



## Tom Poore: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Tom Poore

**Name of interviewer:**

Michael Bright

**Name of cameraman:**

Mark Wheeler

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**Place of interview:**

Stoke St Michael, Shepton Mallet, UK

**Length of interview:**

c. 70 minutes

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### 1. How Tom came to work for the BBC

*Int: Okay. Tom, let's take you back, right back to right at the beginning. How did you get involved in this industry?*

TP: As a child I was always fascinated by radio, even, I remember at sort of eight and nine, Children's Hour (1) was a must. The stories dramatised on children's television were fascinating and I'd wondered who was it and where was it that these voices came from. What motivated them to do it? I subsequently discovered, of course, Broadcasting House and the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], and at the age of 10 I sang in a choir at the Queen's Hall. The Queen's Hall was then almost next to BH in London, Broadcasting House in London. In the interval we went out and I went out of the building and walked round this massive edifice called Broadcasting House and I thought, "My goodness, that's where it comes from". I walked round the pavement and they had these glass panels in the pavement and I could imagine people sitting there and talking and doing radio and maybe Children's Hour (1). Maybe I was standing on whatever that was Children's Hour (1). It was that, I think, first of all made me realise that that's where I wanted to be.

However, my parents put me into a shipping office in Leadenhall Street, Ellerman Lines, which I loathed. After about six weeks I walked out of there and Leadenhall Street's quite a way from BH. But I walked all the way from there through the City to Broadcasting House which was during the war, of course, and it was sandbagged and there was a great fat commissioner outside. I went up to him and I said how do I get a job in here? Surprisingly he said, "Come with me, my son", and I actually was taken inside this wonderful



building. The reception hall in BH then, and still is for me, quite something. However, he took me to a lady called Mrs Killum-Roberts who people maybe watching this will have known her. She was the personnel officer. She gave me a great form to fill in. Anyway I went home, filled it in, sent it back to the BBC.

The net result: I was offered a job. Mind you, it was during the war and they would accept anybody but anybody, and that's the only reason I got in I think. I was put into a department called Registry. Now Registry dealt with all the mail that came to the BBC which was just addressed "BBC, London". I had to read it and decide to which department the letter was relevant and send it to them in the internal post. So that's how I actually got in and anybody now, of course, won't be able to do that. That's not the way of things but it was then during the war. I had a wonderful time.

The next sort of milestone was that I was called up in 1943, a reluctant soldier I have to say. I'm a professional coward and was and still am probably. So that I didn't envisage going into the army with any great glee. However, ultimately I became a radio operator which again was akin to what I liked and believed in, and did the normal thing. I did June 6<sup>th</sup> [1944, Battle of Normandy, World War II] in Normandy and through Normandy, where I met for the first time a guy called Frank Gillard. I was in a half track vehicle with a radio in it and a six foot mast on it. I stopped the driver and said, "Look hang on a minute", and I got out and Frank was doing a piece, not to camera of course but only sound. So I waited until he'd finished and I went up to him and said, well, "Excuse me, but I'm also from the BBC. How are you? Who are you?" And Frank – wonderful man – we had a little chat. Anyway we hear about Frank later in my career.

After the war was – oh no – then after the European thing was over I went to the Middle East and had an opportunity to join Forces Broadcasting. There was an advert in a local forces' Radio Times would you believe. If any ex-members of BBC would like to work in Forces Broadcasting. So I ended up in Forces Broadcasting in Cairo and then we moved to Jerusalem, and I was made Head of Recorded Programmes, fantastic title but I was only a clerk. The net result was that we had discs on 78[rpm] sent out from the BBC to transmit on our transmitter, and I shepherded all those through the Middle East to various broadcasting stations in the Middle East.

The end of the war: I had to get back into BBC because I wasn't established staff. So I had to tell them what a good job I'd done with FBS and whatever, and I was put into the Gramophone Department which suited me very well because I love music, and I spent a while there. After two years I suppose, no, more than that, three or four years, I decided I didn't like driving into London from Leatherhead where I lived. It was an hour of hell and I thought they're doing rather nice programmes in Bristol. My first film commitment in London was in 1960 when I put in for a job as assistant film editor. My first director was David Attenborough and I've worked with David now throughout since 1960 in one way or another, with Wildlife on One (2), occasionally he did Natural World's (3).

## **2. The early years at the BBC**

*Int: Let's go back to when you first met David [Attenborough]. On what occasion was that?*

TP: I was an assistant editor in Ealing and my editor was a guy called Bob Walter, and he was editing for David. David was doing his fairly new fronting of natural history programmes throughout the world. One of them Bob was doing and David was in the cutting room a lot, and so that I first met David during the production of a film called, it was an Aborigine film, People of the Dreamtime (4) which David will remember, a very nice film. So that was 1960, that's the first time I met David. He was then a PA, a production assistant, on the Natural World (3). So that was my first encounter with David.

Then I decided to come to Bristol, also knowing that David probably was going to do the same, although not live there but do programmes in Bristol. I got on very well David and I thought, "What a good idea, let's go and do natural history in Bristol". I mean who am I to think I could suddenly change tack but it was so easy. There wasn't a problem about changing over. Of course I had to find a house and do all that kind of stuff. However, my first production in Bristol, I was then an editor, and the first production I did was the Look (5) series with Sir Peter Scott who I enjoyed working with immensely, wonderful sense of humour, super man. I did one series with him. But I had a problem in that I really couldn't stand the producer whose name at this point should be anonymous. I really couldn't work with him and I went to film edit office and said, "Look, you've got to take me off this because there's no way I'm going to spend my career with this guy". So I was reluctantly taken off it and I never worked with him again.

