

BEHP 0309 T Aubrey Singer Transcript.

AUBREY SINGER

Television director, television producer, television executive

Interviewed 25 November 1993 by Norman Swallow and Alan Lawson

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SIDE 1, TAPE 1

Alan Lawson: First and foremost when and where were you born

Aubrey Singer: I was born in Bradford in Yorkshire on January 21, 1927.

Alan Lawson: And schooling

Aubrey Singer: I was educated at a prep school and Giggleswick for one term and then I was withdrawn by very grateful parents because I hated it, and I went to Bradford Grammar School which was wonderful.

Alan Lawson: Any further education after that

Aubrey Singer: No, except the university of life

Norman Swallow: And you're still graduating from that

Aubrey Singer: I'm still graduating from that.

Alan Lawson: Did you go in for any courses at all, training

Aubrey Singer: I became a trainee film assistant director editor with Gaumont British Instructional. And I worked with them 5 years

Alan Lawson: Where was that, Wembley

Aubrey Singer: No, I worked at Elstree, Borehamwood. Well first I worked in Lime Grove Studios and then we moved out to Elstree. And then I, because the war was on and I was rated grade 3 by the medics I was able to skirt ahead on other people's misfortunes. So one could actually direct by this time

Norman Swallow: During the war

Aubrey Singer: Yes, I realised any fool could direct

Alan Lawson: What year did you start with Gaumont British

Aubrey Singer: 1944

Alan Lawson: Do you remember what they paid you

Aubrey Singer: Yes, £2/10 sh a week [=£2.50pOS]

Norman Swallow: Quite a lot

Alan Lawson: It wasn't

Aubrey Singer: And I saved 10 bob a week out of that until I started smoking [10 bob = 50p.]

Norman Swallow: You were living in London obviously

Aubrey Singer: Yes, staying at the YMCA in Great Russell St.

Alan Lawson: And you progressed from that

Aubrey Singer: From there, well what happened was I was sent overseas by Gaumont British Instructional to join Gaumont British Africa. And we then made a whole lot of programmes, one called *Basuto Boy* which I directed and Jimmy Allen photographed and one down the gold mines literally.

And then I did some work up on the groundnut scheme\* for UNOEVA [?]

Norman Swallow: This is after the war, 1946, 1947

Aubrey Singer: Yes 1946, 1947. And then in 1946 I came back and I then worked as assistant director, unit manager on two of Mary Field's children's films, children feature films.

Norman Swallow: Where

Aubrey Singer: In Austria

\*Post World War 2 British scheme to encourage Tanganyika - now Tanzania - to grow peanuts as a cash crop.

Norman Swallow: On location

Aubrey Singer: On location yes. And then along with the great Rank collapse me and 400 people were fired by John Davis. And then I looked for a job and this was very difficult. And I canvassed everybody in the industry and I'd get these letters arriving, it still reminds me and there was an advert for outside broadcast producer so I applied. And I must confess, I didn't really know what I was doing. But then I found myself in front of a board

Norman Swallow: Yes, I know that

Aubrey Singer: I then had a great row with Peter Dimmock on the board. Did you write this commentary he said. No I didn't I said. Then who wrote it. I said I don't know, I didn't write it. So then, that was all right, one obviously had to stand up to Peter.

Norman Swallow: He was head of outside broadcast, maybe not

Aubrey Singer: He was assistant head of outside broadcast under De Lotbiniere. [Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere]

Norman Swallow: Round about 1949 are we, to get the record straight

Aubrey Singer: 1949, that's when I joined the service. Then I worked in OBs until 1953, no until, when was the Coronation, 1952, yes. I was then, my role in the Coronation, because I had been sent up to Scotland, seconded to Scotland to start OBs there, my role in the Coronation was sit with a lip mike in Kirkxxx and if everything broke down do an announcement and I've never been in such a prayerful state in my life, what do you say if that happens. Anyway, so I then went up to Scotland for 18 months and that was fun because you had a unit to yourself and I worked with Jimmy Buchan as he was then, and Noble Wilson, Noble was the first stage manager. And then I was given this job, I was given this job on a board in the BBC New York office, from 1953 to 1956. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, because you suddenly started learning about playing with the men rather than the boys.

Alan Lawson: What actually did the office do in New York

Aubrey Singer: Well I was called television officer, I didn't know whether to salute, one of these stupid BBC titles. But my job was , I was the first television man to be appointed to the BBC New York office and my job was in a way to keep an eye on what was happening in the industry and report back. So I reported on the start of colour television and the colours involved in doing colour. Whether anybody read report my reports [...?]

Norman Swallow: Going back on your biography you were still a very young man at that point

Aubrey Singer: I was 22.

Norman Swallow: No, 26, 1953,

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: Sorry I was going to go back if I may, this is fascinating but what made you go into this entire profession in the first place. At Bradford Grammar School, what was your subject

Aubrey Singer: I wanted to be a scientist. But I also wanted to write poetry, so one had a big dichotomy between what one wanted to do. And I realised I was no good at science. I had great romantic visions of being a Pasteur for something like that, and the only problem was I couldn't add up, I couldn't do maths. So I fell down on physics totally and they said you'd better go and do something else. And somebody said you've got to take Latin anyway if you want to go to Oxford or Cambridge. I said bugger this for a start. And my mother said I can't afford it, so I said great, let's go and do some work. I then had got very interested in film. And I used to go to the Bradford Civic Theatre and my mother knew Margaret Hancock who bought all the films there. And because I became interested in films she then dragged me a long to the British Film Institute screenings for all the film society people. So you would see 30 or 40 films in a day but sections, you saw everything, you saw the lot, *La femme du boulanger*, Einstein, the lot. And so I became passionately interested in film and I said I want to join the film industry.

And then my mother knew Anna Neagle's sister and I was whisked down to Denham for an introduction to the film industry. And that was incredible. Then I was whisked round to the Crown Film Unit where I bumped into Humphrey Jennings. This was just cast an eye on me, and the guy who was running the Crown Film Unit. And I said I didn't know about that. Then I finally got in to under Donald Carter, I forget the name of the other guy, in to GBI, Gaumont British Instructional. And that was really a very good training ground. Everybody was in there. Lewis Gilbert was there.

Norman Swallow: To name but a few

Aubrey Singer: Yes, to name but a few, and all of us worked in GBI. While I was there I started off as an assistant editor trainee and the first cut I made was in Mary Field's series *Secrets Of Life*, where I remember agonising about cutting in a shot of waving branches, a cutaway of waving branches. And I've never forgotten that cutaway of waving branches. And then I worked on a whole lot of training films, *Introduction To Naval Gunnery*, parts 1, 2, 3 and 4. *Stengun*, parts 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, animation films. I worked on, I then graduated up to my own films, they were terrible and I realised gradually I wasn't really a director but I hated to say that to myself because I thought I was going to be the greatest. Then I got interested in production management etc., that was quite useful. So it was all a very good background.

But then came television and this was fascinating in retrospect. It was agony. Because the film industry is full of pretensions as we know, the first thing that you do when you join the film industry is immediately grab a job lot of pretensions. And you know by this time I had come back from South Africa, I had a bit of my own money, I'd earned a reasonable salary and I got myself a camel haired coat, and I turned up in London and took this along to Marylebone Rd where I was installed on November 7<sup>th</sup> I remember it as an OB producer sharing an office with another OB producer called Berkeley Smith [?]. So then I didn't get on very well with anybody. De Lotbiniere,

Norman Swallow: Lobby, Seymour Joly De Lotbiniere

Aubrey Singer: Yes, thought I was awful obviously. And I was taken round to meet his family, obviously wanted to

judge me. And I was, I had to go and see McGivern as part of this interview. What was I like. I got on quite well with Cecil.

