised too that natural history was changing. That the kind of **blue-chip** film that I'd come into make, that I'd been involved in, wasn't the only show in town that new filmmakers were arriving. Amongst them, of course, people like Steve Irwin who had picked up on a strand of filmmaking which involved, I think in some ways quite sensational aspects of natural history filmmaking. But there was an audience for it and he catered for that audience, created those programmes with tremendous skill but it was not for me.

Int: That was coming in through Partridge Films, wasn't it?

PJ: Yes, that was.

Int: Probably the bigger surprise to them as it was to you actually I think.

PJ: Yes. To a certain extent Trials of Life (33) had set something in motion because the immediacy of some of the filming, and the power of some of the scenes, could easily lend itself to natural history going off in hot pursuit of, I think, the sensational. I don't think the Trials of Life (33) was sensational. Everything in it was rooted in science but clearly there were scenes of such power that were so overwhelming, that many people felt this was bound to be the way that natural history would go.

In the United States, Time Life took over the distribution of the programme and they wanted it distributed on DVD [meant – home video], and made huge sales by virtue of a quite sensational [US] commercial. Which went out —. They probably spent more on the commercial [rumoured to have cost $25 million] and putting that out than we perhaps spent making the programme. But anyway it generated $100m worth of home video sales. It was home video then not DVD, wasn't it? So in a way perhaps the Trials of Life (33) had sort of planted the seeds of various things that were going to take natural history in these different direction.

I mean I'm pleased to say that the Attenborough [series] continued. Indeed, there was a point on the Trials of Life (33) when David [Attenborough], Keenan [Smart] and I were crossing Serengeti at the end of a filming trip, when Keenan and David were in conversation. I think David led it off by saying you know "If you think about growing up, finding food, passing on your genes, mating, plants do this as well as animals, except they have to do it rooted to the spot. So that little conversation obviously led to David's genesis of The Life of Plants (35) which was brilliantly executed a few years later by Mike Salisbury and his team.

So there was a kind of continuity there which continued to the Natural History Unit. But as an independent, we were able to develop our series but the fact remains that it was quite hard as an independent in the 90s getting all the necessary co-producers. And I think it does reflect in the way on the situation that three very good series made by different Bristol independents. There's a wonderful African series from Tigress (36) and another fantastic, futuristic film, The Future is Wild (37), about how evolution might go in the future. We did the Triumph of Life (38).

Int: Triumph of Life (38) never got shown in England, did it?

PJ: Nor did the other two, this is my point.

Int: Nor the other two, I see.

PJ: So major pieces of work done by independents, much sought after and praised throughout the world. Triumph of Life (38) had record breaking viewing figures on PBS and I think what that reflected was this changing ecology in Britain itself. Essentially Anglia Survival had collapsed so ITV [Independent Television] was no longer providing a home for natural history programme makers. Channel 4 was not keen to be seen to following in the tracks of the BBC. Channel 5 at that time hadn't embraced natural history. The BBC was keen, obviously with its own staff, to work with them and to hang on to the ownership of the increasingly valuable digital rights that were going to become really part of the vital sort of assets of the late 90s.

Int: It was a shrinking BBC at that time.

PJ: And it was a shrinking BBC but not in the Natural History Unit, the Natural History Unit expanded.

Int: But it had no film crews and it had no film unit, did it, as such?

PJ: No. But basically if you look at the output, the number of staff continued to increase. And so —.

Int: That was production staff?

PJ: Yes. So essentially the position of the independents of the 90s was that it might be wise to have a few other irons in the fire. I had always wanted in any case to pursue an interest in primate work, and especially the primate work much closer to us than anything else, which is frankly the story of human evolution. So the story of human evolution became our first big Green Umbrella project. We were doing a natural history series at the time, Living Europe (39), and then we got more deeply into science and the history of science.

So in a sense Green Umbrella was the way in which my Horizon (3) work and the natural history work all was coming together in the one company. The history of science became of particular interest to me because I'd actually come to think that science has been with us for just a few centuries, and yet it seems to us as though what we believe in today is so different from what we believed in yesterday and yet all of it really occupies such a relatively tiny time span. And yet the way the steps that were taken historically in getting us from the time of Galileo to Einstein, and to the present day, to the Hamiltons [Bill] and the Dawkins [Richard] and others, I found increasingly interesting. Part of that I dealt with way back in the Horizon (3) days by looking at the history of medicine in the Microbe Hunters (40). So we then recognised that the history of science, how we got to where we are, is an extraordinary story, so we touched upon it then. We did one or two specials on The Natural World (18), about Wallace (41), so that enabled us again to look at how we got to where we are. We in Green Umbrella did Einstein (42), the story of John Harrison in Longitude (43), Galileo in Galileo's Daughter (44).

So a new strand was emerging which, given the changing ecology of broadcasting, became a life saving strand for the company because it meant we had a diverse range of output, at a time when it was becoming harder and harder to get commissions. Things were becoming more and more competitive. We've talked our budgets a little [note – A sharp division was emerging between low cost, long runs of cheap programmes shot quickly on tape and the costly ‘high end’ shows that Green Umbrella made through the 1990s. We stuck with the latter even though it was harder – very much harder – to get commissions. These programmes were also going to get more expensive with the onerous requirements of High Definition. It turned out that Triumph of Life (38) was the last ‘high-end’ series to be commissioned from an Independent (along with an African series from Tigress (36)]. Certainly there were some very big and generous budgets available in the BBC but they were not going to come out independents. And as a result of that, in conversations with some of my team, my best advice to them was, well, go into the BBC. Some of them have done that, like Mark Linfield and Catherine Jeffs and other people on the team, and they’ve done extremely well and I like to think anyway that their training at Green Umbrella put them in a very good position to take advantage then of everything that the BBC could offer them, that in fact we were unable to in Green Umbrella as the commissioning process dried up really round about '99 and the year 2000. But by then we were well on our way to developing our interest in history and the history of science.

Int: Excellent. Peter, so we wait with baited breath the next 50 years.

PJ: Indeed. Let's think about the next 15 certainly.

END

Glossary

Altruism (altruistic): In Zoology, the instinctive cooperative behaviour that may seem detrimental to the individual but contributes to the survival of the species.

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.

Darwinian: Theory of evolution by natural selection.

Group selection: A form of natural selection proposed to explain the evolution of behaviour which appears to be for the long-term good of a group or species, rather than the immediate advantage of the individual.

Missile silo: An underground vertical cylindrical container for the storage and launching of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Post production: The processes of film-making which take place after shooting has been completed, i.e. editing and dubbing etc.

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