*Int: In that series, what sort of programmes were they?*

TP: I think I edited the first colour film. No, the first colour film was a film about an oak tree (6) which Chris Parsons produced. I did the second one which was The Private Life of the Kingfisher (7) shot by Ron Eastman on the River Test in Hampshire, absolutely brilliant stuff. He took two years to film it and it was during one of the worst winters in 1970 something or other, I can't remember. No, it can't have been 1970, it must have been 1968. A fascinating film, absolutely [an] editor's dream. He shot so well. Everything was covered and the shots were brilliant, and I had a super time on it. That was part of the Look (5) series incidentally which Peter [Scott] did the commentary for.

Yes, well, doing a natural history film with Peter Scott on praying mantis (8), and the habit of the mantis female is that after they've copulated she bites his head off and it falls to the floor. This happened on film and so we cut it in, and when the film had been finished Peter Scott came in to write his commentary in my **cutting room**. The producer was away at the time on holiday or something. Peter got to this piece where the head had fallen off and he said, "What can I say over this?" I said, "Well, how about, f\*\*k me, no head", and Peter didn't react too well to this. I thought, "Oh dear, I've overdone it".

Anyway, we ultimately went to record the commentary in the studio, in a sound studio, and Peter recorded his straight commentary, and at the end of which he said, "What was that line you wanted me to do when the head fell off?" So I said to him, "Well, how about, f\*\*k me, no head". So we had a very pretty woman on the desk in the booth and Peter said, "Okay, I'm ready", and he suddenly said, "Well, f\*\*k me, no head", and she nearly died, this woman. She was the SM [studio manager]. Anyway, the offshot of it was that we took this back to the **cutting room** and I cut it in to the soundtrack for the producer to hear when he came back. He wasn't at all amused and insisted that we throw it away. Of course we were going to anyway. However, I put it on a shelf in the cutting room, cut into a track, and went on holiday. While I was on holiday Enterprises asked for a soundtrack of the mantis film so that they could use it. My assistant, not knowing because I'd actually cut this piece in, sent that track up to Enterprises. I came back off leave just in time to pull it. So, that's a little –. It's the sort of thing –. Peter actually loved it, Scott, but at first he didn't show it. But he had a wonderful sense of humour and thought that was funny. So that was that little tale about praying mantises.

*Int: Who was around at that time? How big was the [BBC Natural History] Unit?*

TP: Desmond Hawkins was head of the unit, I think, at the time. Chris [Parsons] was senior producer, executive producer. I don't know they called them then. Peter Bale, Doug Thomas who was doing Animal Magic (9).

*Int: Tony Soper?*

TP: Tony was never on staff. Tony came in –.At that time he wasn't on staff, he was originally but he'd gone by then. He made appearances and did odd things. I don't mean odd things but he came and did items. But I don't recollect doing a whole film with Tony.

*Int: You had the Look (5) series running then. What else was being broadcast at about that time then?*

TP: I'm not absolutely certain about dates here but I think Look (5) was dropped for reasons various. I don't know whether Peter [Scott] didn't want to do any more or whether the pundits in the BBC felt it had run its course. But The Natural World (3) came along. I can't say it replaced it because Peter's was only half hours [episodes] as I remember.

*Int: World About Us (10) was first, wasn't it?*

TP: It was indeed. It was called World About Us (10) to begin with which was a 50 minute series and wonderful stuff.

*Int: You worked on some of those?*

TP: Yes, did quite a few of those.

*Int: Can you recall some of the films that you worked on?*

TP: No. A long time ago, 35 years ago chaps.

### **3. The editing process**

*Int: When you were working on those days, how actually did you edit the film? What was the process that you went through?*

TP: The process generally at that time, and I suppose continued with variation, was that the first sight we had of any filming was that they would be viewed in the theatre, in the huts where we were editing in BH in Bristol. So we had a viewing which might last from anything from three to five hours, with the director, producer. So that was my first sight.

*Int: So to view you actually sat in a viewing theatre?*

TP: I viewed the whole lot. It was partly a technical exercise for camerawork and lighting and whatever, which you don't get on a Steenbeck, it had to be projected. So that was the first and then it comes to the **cutting room**. The producer will, with luck, come in with a draft edit. Shots weren't normally numbered as I recollect on natural history filming, correct me. We had boards I think if it was sync but generally **[new]** stuff didn't. So producer couldn't call for shot 65, so we went through sequentially and pulled out all the shots relevant to the first sequence in the film and hung them up on **[trim] bin**. That process proceeded and took anything up to two weeks to do. Then having hung them all up, the producer would disappear and say, Tom, I'd like you to make something out of sequence A, B and C to start with. Then I would put them on the Steenbeck and endeavour to do that. Most times it wasn't a problem but because of the existences of some filming, not all the correct shots could be got to make continuity of sequence. So we sometimes had problems. I always claim that I can muck up good filming but sometimes make a good job out of bad filming. But that's my own sort of thoughts on it. I had a wonderful time there. It satisfied me totally. I didn't have a stress problem. There were no stress in –, for me anyway. I think stress came along possibly at the time of the Life on Earth (11) series. Not that it was difficult to edit but it went on for three years.

#### **4. The effect of the Life on Earth series**

*Int: You were involved in Life on Earth (11)?*

TP: No, it was suggested would I like to do it and I was doing something which was quite long lasting, and I hadn't realised the potential of this so-called Life on Earth (11) series. I don't really know what it was all about and they said, "It's going to be a long run", like two years plus. I thought I don't think I want to get stuck on something for all that long and didn't do it. Whether they were serious about me editing it I don't know. But anyway Ron Martin did it in the end which was wonderful because he thoroughly enjoyed that.