Norman Swallow: He was in effect, just for the record

Aubrey Singer: Controller of programmes

Norman Swallow: Controller of programmes. I say that because future listeners will say who was he.

Aubrey Singer: But my colleagues in the department did not like me. Barry Edgar snarled at me why don't you get a haircut. Seriously, I thought well fuck you, excuse my language. And it went on like this. And then I found I couldn't really adapt to the medium because I wasn't quick thinking enough. Now when you remember people like Alan Chivers who was a fighter pilot and had reflexes which were just incredible. This was wonderful for doing football matches but if you were slow thinking, what I wanted to do was feature programmes and I started specialising in that. But for the first year they were always talking about firing me or putting me under contract, that phrase the BBC uses to get rid of people. But finally they came round to the idea that I could be useful and I was sent up to Scotland. That was pretty awful, it was fine for me, it was hell for my wife

Norman Swallow: that was a couple of years

Aubrey Singer: It was about 18 months. I went to America in 1953 to 1956

Norman Swallow: It was before that

Aubrey Singer: Yes. So up in Scotland we did the usual OB features and things like the queen's entry into Edinburgh which was just post coronation, 6 months later she came up. And I got 13 cameras out and I'd really done everything I could. And come the morning of this OB with me sitting in this control room we'd built up, and I'd incurred enormous hate from Lobby I think, he didn't like me by this time, in fact he wrote me a very rude letter. We're not doing this for your blue eyes, read the letter. But on the morning of the show a thick sea mist came in and you couldn't see a bloody thing. And that was actually in a way the most

devastating moment of my life. I didn't know what to do. I was actually stymied, but it was a great lesson.

The very first OB I did in London was, I took all by myself, was a thing on **Nippies**, from Cadby Hall was a disaster. The only good thing about it was it introduced Gilbert Harding to the audience. But it was a disaster

Norman Swallow: What part did he play

Aubrey Singer: The irate customer, what else.

So they spent a lot of time working out how to get rid of me. And finally they thought, I was then interviewed for Scotland or Manchester

Norman Swallow: As what

Aubrey Singer: To be an OB producer up there, would I go and be OB producer and start things off there. And Derek Rawle Davis ended up by going up to Manchester and I ended up by going up to Scotland. Well it was very hard work in Scotland. And the thing I remember most of all was the OB we did from a coal mine actually, believe it or not. That was an incredible experience, but only incredible because as we finished with each camera it broke down

Norman Swallow: When you finished with it

Aubrey Singer: Yes, you know. It was camera 1, camera 2, camera 3, camera 4 along the scene and each one broke down as I finished with that sequence. And then it took them 4 weeks to clean the equipment out. So anyway it was a great experience up there, one learnt an awful lot

Norman Swallow: I went briefly in 1952, to make a documentary about the Gorbals, with the other Lotbiniere, young Tony, and we worked on this, I mention this because a guy you must have known well, with Archie P Lee

Aubrey Singer: Yes I knew Archie

Norman Swallow: A nice guy

Aubrey Singer: A very nice guy.

Norman Swallow: I liked him only worked on the one film

Aubrey Singer: Archie was very good. But they were a strange mob up there, Jimmy Cramsey who did the drama thing. In fact the first show I had to do in Scotland was to direct a drama. And I would have really been fired had I'd been left on my own devices, but I said for god's sake send somebody up to help me. And they sent up Campbell Logan. And of course the only way you can actually direct a drama from an OB situation is to have somebody calling the shots. And there was no way of doing this in the configuration of that OB vehicle. So I had to drill into my head 304 cuts by heart.

Norman Swallow: Where Aubrey was the location

[Glasgow]

Aubrey Singer: The Citizens' Theatre [where we did *The Black Eye* by James Bridie

Norman Swallow: A kind of substitute for a studio really. And who was that director who has now died alas

Alan Lawson: He worked in a wheel chair ultimately, you mean that one

Aubrey Singer: No I don't think so, anyway it's neither here nor there, but that was the baptism of fire. Scotland was fascinating. But the important thing was New York. And I shall never forget New York

Norman Swallow: Did you apply for the job Aubrey

Aubrey Singer: Yes, I applied for the job.

Norman Swallow: You weren't sort of pushed there

Aubrey Singer: No, I applied for it and to my total surprise I got it, against my dead body said McGivern, he didn't like the appointment at all. But that was alright. I didn't mind.

Alan Lawson: Who was on that board, do you remember

Aubrey Singer: There was Basil Thornton who was the North American representative, and a lot of people from overseas services, you know, because it was an overseas service appointment. And I think there was one television producer, Leslie Page or somebody. One of those, I forget who it was.

Norman Swallow: It would have been him

Aubrey Singer: But anyway, having got the job it was as I say a different world.

Norman Swallow: Were you the first television man in the New York office

Aubrey Singer: Yes I was.

Norman Swallow: A sort of pioneer

Aubrey Singer: Yes. And that world was my oyster and I got to know a lot of people because the BBC still carries a lot of clout in America. And as a BBC man, even though you were called television officer, you could get into Fred [w.] Friendly's cutting room, or you could go and see Fred and have long talks because *See It Now* wanted something, I had a lot of dealings with the *See It Now* unit, what was Fred's show, that was *See It Now*, the *Person to Person* unit as well, Jesse Zousmer's show. And as a result of that one learnt a far bigger approach to television than one could learn back here. In Britain it was and still is very parochial, whether you like it or not, if they decide to do a thing big they'll do it. If they decide to mount a splash down, they'll do it in two weeks, it will take us 6 months planning and everything else. So I learned a lot about how to operate. And Fred, I thought this was incredible, he had his own cutting room and he cut the films there and then, and he had his own projection theatres, and he ran the cut films

Norman Swallow: CBS

Aubrey Singer: That's right. And he was very clever and very able and very trusted

Norman Swallow: Lovely man too

Aubrey Singer: I'm no so sure about that

Norman Swallow: I liked him

Aubrey Singer: Well I liked him, but I liked him unless you didn't cross him and I had to cross him fairly frequently. And he was a driver, a real driver.

Norman Swallow: He's still around

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes, I've not seen him for ages.

Norman Swallow: He's a professor at Columbia University

Aubrey Singer: For 20 years or something. But he is one of the great names of the industry. And I was around for the whole of the Army-McCarthy hearings, I was around for the Murrow versus McCarthy debates

Norman Swallow: That was a *See It Now* wasn't it.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. I was there, all the big television events like the Sylvester Weaver introductions to colour, *The Magic Flute* in colour. Things like that. And I was allowed to go round the studio and see the set up and the cameras and it was fascinating, it was wonderful.

Norman Swallow: We, the BBC, transmitted McCarthy Murrow programmes didn't we.

Aubrey Singer: Those you transmitted. I presume you only did edited versions of the actual-Army McCarthy debates. But the McCarthy Murrow programmes I think we did transmit. Yes we did. I got them and sent them over. I purchased them for peanuts, because I had to do a lot of programme buying too. And a bit of selling

Norman Swallow: Good

Aubrey Singer: Well I had to sell, what was the show we made, *War In The Air*, the John Elliot special

Alan Lawson: That's right

Aubrey Singer: And I said what do you want me to get for this. They said oh well, we don't know, I suppose \$2,000 or \$3,000, something very low. I said this is nonsense. So I then saw the seller and was asked what do you want for it, and I said \$18,000 an episode. And I got it. And the BBC were absolutely astonished.