*Int: There was a change in the way that programmes were made with that series coming in. There was a change of atmosphere.*

TP: I think the change of atmosphere was basically what the Natural History Unit started to do. Up until that time filming was with people like Ron [Eastman] doing the kingfisher film (7), Tony Soper and so on. But with the advent of Life on Earth (11) the Natural History Unit suddenly began to do what was termed **blue chip** films, and blue chip films they really were. Quite big budgets I believe, although I had nothing to do with budgets and didn't care. But it was obvious during and after Life on Earth (11) that the Unit's output became much more - critical's the wrong word - believable, filmed well, made blue chip films really which hadn't happened until Chris [Parsons] started with Life on Earth (11). Life on Earth (11) was the watershed really for what followed.

*Int: Pre Life on Earth (11) then would you say, was that the time of the dedicated amateur?*

TP: Yes. But alongside the dedicated amateur we had staff crews who were equally dedicated but perhaps not so much as, say, Ron Eastman with his kingfishers because he lived kingfishers. And because he lived kingfishers he was able to film them so well, objectively, and whatever else. Staff cameraman, there's a weird thing about staff people. As an editor I tended to find that it was a bit of a mill. You worked six weeks on a film and on Friday night you finished it and that was the end of it. On Monday morning there was another load of stuff came in with another producer who said, "Tom, this is the best thing since sliced bread". Most of the restarts on each film, after a six week edit, most of those were the best films since sliced bread and it was a bit of a mill going through. I think, going back to cameramen, cameramen after they'd had a hectic jaunt through the Amazon jungle came back and were asked to go to Turkey. Can you expect them to be as

dedicated as the Ron Eastmans? I hope that's the answer to your question - that a dedicated cameraman like Ron, staff cameramen had to be pretty good to apply themselves in the way he did. Not to say they weren't any good but didn't have quite the same dedication, I suspect.

## **5. Working as a freelance editor and IMAX**

*Int: How long did you stay with the BBC?*

TP: I went to Bristol in 1960, sorry 1964, and I left. I decided to go to freelance. I wasn't disillusioned with either the outfit or what I was doing within the BBC, I loved every minute of it. I never had a trauma except for the one producer I referred to earlier. But I was asked to do the fourth leopard film (12). I'd done three (13) and a fourth one came along, and I thought, "I think I've gone full cycle here, I think I might like to try something else". It was a bit of an ego trip. I was the first one to leave BBC and set up an editing suite outside which was a risk but I was prepared to take it. But it was just that I wanted to expand my experience a bit. And the net result of that was –.

I started off incidentally by a producer Peter Crawford in the BBC, who I'd worked with for years, 10 years more or less I suppose. We got on so well and I told him I was going to leave. He was going to do a series In the Country (14) with Angela Rippon. He said, "Would you like to take this outside, Tom?" which was like nine months work or whatever which was wonderful, set me up, super. So I did this with Peter and the BBC, for whatever reason, continued to use me as a freelance editor. I'd go to the sort of leopard syndrome almost again where I was doing outside what I had desired to leave, [I was] doing the same films again. Then a film shot by whose name I can't remember, the meerkat film.

*Int: Meerkats United (15).*

TP: Meerkats United (15) which was probably after Ron Eastman's film (7) the best shot film I had to edit.

*Int: Marion Zunz was the producer.*

TP: Marion Zunz was the producer and I had probably the most exciting time with that. It could have gone out as **rushes**, it was so well shot but I like to think I added something to it. However, the net result of that, doing that film, it got an award here and there, not for editing but because it was a good film. Afterwards Chris Parsons, who was about to leave BBC, he had been head of the Unit and he decided that he was going to go freelance, not retirement but he went early. He rang me one day and he said, "Tom, how about you and I joining forces as a company?" He said, "I'll be the think tank and you be the front end", and I couldn't believe this. I mean Chris was the ultimate in people to run things and I thought, "What the hell's he want me for". However I said, "Yes, that'll be fine".

So we set up a company in Tyndalls Park Road and I then did a couple of films in America for private producers. They'd seen some of the stuff I'd done for the BBC on WNET and WGBH in Boston. I think it was not because I was any better than anybody else but I'd got a funny name and that was the name they could remember. So they rang this guy called Tom Poore and said would you do a film for me? So I went to Lake Tahoe, it's a fabulous place, to do a film with a very, very tricky lady. However, we dubbed that in New York and then I went on holiday in Washington because I was over there and Joan [Poore], my wife, came over and we went on holiday.

We went to Washington and we went to the Space Museum in Washington, in which there was an IMAX theatre. We saw a film called *The Dream is Alive* (16) which was shot on a space shuttle. Absolutely brilliant, stunning, mind boggling. I came back and I said to Chris [Parsons], "Look, have you seen this IMAX caper?" and he said, "No, what's all that about?" I said, "It's widescreen and all this business". So to cut a long story short, Chris and I went up to Bradford where the only IMAX theatre in the UK was, and we saw a film up there and he was knocked out as well. I think he saw *The Dream is Alive* (16), I can't remember, and he said, "We've got to get in on this, we must do some of this".

Anyway, the offshoot was that we did three films on IMAX. One for the Koreans for Expo Korea, whatever year it was in Seoul (17). Then we did another one called *Survival Island* (18) which David Attenborough was involved, down in the Antarctic. Super films to do but the editing technique was, not totally different, but you had to be aware that some of the things that we did you could not do on IMAX. For instance, IMAX shots are much longer than normal television shots. The reason being that the screen is so big you have to allow the audience a scan time, in other words, they've got to be able to read the shot. You can't take in the whole of an IMAX screen in one go, like you can on normal cinema screen even or certainly television. So you have to allow scan time.

The other thing you can't do is montage, quick montage. The screen again, because of its size, you can't take in the montage cut situation, it doesn't work. The other thing they tried drama on IMAX, they did *The Alamo* (19), we didn't do it but I saw it and thought this doesn't work. Drama didn't work for me simply because on IMAX you would have two people in reasonable close-up talking to each other, and it was unreal, they were too big. You didn't take in the whole of, a), what they were saying because the picture was so big you had to go round it like this, and while you were going round it like this you lost what was being said. So that drama for me didn't work. I think they've done some subsequently. But IMAX is essentially an excitement thing - fairgrounds, waterfalls, *Grand Canyon* (20), brilliant film, wonderful, shown every day in the *Grand Canyon* IMAX theatre.

*Int: You think IMAX works or wildlife works on IMAX?*

TP: Yes. I'm not too sure close up behaviour works. Nesting whatever, building small nests and so on, I don't think those work.

*Int: Because again it gets out of scale.*

TP: That right, yes.

*Int: But great vistas.*

TP: But panoramic. It's a pity really that you end up with so many aerial shots in a way which of, *Grand Canyon* (20) was mostly that. So, yes, panorama and excitement. I often ask how long IMAX can last. I'm not in the business now so I can't talk to anybody about it. But I get the feeling there's going to come a time with IMAX when they've done it.



*Int: I think probably the digital projected high definition is probably going to take its place.*

TP: I couldn't see anything wrong with the IMAX image, the celluloid image.

*Int: How did you actually go about editing it because the film was actually enormous I believe? You can't edit the film.*

TP: Yes, I've got my wallet. [Holds up wallet] This is roughly the size of an IMAX frame, something like that. We couldn't edit that clearly, so it had to be reduced to 35mm and we had to get in a 35mm Steenbeck because obviously we'd always been working on 16mm. So I had to get into the 35mm mode which I'd never done. I mean I wasn't in the business when everything was on 35mm. So we ended up cutting 35mm. What we did with the first film, we got a director over from IMAX from Toronto, to come and look at our rough cut because Chris [Parsons] and I weren't sure whether we were allowing, what I would call, scan time on our long shots. It turned out to be that Chris and I had got it right but we had to have somebody over from Toronto to make absolutely sure. There were no point in going right through business of getting a show copy if the edits are wrong. But we managed it more or less.

*Int: Did you do all that on the Steenbeck?*

TP: On a Steenbeck, yes.

*Int: On 35mm?*

TP: On 35mm. But we then had the problem of viewing our rough cuts on something that would be a bit like an IMAX screen. So we hired the Whiteladies cinema which was a normal cinema screen. But we sat on the stage right up against the screen which gave us as near to an IMAX image as we were ever going to get. We had to have scan time. We had to do that with it, which is what the audience on IMAX was going to do. So we had to view everything in the Whiteladies cinema which was tedious actually. If we found something on there that we didn't actually like the look of too much, either the colour grading or whatever, we had to get another shot graded and go in to look at maybe two shots, to see that we'd make the right corrections or we'd cut it differently. So it was up and down to Whiteladies cinema, only a couple of hundred yards from where we were in our office but it was tedious. So then the final 35mm was sent to the [United] States to have the IMAX footage cut to it, in other words **neg[ative] cut** to it. They actually had the neg of course. What happened next? We then had to go to Bradford to view the first **neg cut** and **grade**.

*Int: A kind of arts print.*

TP: An arts?? print, absolutely right, which was a long way to go but we didn't mind, it was fun. We would make corrections because Chris [Parsons] and I knew the film so well, it was shot 68 we wanted to change, so we just jotted it down, change colour or whatever. Then that would go all the way back to LA and then they'd send another one and we say, "Okay, that's it".

*Int: When you saw your first IMAX film, the proper arts print up on the screen in Bradford, what was your reaction?*

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TP: Did I do this? No, not did I do it, did we do it? I was very conscious that I had to be totally honest about whether it was edited in a viewable way. There's no good saying, "Oh dear, I didn't cut that properly", because if I didn't cut it properly then it was going to look bad all round wherever it was going. I don't think we had any big problems in that way but, yes, you had to be very critical of what you'd done. The sound was amazing. We didn't have the sound at first to view the arts prints of course. But then we went to Toronto to a very, very swish dubbing suite and spent two weeks dubbing it, 40 minutes they were.

My view is that an audience actually can't take more than 40 minutes which was something that was wrong with *The Alamo* (19), because I think *The Alamo* (19) was an hour or hour and a half or something, and your audience can only take 40 minutes of that big image. I don't know whether they get tired. I saw the Rolling Stones film (21) which lasted an hour and a half or two hours or whatever, and two-thirds of the way through it I thought, "I've had this". It was too big.

## **6. The changes in film technology**

*Int: In your time you've seen quite a few technological changes. I mean there was another one which you went through and that's the jump between the Steenbeck and the digital editing suite. Can you just talk us through that experience?*

TP: Yes, I can take you back one, I think, on that. We used to have a thing called a Movieola which was an upright viewing machine with your shots belted through a prism, and you looked at it on a tiny little thing on this and you had to decide where to cut with that. They were difficult. Then we got Steenbeck. Steenbecks were a beautiful machine, loved them. Then the time came after I'd left. I'd set up my **cutting rooms** with three Steenbecks with three editors and electronic came in - Avid, Lightworks, et al. I decided to go for Lightworks for whatever reason but totally different technique, no handling film. There was an editor in Bristol who if he wasn't sure whether a shot was long enough, he'd pull it out to the length of his arms and stick it in, didn't always work. Well, you couldn't do that with keyboard things. The machine cost the earth incidentally, my Lightworks cost something like 28 grand. Well that for a freelance editor is like taking out a mortgage on a house. So I bought the first one reluctantly and took me quite a while to get hold of how to use it. It was so flexible.