Norman Swallow: Meaning what, what was a dollar then

Aubrey Singer: Oh 2.50 to the £. No it was more than that

Norman Swallow: 3

Aubrey Singer: 3 or 4. So, but making friends in the industry and walking round. I had a sort of love hate relationship with American television too, that I admired it but I wasn't so sure I wanted to get entwined in it. I had the greatest admiration for it but I thought god I'd hate to work there. I love my BBC but it is nice and secure and this isn't. Actually that's an untrue statement because the fact is that some of people who worked on *See It Now* like Palmer Williams are still working for CBS Public Affairs, and he's just had a contract. And Don Hewitt, he worked for the same set up, so they've done alright. Don has just had a contract for \$3m apparently.

Alan Lawson: But they're front men really.

Aubrey Singer: Well Don Hewitt wasn't. Don was the executive producer, he never fronted anything in his life.

Alan Lawson: I don't necessarily mean in front of the camera

Aubrey Singer: Ah

Alan Lawson: He was the front man of the programme really

Aubrey Singer: And anyway what else can I remember. I used to go on what I call routine visits to Hollywood. Then you could go round all the studios and see Jack Benny etc., etc. I went and saw Ralph Williams when we were negotiating for *This Is Your Life*. It was a very, very broad training ground.

Norman Swallow: You were there when *This Is Your Life* was first shown

Aubrey Singer: That's right. Yes

Norman Swallow: You had something to do with the deal

Aubrey Singer: Well no but in the background I was there and I wrote several minor things saying you ought to buy this. So, but then nobody took any notice of what I wrote, that was par for the course, nobody ever took the slightest

bit of notice. But that didn't matter, it was a very, very useful background. Really useful.

Norman Swallow: Who did you work to over here. What was the kind of hierarchy. Who from you upwards

Aubrey Singer: The problem is I don't know. I don't know. I used to write to Cecil if something needed writing about. I used to write to others, I used to report on a lot of shows when people asked me for a report. People asked me to film too, hence the Rodgers and Hammerstein piece which you remember. Hence I did my own bits of filming. That was extremely valuable to be able to rush round with American film crews and learn how they worked. I did *Panorama* reports with Patrick O'Donovan. We'd go off to the South, to West Virginia and places. Because *Panorama* was short of money and reporters, and Patrick was there and I said alright, I'll take a crew out.

Norman Swallow: American crew

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes, oh yes.

Norman Swallow: Cheap

Aubrey Singer: Not all that cheap no but very efficient. And sometimes they were very efficient, at other times they could be very inefficient. Sometimes they could be terrible American crews and you had to be very careful to get cameramen you could work with and liked. And there was a cameraman called Bert Spielberg who I did an awful lot of work with and who was very good. And so it was as I said a wonderful job, you had this opportunity of learning about that industry, all sides of it, making stuff there, selling stuff there, buying stuff there. It was very, very interesting

Norman Swallow: And that was for 3 years

Aubrey Singer: 3 years

Alan Lawson: It was an appointment for 3 years was it

Aubrey Singer: Yes, and you could have extended it, it was extensible as they say. But I decided not to do it because I thought I'm not going to do anything else now, I 've done it for 3 years and all I'll be doing is enjoying the fat

life. And also my kids were growing up and had to go to school and all the usual problems that created [?]. So I thought I'd have to emigrate and I went so far as to take out emigration, well not papers but to get the forms. And then I suddenly looked at this and I thought well do I really want this, do I want all the pressures of the house in Scarsdale, the two car family, keeping a job. Well I don't know. Maybe I was cowardly, maybe I should have jumped at it. But it's always been, I've always been during my career terribly cautious about security, I don't know why. But I never wanted to leave the confines of the BBC until I was absolutely forced to go. We'll come to that later. Well there comes a time when you decide things have come to an end, as New York did. And I said I've got to leave New York.

So I then left New York and I came back to OBs again. I was absorbed into the department. And that was a strange period. I mean I did nothing that I was particularly proud of. I'd done the Festival of Britain during the first period when I was there. And I did a lot of stuff with Richard Dimbleby obviously, who I liked and admired. But in the end when I came back I said I want to do features really. I don't want to get myself hooked into any of this immediacy, or sport, because I was no bloody good at sport, as you can imagine. There was a wonderful moment when I was doing my second cricket match with EW Swanton the great nabob in charge and he said well now we've got such and such at third leg, if we can just look at the third leg. And I had no idea where third leg was. I said to the cameraman pan to third leg. The cameraman didn't know where it was either. So I sort of fudged it and it wasn't good enough for Swanton. He said if we can look at third leg he said. So I said well hard luck Jim, you can't look at third leg, I don't know where it is. So he came down saying he wanted to sack the producer which was fair enough. But I was no good at sport but occasionally I had to do it. I had to do a horse race with Dimmock standing in the back. This is when I first came back. He said we'll put you on at Kempton Park. I thought oh Christ, I don't know one end of a horse from another. And Dimmock was shouting at the back.

And then things looked up after that. In the earlier days I was with Dimmock when we did the very first *Come Dancing*. And again we had one of our furious rows. He arrived late and he said you produce it. Then in the control room he had this habit of trying you to bully you to do this. So I

turned round, took the headphones off and said look do you want to do it or shall I. I don't care how it goes. He said take, I said I'm not taking anything. Shut up. Either you shut up and take over or I'll put the headphones back

Norman Swallow: Was it an OB, *Come Dancing*

Aubrey Singer: Yes, from the Lyceum Ballroom. Where else. But that was before I went to America. Now when I got back from America the service had expanded considerably. We'd started commercial television and we were in this low ratings period and OBs were still the commando service, there were a lot of military style thinking went in, and OBs were really the get up and go boys. Well that was rather silly to base things on technology and not ideas quite frankly. And it collapsed under its own weight in the end. But meanwhile I remember just after I got back, wondering what to do, and I said why is nobody doing any science features. And McCloy was doing science at the same time

Norman Swallow: James McCloy, and I was sent down to look at the International Geophysical Year, go and look at it said somebody. McCloy can't handle this. So Singer went down to the Royal Society and we got on like a house on fire. And we did this big programme on the International Geophysical Year, which was using all the same techniques that Friendly had done, get your own film crews, get your own cutting rooms, get your own budgets, how much is it going to cost. £30,000, this is most expensive show documentary ever done. We filmed in the Congo, all over the bloody place, 3 hours

Norman Swallow: This is 1956, am I right [1957 DS]

Aubrey Singer: Yes, with the Duke of Edinburgh, yes 1956, [1957 DS] that's right. So that was my arrival back in the country really. That was the start. And so I built up quite a reputation I suppose for being thrusting and bullying and everything else. But also one thought quite a bit about these things, and the IGY thing was a fearful risk and it worked. Terrifying but it worked.

Alan Lawson: It terrified Joanna

Aubrey Singer: Yes. It did. Absolutely. To this day she has always looked on me askance. No, but it did. But after I

did that came the question, I said let's do some more science. And so Phil Daly who worked on the IGY with me on attachment and I went into the science game with this thing called *Eye On Research*. And Bill, who is the nice cameraman, OB cameraman who then became a producer, Bill, Bill went in for medicine and developed hypochondria to such a pitch he couldn't work at the end of it. And, that is a waspish but true statement. Bill Wright. He invented this title sequence with a guitar that worked very well. We then turned out OB after OB from all over the place. From all the research establishments in Britain, well all the ones that were worth shooting. From Sxx[?] from America, we started filming

Norman Swallow: And they were all very co-operative were they

Aubrey Singer: Who

Norman Swallow: The people you were talking about

Aubrey Singer: No, we had to break down an awful lot of resistance from the scientists,

Norman Swallow: I was wondering

Aubrey Singer: No

Norman Swallow: Because television wasn't naturally for them in those days.