One of the problems with Avid and Lightworks was you had the option of cutting a sequence and parking it upstairs somewhere, and cutting it again in another way. Some directors would want to do this six times and see an edit six different ways. Now the budgets for editing time were getting tighter but they said, "Oh, it's much quicker on Avid and Lightworks to edit". It was but if the director wanted to cut each sequence six times it wasn't quicker. So the editor had to have the ability to tactfully say, "Look chum, we've done it three times, forget it". It didn't always work but that was the difference. Of course, we didn't have to handle film, we didn't have to have the **neg cut**. Wonderful because that was tedious.

*Int: But you didn't have so much thinking time when you got into that. When you were handling filming because you actually had to move things from A to B, you had time to think and the producer had time to think, the editor had time to think.*

TP: I think yes.

*Int: Quite a change wasn't it?*

TP: Maybe a little bit but I always insisted on maintaining a thinking time, although it was coming up electronically. Yes, I know what you're saying, while you're handling it you can be thinking about something else. But if I wanted to think about how to do something I wasn't deterred by the fact that it could be done quickly and therefore I'd better get on with it. For me it was going to take as long to decide which shot to use. But the physical handling of a film, yes you're right, did you give time.

*Int: Have you seen a change in the way that films have been edited during your time in the business?*

TP: Yes, particularly now and this I think is partly to do with budgets. Editing time, I think, has been cut down and shortcuts are being taken in sequential editing and how stuff is put together. Let me just give you an example of how I think, well I know it's changed. The chap coming home from the office is filmed driving up to his house in his car, opens his door, close-up of the door being closed, walks up his drive, key in the keyhole, close-up of key in the keyhole, goes indoors, puts his slippers on, sits down, reads the paper. Now, unjustifiably in my view, you see the car arriving at the house and the next shot is him sitting in his chair reading a paper. I don't think there's anything wrong with that and didn't bother me. At first I thought, "Oh dear, yes, we've lost something here", but it actually worked. But what's happening now, and I suppose it's mostly corrupted in soaps, I end up not knowing because of sequence changes, location changes within sequence, you end up not knowing where you are. They're changing sequences so quickly now. Sequences are short and it's almost montage of sequences.

*Int: Is this true of wildlife films too?*

TP: No, not quite as much. But I think a lot of the corners have been cut, whereas you would worry for a long time. If you'd got seagulls in flight, you would wonder about when you cut to a close-up of a seagull, whether he was bent over that way like it was in the long shot, and when you go close he's got to be the same. I'm not sure that's now the case but I'm maybe open to correction. I think corners are being cut a bit.

The other big thing for me, and this is in defence of editors, I think producers are more and more going towards desktop editing. In other words, they will put a series of shots together and sequences together and then ring film image up and say, "Can I have an editor to smooth this lot out?" Now this happened to me with Hugh Miles who I'd worked with for many years, did about 10 films with Hugh Miles. One day he came to me and said, "Tom, I've got a Steenbeck at home, I'm going to do a rough cut, and then if I could bring it in and you could sort it out for me". I said, "Hugh, don't ask me to do that because unless I'm in on the beginning I'm not sure whether the potential in **rushes** is actually got on the screen. It's not a question of whether you know yourself but I'm a third eye or second eye, and I can see the holes in things that you might not. Because you shot a shot with your water up to here in a lake you want to use it, if it's no good I don't want to use it, Hugh". So we parted amicably. I didn't do anymore of Hugh's films, my assistant actually took over the 'would you come and tidy my film up'. She had a wonderful time and is now an editor, full editor. But that was the beginning of people saying "I want do a rough cut". It was all to do with budgets.

Partly Hugh liked to begin where the editor began but it was partly finance, where he couldn't afford the **cutting room** slot. So that budgets are cutting back on the editor's function. Now you may say and quite rightly, that I'm looking after my profession but ultimately editors are going to be dumped out of the system if that goes on. I'm not sure how many producers are going to say this ought to be tidied up after I've cut it in my office. I don't know. But Final Cut Pro, which is what most of them are using now, is such a good machine that a producer can afford to spend time and he probably stays there all night doing it, I don't know.

But it could be the function of editor, maybe not disappearing totally, but certainly not being used as much.

*Int: You mention editing assistants. You had some quite talented editorial assistants.*

TP: Yes, I was quite lucky. My career packed up when I was 77. I decided I'd shut the office, I didn't want to be a joke but I'll tell you why I went on so long. That I had young assistants with me from 1980, I suppose, well, and earlier, who pushed me into looking at new ways of editing. A lot of what they said I was not prepared to accept but I moved on with them, and I'm not sure whether I would have moved on myself. The 'guy getting out of his car going into his sitting room' syndrome, would I have done that? I had an assistant called Joe Garrett and another one afterwards called Julie Mitchell who were both very, very intelligent and potentially - they're now editors - were so good that they kept me on the ball. Had I not had this kind of input into my work I think I would have gone on with the guy putting his key in the door. I'm not sure because I'm not stupid and I watch television and I know how things are changing. But those two girls certainly would say to me, "Tom, why don't we try this?" I'd say, "Bugger off, I want to do it my way". Well when I'd gone to lunch they'd have a go at it because you could do that on LightWorks, and they'd show me the sequence. They were absolutely right. Change, move on. Nothing is static in this world and certainly technique of production has changed.

*Int: Looking back again, was there any film which you found especially challenging, that sticks in your mind?*

TP: Yes, challenging in that it was boring, it was the most boring film I've ever done. Chris Parsons went to New Zealand and made a 50 minuter on some flaming robin (22), one actor. I loved Chris and we got on so well, this is before I left BBC. And he came into the **cutting room** with this thing and I said, "Oh gosh, a robin, Chris, wonderful pretty bird". He'd got about 10 years of **rushes** on this thing. We went through it and I said, "Chris, this is so boring, God, this is a boring film". Chris being the way he was, "Yes, yes, okay Tom, let's get on with it". It was, a) difficult to cut because what do you do with a robin? We spent the normal six weeks on it at the end of which I thought, "Thank God for that". Chris and I, after we went outside freelance, every now and again I would remind him of the most boring film that anybody has ever filmed or asked an editor to edit. It was that one, I can't remember what the robin was called. But it didn't harm our relationship at all because Chris is the kind of person he was, it wouldn't.

*Int: Do you have a favourite? One that sticks in your mind because it was so good?*

TP: Meerkats (15) and Ron's kingfisher film (7). But I think Meerkats (15), it had never been filmed before I don't think but this wonderful animal, this head. Take a close-up of that afterwards. This wonderful head and such an inquisitive animal, and shot brilliantly and we'd never seen them before. And that, I suppose, probably the film that I look at as being my favourite film and it's been shown so many times. There have been subsequent meerkat films but I don't think that the impact of the first one was ever superseded in quite the same way.

## **7. Moving from radio to editing**

*Int: You were in London in the early years. Were you born there? Was that the kind of area you were brought up?*

TP: I was born in Streatham, born in London, yes. I mean the reason I was in London was because, a) I went to Broadcasting House to get this job in radio. I couldn't believe my luck on that, amazing. I got married and we lived in Shepherd's Bush.

*Int: You said you were working on the music, you were playing discs and then you kind of jumped to being an editor. We didn't have any time to find out how that transition came about.*

TP: My job in Gramophone Department was, again, ideal for me, although the spoken word I suppose I what I was really wanting to do but I don't think I was intelligent enough to write anything or produce things like that. I ended up in the period I had in Gramophone Department of having to test all the 78s [rpm], they were 78s then, of all of the stuff that was going on broadcast, on radio. Actually play them to check there were no clicks and things in them. I managed to get all the classical programmes fortunately, so that my knowledge of classical music on record leapt. I had an enduring interest in it from them on. Then leaping ahead to when Chris [Parsons] and I, he producing and I editing his films. He would say to me, "Tom, let's have some music over this" and both he and I were musical, and both adored Vaughan Williams. Vaughan Williams suited film so well. I moved on actually and wanted to use more modern music, and Chris had an underwater film (23). I had just heard of a guy called Olivier Messiaen who wrote fairly peculiar music but somehow fitted film very well. He wrote a piece called L'Ascension (24) and one of the movements in L'Ascension (24) I liked and I realised that it would fit underwater jellyfish pulsating and so on. Chris came down and he said, "Whose music is this?" and I don't think he had heard of Messiaen. However, we used it in that and Chris and I were so attuned as to what music was right, so we had a super time choosing stuff.

I did a film on Peter Scott, it turned out to be his obit[uary] (25). He died just before we'd finished it and I used music in that that I knew Peter liked. He was a great [Frederick]

Delius fan and I used the Koanga (26) of Delius in that, and other things that I knew Peter liked. So I was able to bring hopefully something else other than the pictures into that film. Was it Marion Zunz that produced that? No, it wasn't.

*Int: No, it was mother.*

TP: Yes, mother did it. What's mother's other name?

*Int: I'm trying to think.*

TP: It doesn't matter. However, mother and I did this film and loved it. Peter Scott at 80 was still gliding, wonderful, and I loved him dearly.

You can edit this, can't you? Can I just go back to the meeting with Frank Gillard in Normandy?

Having met Frank in Normandy as this wonderful BBC correspondent guy, when I came to Bristol he had just retired. He was head of everything in Bristol. What do they call that? Controller Bristol. After he retired, I was then outside freelance, the BBC decided to do a series called BBC History (27) which was a **sub judice** set of programmes, not to be seen, totally private, in a locked vault in somewhere. But we interviewed chairmen every six months - Duke Hussey and whatever, every six months - and anybody who'd been anybody in the BBC we interviewed them.

Frank was the interviewer, he was doing your job, and I got on so well with Frank, he was such a wonderful man. We used to have to go to London to do these things and I invariably drove because he'd got quite ancient by then, he must have been 90, nearly, and I was always drove. But he was such an interesting man without being 'I am the big'. I mean he'd been Head of Radio in London and he was renowned in the media, certainly on radio.

*Int: Did he have any influence on the natural history broadcasting?*

TP: No but he encouraged Desmond Hawkins, who really I suppose was probably the setter up of the [BBC Natural History] Unit. Frank was very keen that Bristol should do natural history. He was a great innovator. He was the one that started local radio. Frank was the one that started local radio nationwide. He, I think, helped Desmond Hawkins to set up the Unit, yes, because he realised the value of it. He was an amazing man. He died tragically in his club in London. He went up to London and stayed in his club overnight and they went to see him in the morning and he'd died. 1994 I think it was, not sure.

*Int: And still working?*

TP: Yes.