Aubrey Singer: It was very tough

Norman Swallow: That's what I mean

Aubrey Singer: And it wasn't helped by Grace and James faffing round. Going out to the labs was much more different to all this farting about doing operations on legs of pork when they couldn't do the real thing. But James McCloy was very good, I don't want in any way to denigrate James. I just think he was working with 1½ hands tied behind his back. Of course this did need mobility and the ability to see things, and you needed your own engineering division too, because you wanted to attach cameras to microscopes and things like that.

Norman Swallow: This wasn't presumably science department in those days.

Aubrey Singer: No

Norman Swallow: Not yet.

Aubrey Singer: But then a very strange thing was done and I learnt in the BBC that jobs actually go with people and not with things, it was decided that I could become assistant head of outside broadcast science and features, which I was. And so I looked after the science output. And then we started doing major film documentaries like the one done Adrian Malone actually, *A Plague On Your Children*, the best thing that Adrian's done

Norman Swallow: Very famous

Aubrey Singer: Because I made him rewrite the commentary totally. Well the bloody fool wanted to over egg the pudding. I said don't be daft. Just use the quotations from the manual on germ warfare, that's all you need. And so we worked with Adrian, we worked with Bob Reed, and Bob later became head of science features who was very good. We worked with Humphrey Fisher who was excellent.

Norman Swallow: Very good team

Aubrey Singer: I was very lucky. Then we got Chris Brasher to run the features side. So that was very, very stimulating and great fun and

Norman Swallow: Again we're in the late 50s now

Aubrey Singer: Then we come up to the early 60's. At this time satellites were coming in and it was announced that we had to do a show for the EBU from Europe to America. And I think we had 60 minutes to get 20 countries in. It was an orbiting satellite, not a geostationary one. So you therefore had this thing going round and we had this pass, they said it's a very good pass, it's a very long pass. We said OK, well we'll have a go. On the other hand Fred was doing from America to Europe.

Norman Swallow: Fred Friendly

Aubrey Singer: Yes, so the two of us were horns locked. And it became a sort of Churchill versus Roosevelt situation with each one of us ringing the other up because of the time lag in the dead of night. Anyway we had to do this for the EBU and this was the most fearful political battle which I worked on closely with Joanna.\* So we got everybody to cooperate and collaborate, the French and Agence France Presse, and we did a sequence.

\*Joanna Spicer

And then somebody said you've got to get something from Yugoslavia. Well what the hell can you show from Yugoslavia. All we could show was a bible in Cyrillic. But we did, if I remember right, a thing from a lifeboat being launched somewhere. And the Tower of London, the ceremony of the keys, and it was all rated a great success.

Norman Swallow: What I should say for the record for future people listening and reading, EBU means European Broadcasting Union

Aubrey Singer: Quite right Norman. Quite right

Norman Swallow: In another 5 or 6 years they might not know it.

Aubrey Singer: Quite right. So at the end of the day we'd done this and I'd got a taste for this satellite broadcasting. But I then thought I'll go back to being assistant head of department thanks, because it's not a way of life going in for satellites. And in any case the geostationary ones were coming. And Joanna had decided to share out the goodies and gave the first year stationary one to Paul Fox, because by this time there was great rivalry between Dimmock and Spicer. And so the idea was to make sure not too much power didn't lie in the hands of one person.

Norman Swallow: Again for the record we ought to say what Joanna's job was officially

Aubrey Singer: Then she was head of planning, head of programme planning and in charge of the Eurovision developments. She was a great woman, I think you have to say this. Had she been in a previous incarnation, she would have been Disraeli, she was that sort of statesman, or stateswoman, she was brilliant, quite brilliant. And you watched what you said in front of Joanna because she'd pick

you up just like that. And the first several years of my relationship there, she was very much dominant. We got onto a basis of equality, but again rather like Lobby's attitude to me she didn't like me all that much. Alright I was too pushy I think. Who cares. Now can we have eine kleine pause

Talking of Joanna, in 1956 I think it was, 1955

Norman Swallow: ITV

Aubrey Singer: I'm thinking of later, when was *Our World*, 1967 wasn't it.

Norman Swallow: I think so.

Aubrey Singer: What happened was that Willy Cave came in. And I've got some guilt feelings about this but not all that many and he said you know Aubrey we could circumnavigate the world by satellite now. I said what a good idea, let's see what we can do. Now when I did this, I got real guilt feelings because I knew damn well that it wouldn't be done by Willy Cave, unfair to say this but he was not the person to do that show. So I said to Joanna why don't we mount a big show linking the world together for the first circumnavigation of the world by satellite. And they said well we'll take it to the EBU. And then the agony, it went it seemed on forever, but the first thing we had to do was to get the EBU interested, to get the French on side, very difficult. Could not be arranged really until their arms were twisted right off.

Norman Swallow: Was that Jean Darcy? In those days

Aubrey Singer: Yes, Jean was around in the background, but it was a guy called Continmine who was a pain in the arse. Then I said well if we're going to circumnavigate the world by satellite, not only do we have to do Asia, we have to try and get the Soviet Union and so we then via a network of committees we set up with Yuri Fokine running the Soviet side of it, the Czechs were all in the act and everyone else was in on the act, and everybody else was in on the act. And we got a script together and we got an agreed plan and we flew all over the world to arrange it, big press conferences in Montreal, meetings in Budapest and Moscow, all over the place, in Japan, we got the Japanese in, we got the Australians in, we got everybody in. And then I forget the political thing that caused it, suddenly the

Russians pulled out and they pulled out because they felt that, ostensibly they said we'd been broadcasting rude things about them, but practically it was to do with the Egyptian, the Israeli-Egyptian War, the 6 Day War.

Norman Swallow: 1967, the 6 Day War. So I remember this happened on a Sunday and I remember going in and ringing up the switchboard and saying look, get a telephone operator in here or two, and we'll start. So I then had to ring round the world. In that afternoon I spent over 700 quid in phone calls but we managed to hold the western side together whilst the eastern block went out of it. And I felt that was a great pity, because it would have been a great achievement to have had that. But there you are, you can't have everything. I was for pulling out. Tony Jay said you've got to stick with it. I said alright Tone, we'll have a go

Norman Swallow: He was involved with it

Aubrey Singer: He was writing it. So in fact we had to rewrite the script and everything else. Tony was involved. So we did *Our World*. Noble directed as ever directed the first satellite thing and directed *Our World*. And he was wonderful on that, bi-lingual, multi-lingual, in German, in French and English and Scots.

Norman Swallow: Last time you mentioned him he was in Glasgow

Aubrey Singer: Yes, that's right. Well he'd become on OB producer by that time, doing his own stuff, his own thing. So we did it and it seemed to work, everybody liked it and said well done. We got the Americans in. And this was actually terribly important to one, not so much for the fact that we were doing this great OB but for the fact that we'd built up a network of contacts who became terribly useful to the BBC later on. And also great friends. I made some real friends on that programme.

Norman Swallow: The content was what, all events

Aubrey Singer: Yes, rather like the Telstar thing. We staged the thing. We insisted that everything should be live because, and it was live except for the Mexicans who put theirs out recorded.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

Aubrey Singer: The content was, the scripted content with several major sequences, you know a day in the life of the world, what was happening at a fixed period of time, we went through night and day and etc, etc. And Tony wrote a very good linking script. And so we did it and it was quite an event and I've got most of the papers there in the drawer if you want to refer to any of them. But it's all very much past history now. It was, in my opinion there were two highlights in my life, one was Telstar and one was that. That was it really as far as I was concerned except for some of the science programmes that we did.

I mean I think we did some brilliant stuff in science in those days. We were the first people onto DNA for instance. And thanks to a guy called Gordon Ratray Taylor who was brilliant. But again you had to take the bit between your teeth. DNA, what the hell's DNA. Why are we doing this. You'd have to say because it's damn important. Anyway let's not go on with that. Let's carry on with the mainstream story.

At this time an outfit had been formed called Jay, Baverstock and Milne. And they were the breakaway sort of government in exile but mostly doing commercial films. And Donald Baverstock was very good at his job. No Donald Baverstock was not very good at his job, simply because he hated being turned down by people. He couldn't stand anybody walking in

Norman Swallow: For the record, so we know what his job was

Aubrey Singer: Well his job was being a third in the partnership of Jay, Baverstock and Milne.

Norman Swallow: Sorry, for the BBC before he did that.

Aubrey Singer: He ended up as assistant controller. And that is another whole story actually. Baverstock was in a way the Lucifer that fell from heaven. He, that's an exaggeration of course, I think he was mad, he's gone totally mad now, he's in a loony bin but drink and the devil have done for the rest. But he, he was a man of brilliant intelligence, no question, brilliant intelligence, one of the best minds but he was also at the same time a rather despicable person I thought. You can

have this, and I admired Donald very much, but I thought well I don't know.

Anyway, after they split up, there came the question of who was going to go where and I was approached to become managing director of Yorkshire Television, or head of programmes Yorkshire Television or wherever it was. And I looked at this and I thought well that's very nice, it's nice to be offered these jobs but two things worried me about this. One how do I get back to London, even before I got the job. And one should say well OK take your chance. But I always felt that getting back to the centre from the periphery was always going to be very difficult. And the other thing that worried me about it was, I didn't really trust them. I didn't really trust Ward Thomas, I didn't trust the set up and so anyway I got a contract. I'd had lunch then where we actually just wound the contract. They said earn more money than ever. I said I don't want to earn more money. Because I was doing *Our World* at the time, I wanted do shows like *Our World*. That's what I thought, I didn't actually say that, which perhaps was rather cowardly of me. But the more I saw of it, the more I thought really I cannot leave the BBC at this stage, there is too much left to be done, and I'm afraid to leave the BBC and I don't want to get myself dealing with lesser stuff. Because you'd in the big league in the BBC and you'd be in the monkey league

Norman Swallow: Mini league

Aubrey Singer: Mini league on commercial tele. Unless you do very big dramas and things which wasn't my aim or my style. So in the end I said I'm not going to do it. They were furious because they'd announced I was appointed so they had to withdraw it from the IBA. They were given 3 weeks to find another director of programmes, the usual crap that went on. My name was mud in Yorkshire quarters and still is with people like Ward Thomas\*. That's alright. You've got to do what you've got to do occasionally. And I suddenly felt I was doing something fundamentally wrong. And I shouldn't have allowed myself to be talked into it. I was flattered by the offer. You know the things that go on. So then I said there is a guy you can offer it to, there is Alasdair Milne or there's Donald Baverstock.

So Donald then went into it. And Donald came to see me and said what's this job about, what's happening. I said

\*Gwyn Edward "Ward" Thomas

there's the job, I tell you what Donald, I'll let you into something, there's the contract I was given. I said don't tell anybody because that would be stupid of you but just use it. And so he did and he got the job and that's how Donald came to go to Yorkshire and that was a disaster as we know. For much the same reasons that I thought it was going to be a disaster, namely it would be very well paid but what do you do. I was doing more output from my own features group than I'd be doing from Yorkshire. And I thought well I really don't want to leave the BBC, I don't want to leave the ambience of working with the place, and my friends and my colleagues. So I stuck around. Now at the same time as that happened I was then called in by Huw, it was a strange meeting

Norman Swallow: Huw Wheldon.

Aubrey Singer: Huw Wheldon, after I'd done *Our World*, etc. Peacock and Humphrey Burton had defected in effect, you remember that. So I went in there and I'd never seen Huw like it, he was sitting there with a carafe of sherry at his side drinking it at 11 in the morning. I'd never known Huw do this. And he was obviously terribly hurt by Humphrey's defection, because Humphrey just went, sent a telegram saying goodbye dear boy, going off to join this new exciting outfit. So the problems were what do we do. And Huw said well I think you better come and be head of features group. And I said good, that's rather exciting. I like that thought. I didn't think far enough to realise that actually had I not been offered that job, Humphrey Burton would have been offered it, I think. So anyway it didn't matter. I said yes I'll do it but at the same time I don't want to do music because I'm not musical and I really don't want to get involved in the music scene. And they said we don't want you to be involved in the music scene so the thing worked out rather well. And I'm embellishing a little, I think they said it but I was quite happy to not be involved in the music scene.

Norman Swallow: So music was not part of the group

Aubrey Singer: That's right

Norman Swallow: A separate department.

Aubrey Singer: That's right. But we had arts and we had general features and we had science features. And that was

a wonderful period, I enjoyed that enormously. Whether others did who worked with me I don't know but I enjoyed it vastly. It was exciting, we could do things like, we had things going like *The Ascent Of Man* and *Civilisation*.

Alan Lawson: That was a wonderful period

Aubrey Singer: There were some great shows

Norman Swallow: *Man Alive*

Aubrey Singer: *Man Alive* came in yes. I brought Desmond<sup>\*</sup> and Bill<sup>in</sup> and they did a very good job

\* Desmond Wilcox; Bill Morton

Norman Swallow. *America* of course

Alan Lawson [?] : That's right. This was your brain child wasn't it

Aubrey Singer: No, I think it was Stephen's with Alistair Cooke. I did the administering of the thing and this is where the American experience came in so valuable, one could actually go and talk to these people as they'd be talked to in American terms. And in most cases you had to do this. So features group rolled on in state

Norman Swallow: Go back to the years again, I reckon it's 1967 to 1974-ish

Aubrey Singer: Yes, then I think it was 1972 when Alasdair Milne had been brought back into the Corporation as Controller Scotland. And Alasdair gave me lunch in the  
Al Tratoo [?] I said what do you want. I said I want a controllership. Bluntly said I don't know what else I can do now, I really think I should be a controller. I've got the qualifications I think by this time. So he said we'll see what we can do. So then Robin Scott, this was a great disappointment to me, Robin was made Controller of 2 before I was. And I thought that was crazy. What was Huw doing that for. And I think Huw thought it was crazy in a way, but it didn't matter, these things pass over and you get rid of the hurt. The Scott thing didn't hurt me nearly as much as Peacock being made assistant head of Outside Broadcast did, believe it or not. Anyway that's all history.

But then Alasdair gave me lunch and said what do you want. I want a controllership. He said ok. I'll see what we can do. Then Robin Scott was going to be made what was it Controller Radio 1, why he thought that was a bigger job than Controller BBC2. A lot of talking must have gone on there. So anyway I was then told would I attend the board for this job. Now the board was very tricky. A) I don't board well. And B) the Board of Governors boards are very tough. And C) I wasn't the only person who wanted the job, there were others like Colin Shaw and various others. And there was one of these tricky dinners held on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of tv centre, the night before the board which had Desmond was there and Desmond knew this board was going on. One of the governors was there, etc, and Huw fiddled the table play so Desmond was in the most awkward position and couldn't get in. He kept cutting Desmond out, because Desmond would just out of spite stir this up. Anyway all went fine and then we had the board. And there was apparently a big argument in the board as to who should get the job

Norman Swallow: Alasdair Milne was managing director of television by now

Aubrey Singer: Yes.

Norman Swallow: Sorry, the last time you referred to him you mentioned him in Scotland.