*Int: You mentioned that you worked with David Attenborough in London, in working on some of these films. What was David like to work with in London?*

TP: I was very slightly in awe of David at that time because he'd just started being a front man on natural history programmes. When I actually met him I didn't have a lot to say because clearly this guy had got a lot going for him, and I thought, "Okay Thomas, keep your mouth shut". But in any event we got on very well indeed. He was a very understanding person. He didn't and doesn't suffer fools gladly. I've been on the rare occasions when I think he's lost his rag because somebody actually wasn't up to it. I never experienced that myself but he was a very kindly person. Again, music he loved. He's never driven a car and I always used to drive him home to Richmond every night after we'd finished, and he'd say, come and have a coffee and we'll play a record or whatever. So I spent quite a few hours in his house in Richmond just playing music and meeting Jane, his wife. So that I got to know him quite well, and then he came down. I came down first and then he started doing programmes in Bristol. So we had a sort of identity.

*Int: If you had your time over again, a) would you do anything differently and, b) would you have a different function in wildlife filmmaking? Would you rather have done something else?*

TP: I wanted to be a neurosurgeon when I was 12. I wasn't interested in driving trains but I wanted to be a neurosurgeon. I suppose it was the sort of humanitarian thing of saving lives, and you have all these odd ideas at the age of 12. However, clearly that wasn't going to happen. Six years as a medical student wasn't quite my scene.

In broadcasting would I ever have done anything else? I would quite like to have been on air radio. There are one or two people who, I'm not saying I'm one of them, but Johnny Morris with the Animal Magic (9) thing was so much better on radio. He was a wonderful raconteur and this fooling around on Animal Magic (9) it

didn't actually –. I did a lot of them, I cut a lot of them, we got on very well but I never liked his image on those programmes, and I was quite glad when it died, he wasn't. John Sparks did that. But I would like to have done something like that on radio. I would have liked to have used the medium [inaudible] information, something. Not a newsreader necessarily. I can't think what I would want to do but I quite like the idea of being behind a microphone.

*Int: Again, just jumping around in your life. When you were editing your first editing programmes, well, they weren't wildlife because you were saying anthropological programmes that you did with David [Attenborough]. But were those the first shows you actually edited?*

TP: No, I was the assistant editor on David's series (28). I was made a temporary editor at Ealing. I didn't know what that meant but I had an assistant and all that sort of thing. I was doing things like Meeting Point (29), religious programmes and I didn't actually like it very much. I did the first Blue Peter (30), showed the first birth but I cut the first birth on film that had ever been transmitted, physical birth of a child. That was a sort of a milestone in a way. The producer was called Bidy Baxter. Do you remember Bidy Baxter? Then another one that I quite enjoyed, we did a film with John Percival called The London Schools Symphony Orchestra (31) and that was shot in the Festival Hall. That was for children's. Super little film and I enjoyed doing that. So again it was musical. If I'd had the choice, natural history I enjoyed. I didn't gravitate to it naturally but it happened and I enjoyed it. I supposed I'd liked to have done straight documentary more than I ever did.

*Int: In London did you edit any wildlife films?*

TP: No.

*Int: No. So that started when you came to Bristol then?*

TP: Yes, with Look (5).

*Int: And that was the first thing you did in Bristol?*

TP: No, that was the first series I cut with Peter Scott and I felt wonderful about that because Peter was the epitome of what natural history film's all about. Who the hell am I to come in and work with Peter?

*Int: When you worked in London you were obviously cutting people, mainly people. When you came to Bristol you were cutting animals rather than people. Was there a difference in the way that you had to approach it?*

*Int: I've forgotten what I was asking actually. Let's just go on to the leap from record to editing.*

TP: Yes. Working in radio, I thoroughly enjoyed but I tend to be the kind of person, which has become evident in this interview, that likes to move on a bit. Television was rearing its ugly head and I thought, "I think I owe it to television to try and get a job there". So I applied to be an assistant film editor trainee, knowing absolutely nothing about it. I had no idea what it was about but film interested me and I thought I

will try and become an assistant film editor trainee. So I went for an interview and much to my amazement I actually got a job. I don't know a **positive** from a negative at that point, and again I suppose there must have been a shortage of people. It was bit like when I walked on to Broadcasting House during the war, they hadn't got anybody else so they took me on. However, I got the job and it was just a desire to change tack rather like going freelance. Every 10 years I suddenly decide I'm going to change tack, and that's basically the reason for that, why I got into television. Television intrigued me; I loved what was going on. I'd felt I'd done radio, I hadn't but in my mind I thought it was time. Vision was happening, television was new, and I ended up as a trainee assistant film editor working on the Tonight (32) programme for a while which was horrendous. I did Panorama (33) for a while as an assistant editor. The story behind that is that my daughter, who was then aged two when I was doing Panorama (33), she decided to go into film and she ended up on Panorama (33) in the **cutting room** that I had used when she was two. She was then 21 or something, and I thought, "Got it".

Again David [Poore], my son, is a composer and he's just done David Attenborough's last series, the Life in the Undergrowth (34), and he's going to do the next series (35) for David, writing music for him. Again, I thought, "Done it", it's moved on, kept it in the family. It's a bit incestuous, isn't it?

## **8. The future**

*Int: What do you reckon's going to be next? How do you think this industry, our industry, is going to progress? How do you see it going?*

TP: I'm slightly concerned at the importance the BBC are putting on HD [high definition]. I am totally satisfied with the picture I'm getting on my current screen. I suppose they've got to move on, development happens, but HD is actually going to mean a lot of expense for a lot of people. I'm not talking about digital [television], I'm talking about HD. I don't want a better picture than I've got and if I've got to have a new set of gear to do that, am I going to notice the difference. What I ought to do is to go in somewhere and watch two screens together. But I'm not convinced that I want HD and I'm sure a lot of the viewing public aren't either. They don't particularly want digital but they're going to have it forced on them.