Aubrey Singer: So, or was he, yes he was managing director. So where had I got to, the controllership. So I was offered this job and I said yes like a shot, I'd love it. Thank you very much indeed. So again I had a dicky first 6 months. I always seem to have a rough 6 months starting these things and Alasdair got very short tempered with me at time. But what I figured was the important thing as controller of 2 was to keep commissioning programming and to learn to say screw the planners. You couldn't let the budgets drive you too much. I mean obviously you had to keep an eye on the budgets and you couldn't overspend. But when they said we can't afford this, we can't afford that, you actually had to say well we're going to afford it and it's up to your job to make it feasible. And so I commissioned an awful lot of programmes at that time. We commissioned *Darwin* and we commissioned a whole mess of stuff. Again the act of commissioning isn't that important seen in retrospect. All you are really is a conduit for someone else's ideas.

Norman Swallow: A bit more than that

Aubrey Singer: A bit more than that but we had a very successful time again commissioning and I was very lucky and I was, again it wasn't me, I was backed up by great departmental heads like Sean Sutton and Chris Morahan and these heads of drama who had wonderful temperaments

Norman Swallow: Bill Cotton

Aubrey Singer: Yes, Bill Cotton was there but he was alright, he was just head of variety at that time. Who else was there, Paul was there of course, Fox, still, he hadn't gone to Yorkshire yet. Of course Baverstock was about to move and this is really when the whole game of musical chairs in television started really. And then so as controller I can't remember what I did as controller, I must have done something, but I did commission an awful lot, my motto was commission.

Norman Swallow: That's what you did, very important

Aubrey Singer: Look forward. And I get excited by ideas and I started silly things like *Pot Sheep*, the sheepdog thing and a few stupid things, you can do things like that. And I started this poem at closedown which I thought is still rather good and I still wish they'd do it although it cost £20,000 a year to do. Well by the time you've paid the poets.

.So what one learned from this also was about finance, you learned what it cost to do television. But you still didn't know all the game. I mean the financial side was actually quite tough and getting tougher and gradually you could see things reigning in. And then, and I think it was right, I'd after all been doing controller of 2 for about 6 years or so, and it seemed to be part of the cycle that every 6 years or so one changed one's job. So then, it was mooted by Al actually how would I like to be managing director radio. And I said what a very good idea. Because it was obvious I wasn't going to be managing director of television at that stage. And I think Paul was around still and various others who would have a bigger claim on that job. And also I didn't really want the job particularly. But I was excited by radio because it seemed to me to be a moribund medium and one in which you could be expansive, it

couldn't get any worst. Well in my opinion it couldn't have done.

Norman Swallow: Sorry again, we're about 1980, 1, 2

Aubrey Singer: No, it was earlier than that, it was 1978 wasn't it. 1978

Norman Swallow: When you ceased to be controller of 2

Aubrey Singer: That's right. And 1978 to 1984 I think it was. So then I found radio terribly exciting. I went over to America to look at it. And I found that this was a medium whereby you weren't steering a giant tanker where you needed 50 miles to slow down, you could do things instantaneously in radio. You could carry it with you. And I found this a terribly exciting thought, the immediacy of radio. So we started and I think we revived things in a way. There was nothing to revive with Radio 1 because Radio 1 was handled very competently by people like Bill etc. Radio 2, well that's an old man's channel in a funny way, or a middle aged person's channel, and they handle that very well with Geoff. Radio 3, we had a problem with Radio 4.

We had that maniac Ian McIntyre running Radio 4, and making an absolute hash of it actually. What he was doing was miscasting, giving the wrong people the wrong job and tying up the news division, etc which is a fatal thing, because you can't fight with the news division, because they're god. That's right. You can but you can't do it the way Ian did it. So I thought the time had come to be rather ruthless. So I suggested that we sack him. Meanwhile it had been suggested that Stephen Hearst who was controller of Radio 3 at the time go and join Ian Trethowen as the future policy guru. So Ian Trethowen said we can't sack this guy, he's too close to Conservative Central Office. It's true. So what happened then, he made Macintyre controller of Radio 3. And that seemed to an issue to our afflictions. It's not necessarily a happy issue but an issue out of our afflictions. But I think he did a very good job. Ian is very clever, very able and his book on Reith is very good indeed. But it was just really, an awful thing to say, he wasn't much of a broadcaster I think.

Norman Swallow: I agree

Aubrey Singer: And therefore that's where any friction if it arose, arose between us. But I think that he is a very capable man and I like him actually. But I thought he was absolutely mad to do what he did on Radio 4, just mad. Anyway we sorted that out. What other crises were there in Radio. There were a few. There was of course the musicians strike.

Norman Swallow: Big stuff, very important musicians are for radio

Aubrey Singer: Well when we had cuts in radio, we were ordered to cut and the history of the BBC over the last 20 years has been cutting, cut, cut, cut, cut. I mean if you look at it, they're still cutting. Nobody has ever said leave it, leave it alone. Let the chaps get on with it. It doesn't work like that. Perhaps that is the process of management, you've got to trim your budgets, trim your sails accordingly. But the musicians strike occurred because we were cutting. And as a result of cutting, we had to save on the radio side, £500,000. Now from radio that's a hell of a lot of money, it's a hell of a lot of money. It also was, we had 11 orchestras. And we didn't need 11 orchestras, we just didn't need them. But because there had been a threat of a musician's strike, and Hardy Radcliffe had fought a brilliant rearguard action and Harold Wilson said we'll raise the licence fee, call off the strike. He never raised the licence fee but the strike was called off. We were stuck with these damn orchestras. We were also stuck with a controller of music who maybe a good musician but was a lousy manager

Norman Swallow: Who

Aubrey Singer: ~~Robert Ponsonby~~ And also he was for musicians and against broadcasting. Again, you've got to be able to, you had a whole department, a music department, who made programmes which were put on shelves until they found slots for them later. I said we can't do this, you've got to make programmes for slots. If you want to do the quartets of Bartok fine, but don't just record all the quartets of Bartok in the hope that we're going to drop them in like that, because it's a crazy way of going on about it. So the thing that happened was we said we want to get rid of various orchestras. Now this was a terrible business because the ones we wanted to get rid of primarily were things like the Northern Dance Orchestra and things like

that. We didn't want to get rid of the symphony orchestras. We would have liked to have got rid of the Scottish Symphony Orchestra but there was a fearful row about that with the Scots double dealing all the way down, oh we'll set up this charity, oh we'll do this, we'll do that, we'll do the other. Anything to avoid saying cut the orchestra. So the stresses and strains of this period were something quite incredible. I never realised what it was to take a major strike, really awful. Aged viola players rushing down the street attacking you with their umbrellas.

Norman Swallow: Really

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes. And badges being issued saying sack Singer. And it was fearful. And also you felt sorry for them. This was the problem. I didn't want to go sacking old viola players. What I really wanted to do was clean up a financial mess which I had to do if the whole service was to survive. So the interesting thing about it was that before I went into the present strike, I got the press cuttings out from the Wilson period. And I thought oh god, they were that thick, stirred up by Hardy Radcliffe, these poor musicians. And they used exactly the same techniques, barges on the Thames outside the houses of Parliament, full of, playing the Water Music, and on the steps of St Martins In the Fields running a concert in the mornings and then all these bloody journalists like Nicholas de Jong stirring it up all the time. Well I suppose I have to forgive Nicholas de Jongh for that, but if I ever meet him, I'll hit him. Even now. What he did was actually unforgivable

Norman Swallow: He's now a drama critic

Aubrey Singer: Yes. A bloody bad one too

Norman Swallow: *Evening Standard*

Aubrey Singer: I don't know who. Anyway it was a nightmare period and you couldn't do anything else. It went on for about 6 weeks I think or two months

Norman Swallow: I was going to ask you about that.

Aubrey Singer: 6 weeks I think. And on the last day of Michael Swann's chairmanship, because his wife was a musician, Tess played the flute, he said I've been thinking

about this, it's got to stop. Call it off. Now I didn't want to call it off because I'd beaten the buggers. They were literally talking terms to come back by this time. So anyway myself and Michael Bett, we were in this together, Michael really did a lot of the industrial infighting for me and with me, and at the end of the day we said well we can get rid of 6 orchestras pretty quickly, pretty quickly but not overnight and we did that. But I took no enjoyment from the thing, I just hated the whole time. And I've a lot of sympathy for people like Edwards who run a major strike at Fords. Terrible, terrible, just awful. It divides your loyalties and everything.

So then after the musician's strike I thought I've got to do something about this. The first thing I've got to do is the music department. I really cannot have this body working to music and not to radio. And so I said well I'm now going to be really draconian and move Ponsonby over to doing the Proms and that's it. And I'm going to put Christine Hardwicke in charge of music programmes and recorded programmes. And I said to Ian I'm not going to announce this in advance in any way, shape, or form, I'm only going to announce it on the day. Because I knew after the musician's strike the sort of stirring up which would go on and the factionism which would develop out of this. Far better, were it to be done, it were it to be done quickly. And so I did this. And he will never forgive me for it, Ponsonby won't ever forgive me. Well I don't blame him but I'm sorry again it had to be done. And so he came in at 11 in the morning. And I said Robert I have taken certain decisions, they are not discussible. This is going to happen. If you want to resign you can. If you don't you can. But you stay as head of the proms, not running that department. And I'm going to put Christine Hardwicke in charge of that department. And that's what we did.

Norman Swallow: She had done what

Aubrey Singer: She was head of recorded programmes and very good too. But I appointed her because she was dogged and had real character and knew her stuff and also I felt she would get on better with these awfully snooty musicians which she did, even though they bellyached like hell. And I shall never forget the department meeting where I told this was happening, wow. So that was another thing I did. Ernest Warburton went to assist Radio 3. He didn't like that and he says he's never forgiven me. Well I'm sorry

because I liked Ernest but I didn't know else he could have done. And he said he couldn't work with Macintyre, well I saw that. But life goes on. So all I can say is that period was also pretty fraught.

And then came the next appointment, director general. And we were all called in for a board, just as make waves. I knew bloody well I wasn't going to be director general. I don't know why but I knew I wasn't suited for the job. I'm not so sure in retrospect, I think I could have done it. But I'm glad I didn't try because it would have killed me I think. Then I was asked by Alasdair would I like to be MD tel? Yes I said, I would love to be MD tel. I couldn't go on MD R\* because I thought I'd served my purpose in MD R by shaking the place up a bit and really I'd nothing else to do there. I'd shot my bolt as it were, at least I thought I had. I don't know if they did. So then the next problem was if I would become MD tel what about

\* MD Tel = Managing Director Television\*\*MD R = Managing Director Radio

Norman Swallow: Alasdair Milne became DG

Aubrey Singer: Yes. Alasdair Milne became DG. We had this board for the director general at which we all appeared. And George proudly announced the next director general will be Alasdair Milne. I thought oh god. And you know, you can't ask how did I do. You know you've goofed. On the other hand you would like to have been, well I thought I didn't do a bad board and I did a pig paper explaining what it was all about. I worked like hell on that, because I thought I had to because I couldn't just let the thing go although most of me said you don't want this job, it's not for you. But I still had to try. And that was a very I used the word before, dichotomous situation, it tore you two. So anyway having got the MD Tel job, I then realised several things. In my heart I knew I'd been in the Corporation a long time. You know from 1949 to whenever it was

Norman Swallow: 1982.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. Thirty odd years. I also knew it was my last job in the corporation. I also knew I had 5 years, 4 years to go and I started thinking about what might happen. But there was another current running parallel to this, the fact that Alasdair Milne was a sort of MD tel, manqué, an emeritus MD tel who kept interfering in everything I was doing. You know you would take a decision and then you would find it either countermanded or there would be

consultations going on with other people. I didn't mind that, that was his prerogative, but on the other hand I got rather fed up with not being able to run one's own shop as I'd done in radio and as I'd done in features group etc. So Alasdair and I are great friends, and we still are great friends, however we used to shoot, you know the story

Norman Swallow: Carry on with it

Aubrey Singer: We used to shoot pheasant. And driving back from the shoot, Alasdair was driving, he said I want you to take early retirement. I said for god sake's why. He said well I think it will be best. I said why. He said I'm going to ask you to take early retirement. Now it was by this time, of course, instead of being the youngest OB producer at 22 or whatever it was when I joined the BBC, I was the oldest member of the board of management

Norman Swallow: Really

Aubrey Singer: Just about. I was getting on. And I think one of the reasons was he wanted to make room for new blood. The other was I suspected that it was the easiest thing for him to do with a friend there rather than, and I suspect that he didn't think that I was doing that good a job. I'm not so sure about that but it is his decision. So I said OK. Let's negotiate a departure. I didn't want to leave the BBC, I felt that, I loved the organisation. I believed in everything it stood for. I didn't, in many ways I would have died for the organisation but in practice I see that would have been a silly thing to do I see now. But we negotiated a reasonably satisfactory settlement. And it so happened that when I got back from the shooting trembling with fury and indignation, I was having dinner with my friend Jo Strick

Norman Swallow: Can you say more about him.

Aubrey Singer: Jo is a film producer, a publisher, Jo filmed *Ulysses* among other things. He is a very good feature film director, or he was. I think like all these feature film directors in the end you lose your nerve. So I said look what's happened. Hear am I, I'm told to leave. Jo said don't worry about it dear boy, don't worry, let me do the worrying for you. We have a classical situation here in which the head of a Hollywood studio is moving to another studio. We'll find the studio, we'll fix it up. So Jo said

I'll come back on Monday. He came back with a piece of Concorde notepaper, he'd flown over on Concorde and he listed the points I had to have, all the money to make films with, various money to set up my business. And I'd got every point thanks to Jo's clever listening and the negotiating of Michael Flint, and I got an awful lot of money out of them, an awful lot. Alasdair was awfully worried about it really, he kept saying well are we sure this is this right. And Alasdair had to go along with it and it was a lot of money, an awful lot of money. And so I managed to set myself up. I'm not so sure I've made any money out of it, I haven't squandered any money

Norman Swallow: The beginning of White City Films Ltd

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: An ominous title we all thought at the time

Aubrey Singer: Why

Norman Swallow: White City

Aubrey Singer: I know, I thought it a rather good title.

Norman Swallow: Could I go back a bit. You were managing director television. Weren't you also deputy director general.

Aubrey Singer: I was made deputy director general and I again, that was interesting because you find yourself in conflict with people like Alan Protheroe and equally I didn't want to be deputy director general, I wanted to do my beloved programmes if I could, I really did. And I was a rather bad deputy general. Had I been a good deputy general I would be rushing up and down the Westway in my high powered car with Len, but I think that in the end I didn't really want to be deputy director general. It was a title I grabbed to myself in order to keep my end up, but in the end what the hell is a deputy director general for Christ's sake. I've no idea. On the other hand I think that it, the one time I really had to act for the director general I made a bit of a hash of it really, simply because I was at Television Centre and all the guys from the Regent St branch kept going into George's office. So one could never

Norman Swallow: George being

Aubrey Singer: George Howard the chairman. And again I got fed up with the sort of politicking that went on and that didn't help things much. So that was really it. And then we come to White City Films.

White City Films has been a very interesting experience. I've had to learn everything the hard way. The BBC does not fit you for any commercial type of filming operation whatsoever

Alan Lawson: Why is that

Aubrey Singer: Because you are cosseted by too many, in my day you were cosseted by too many internal resources you didn't have to charge out. You didn't have to worry about research, you didn't have to worry about borrowing disks from the gramophone library. You didn't have to worry about clearing music rights.