*Int: Do you think the public is going to still want **blue chip** natural history programmes?*

TP: The advent of Sky and all that goes with it, there are rather a lot of production houses now producing natural history films. A lot of the producers are ex-BBC. But I think the output generally of natural history programmes is so much greater than it was when we were the only ones doing it, that I think there's a chance that the public are actually going to say, "I've seen that before". The fact that they've filmed it in a different way and with Living Planet (36), of course, absolutely amazing camera stuff. The fact that it's being shot differently I'm not sure it's going to hold the audience, I just don't know. I personally don't watch every natural history film there is now whereas I did when I worked on it. I think I'd gone through it and I don't want to see everything that's on.

*Int: Is there some advice that you could give to youngsters now starting in the business, whether they're editors or whatever? What would you say to them?*

TP: Well, one of the problems at the moment, the universities are turning out rather too many media people and there aren't enough jobs for them. The fact that you've gone through and done a media course as a student does not necessarily mean you're going to get a job, and maybe 20% are getting jobs and that's

about it. I don't know. But I had so many people when I was freelance coming to me and saying, "Look, I've been to a university media course". You realise that you may be turning away potentially good people but, a) I didn't have the room for them and when they said, "Am I on to a good thing by trying to get into this?" I had to say you may well not be because there are too many people trying to do it. I don't know how I would react if I had a youngster going into the business now. Is it something worth going into? Yes, it probably is but it's so different that I don't think that I can comment.

*Int: If you had unlimited funds and you tied up with a producer and director and whatever, is there a film that you think that you would like to have been involved in? A film which hasn't been made yet.*

TP: I was talking to you earlier before we started filming. I decided I wanted to make a film on Bertsgarten which was [Adolf] Hitler's retreat up in the mountains in Bavaria. I wanted to film the people that looked after Hitler. I wasn't particularly interested in why he was there or the Nazi party. I wanted to know how they got on with him, how they got on with each other. So a cameraman and I set out to start to film up there and film some of the people with their stories. Unfortunately my wife [Joan Poore] died suddenly and I put it on a shelf for about 18 months. I was going to interview people like Trudi Junge who was Hitler's secretary, she did his will in the bunker in Berlin, Martin Boorman's son who's also called Martin Boorman, and the camp commandant of Bertsgarten Oben Gruppe Fuhrer Frank SS ???. We interviewed him, he was wonderful, such a nice guy. But having put it on the shelf after Joan died, I didn't have the courage, a) because two or three of my main contenders to have in the film died and I just couldn't sum up the courage and haven't done to complete it. I also ran out of funds because it was self-financed, I didn't have any money. I did a 70 minute promotional film from it, from the filming we did, and sent it to WNET in New York who said, "Yes, fabulous, come and talk, love to do it". So we'd arranged that I went over there and two days before I was due to go to 9/11 [September 11, 2001 attacks]. Their office was next door to 9/11, WNET, and of course I didn't go and I haven't resurrected it since. I would like to have done that because I enjoyed documentary and I enjoyed interviewing people. I enjoyed cutting interviews and whatever. The answer to your question, would I have preferred it to doing animals, I don't think you can make that sort of statement. It's not a preference, it's just something else.

**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.

**Cutting room:** the room in which the editor works.

**Grade:**

**Negative cutting:** a process where original camera negative is cut and spliced together to match the order specified by the film editor.

**Positive:**

**Rushes:** the first, unedited prints of a film.

**Trim bin:** a large, lined barrel with a row of pins inside on which **takes** of film are hung.





## References

1. *Children's Hour* (BBC Radio, 1936 – 1978)
2. *Wildlife on One* (BBC, 1977 – present)
3. *The Natural World* (BBC, 1983 – present)
4. People of the Dreamtime
5. *Look* (BBC, 1955 – 1969)
6. THE MAJOR (BBC, 1963)
7. THE PRIVATE LIFE OF THE KINGFISHER (Look) (BBC, tx. 3 May 1966)
8. Praying mantis
9. *Animal Magic* (BBC, 1963 - 1984)
10. *The World About Us* (BBC, 1967-1986)
11. *Life on Earth* (BBC, 1979)
12. Fourth leopard film
13. Three leopard films
14. *In The Country* (BBC, 1979 – 1981)
15. MEERKATS UNITED (*Wildlife on One*) (BBC, tx. 26 January 1987)
16. THE DREAM IS ALIVE (IMAX, 1985)
17. THE SECRET OF LIFE ON EARTH (IMAX, 1993)
18. SURVIVAL ISLAND (IMAX, 1995)
19. ALAMO: THE PRICE OF FREEDOM (d. Kieth Merrill, 1988)
20. GRAND CANYON: THE HIDDEN SECRETS (d. Kieth Merrill, 1984)
21. ROLLING STONES AT THE MAX (IMAX, 1991)
22. 50 minuter on some flaming robin
23. Underwater film
24. L'ASCENSION (Olivier Messiaen, 1932 – 1933)
25. NATURE'S CHAMPION: A TRIBUTE TO SIR PETER SCOTT (BBC, tx. 10 September 1989)
26. KOANGA (Frederick Delius, 1896 – 1897)



27. BBC History
28. *Zoo Quest* (BBC, 1955 -1961)
29. *Meeting Point* (BBC, 1956 – 1969)
30. *Blue Peter* (BBC, 1985 – present)
31. The London Schools Symphony Orchestra
32. *Tonight* (BBC, 1957 – 1979)
33. *Panorama* (BBC, 1953 – present)
34. *Life in the Undergrowth* (BBC, 2005)
35. *Life in Cold Blood* (BBC, 2008)
36. LIVING PLANET (d. Dennis Earl Moore, 1979)

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