Norman Swallow: that was before the days of "producer choice"

Aubrey Singer: That's right. Of course. You didn't have to worry about any of these things. And once you're in the wide, wide world you have to worry like hell. And they absorb an awful lot of your time. And I had visions when I formed White City Films of taking a suite of offices and thank god my cautious instincts said don't. Because I enquired, I looked at a suite of offices. I enquired, oh it's £11,000 a year they said. Well actually you have to make an awful lot of films to run £11,000 a year and I realised this was tricky. And so I decided I would make this White City Films, my study

Norman Swallow: Where we now are.

Aubrey Singer: Where we now are, because I live here, it's my house. And I really don't want to involve myself in high overheads. And equally we may be rather uncomfortable when we're producing a film but I'd rather do it that way than go broke. So if for instance we go into series on this present series, if, then we'd have to take offices, because we can't do it.

Norman Swallow: Can you tell us about that

\*A bureaucratic BBC process introduced by John Birt intended to ensure production staff knew all the previously "hidden" costs of programme making [DS]

Aubrey Singer: Well, it's a series, just call it a series,

Norman Swallow: Any series

Aubrey Singer: The programmes one did, we started off ambitiously with high hopes. We wanted to do a series, Stephen suggested

Norman Swallow: Stephen Hearst

Aubrey Singer: Yes, we work together.

Aubrey Singer: And he wanted to call it *Time Flies* at which you look at the helicopter history of Europe really. And IBM came into it through that incredible man Mike Dann and we got a lot of money out of IBM to develop this. We did a pilot and then IBM's profits fell and they pulled out. But I learned too that if you weren't part of the BBC, you had the devil's own job. I thought I knew it all in negotiating production contracts, unless you had these big powerful organisations behind you, because these buggers would split your throat for tuppence. And did. The French did, I had a contract drawn up with the French and they pulled out. So it was a great lesson to me. So then we had something like £200,000 to invest in films. So I said let's do these two documentaries, one in China and one in Vietnam by Anthony Gray, we did that. Part of my time, in the BBC, no after leaving the BBC was bedevilled by Bill Cotton's antagonism towards the arrangement Alasdair had made

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

Aubrey Singer: But we managed a strike rate of about 1 programme a year. And many projects too and we developed a lot of projects, we developed a big project, who is the guy, the code man, the code breaker, anyway we developed a big programme on that. The BBC were interested and they paid for the development, we then, they said we ought to take it to WBGH so we took it to WBGH

Norman Swallow: American Boston

Aubrey Singer: Who said they didn't want this director or that director and they wanted it to be done by this people and that people. And I said I'm terribly sorry, but I don't work like that. I decide who is going to direct my programmes. So anyway they said we don't agree. And then *Horizon* got very excited. And I finally said alright pay us the money, pay us off which they did, and so I think we got 8 k each. And that was that, that was fine and I'm quite happy. In Hollywood you can spend you life in development, I'm quite happy to spend my life in development if I want to.

Norman Swallow: It's unrewarding Aubrey

Aubrey Singer: I agree with you but on the other hand it keeps the wolf from the door

Alan Lawson: Hardly the point

Aubrey Singer: Well, it is and it isn't. If you really want to sit in an office like this with secretaries and a desk, you can live very nicely on development, you can have great ideals, travel, good lunches. You know, good conversation. So anyway really we've done a lot of development. We did that which was a great pity, and it was then handed over because they wanted Chris Sykes who fucked it up, but good. It needed longer than they devoted to it.

Norman Swallow: *Horizon*

Aubrey Singer: But this is because of the influence of WGBH who were awful I thought just awful. But gradually I've become more and more disillusioned about television as time goes on.

Norman Swallow: Explain why

Aubrey Singer: Well what is new is the question I keep asking myself and the answer is feature films and not television really. That although the effort is much greater and the struggle much harder, the rewards are greater, not only the financial rewards, but the actual achievements are bigger. Unless you have a thing like that wonderful series which was repeated, *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*. Well that, I think Philip Saville directed that, didn't he, and that was one of the inspired bits of direction and casting. Inspired. But you don't have many of those around. And the bigger your budgets get, the fewer you seem to get, it seems to me. I think the BBC's policy of feature films has been disastrous so far, just disastrous. It's always disastrous

Norman Swallow: You mean Screen 2 or whatever

Aubrey Singer: Yes, that's right

Norman Swallow: And Channel 4 also of course

Aubrey Singer: And Lew Grade didn't make too many feature films, and when he finally made two successful ones he was broke.

Norman Swallow: Are you trying to make them now, in the pipeline, on paper

Aubrey Singer: No, it's like climbing Mount Everest.

Norman Swallow: If you sound so keen on it, I'm surprised you haven't

Aubrey Singer: Well I watch films because I'm fascinated by them.

Norman Swallow: I thought you might have put up an idea or two

Aubrey Singer: Well every idea you put up is 3 years out of your life. Minimum, probably more. And that's again one of the problems of being an independent producer and not a head of features group. That you don't have to spend your life struggling with one idea to get it on the air. You can jump from place to place. And that I think is what I really

like doing, commissioning a thing and then leaving it to someone else to struggle. But I don't know. I'm excited by feature films now but I've no idea of making any. It's a difficult thing to do Norman

Norman Swallow: I'm sure. I wouldn't know.

Alan Lawson: Don't you think a lot of this escalation of costs is a lot to do with the amount of complications now being introduced into making films. Everything has to be high tech which is costs money. Is this really necessary. Isn't the story more important than the high tech

Aubrey Singer: I don't think it is either or like that. I think the high tech improves the quality of the film which if it works improves the quality of the story or the other way round, you use the high tech to increase, enhance the quality of the story.

Norman Swallow: You begin with a story, don't you

Aubrey Singer: You do. In the beginning was the word, whether you like it or not

Norman Swallow: Or the image or both

Aubrey Singer: I think the word actually, I've decided.

Alan Lawson: I'm not so sure about that. I saw a silent film on the big screen two weeks ago, and nobody missed the sound

Aubrey Singer: What was it

Norman Swallow: *Wings*.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. Well I'm sure but you wouldn't go back to making silent films if you had sound.

Norman Swallow: Not now

Alan Lawson: It would be an interesting experiment.

Aubrey Singer: What was it we used to say in radio, that if television had come first and radio then came along, you would say what a wonderful medium radio is, we don't need all these cluttering of images, but you can't reverse the

process. Now I'm straying outside my brief. You wanted me to talk about the past and I've talked about the past

Norman Swallow: Well you've an idea or two in the pipeline now. At least one.

Aubrey Singer: I'm happy to do that. Really what I think, I'll probably retire after this. There's a lot I can do

Norman Swallow: You'll be bored to death

Aubrey Singer: Yes. Yes.

Norman Swallow: I can't see you doing nothing. Retirement with a capital R I can't see that for you

Aubrey Singer: I can't do that.

Norman Swallow: You could write another book or two.

Aubrey Singer: I could, if I had, it's the will to do it.

Norman Swallow: I know you've written a book or two

Aubrey Singer: Only one

Norman Swallow: A famous book, tell us what it is.

Aubrey Singer: This took me 3 years, *The Lion And The Dragon* about the McCartney Embassy to China because I went over to Peking and I met this Chinese academic and he said what are you lot doing about McCartney. I said this is interesting, this is about 4 years after that. So I said let's do the following, a big seminar at xxx[?] let's do an exhibition at the BM, let's write a book. And let's do a film. Well. Well we got money to develop the film, no problem. And I wrote the book. Yes

Norman Swallow: And you had the exhibition

Aubrey Singer: We had the exhibition. And we had the seminar. But we didn't have the film. Now the reason we didn't have the film is very interesting. Partly because of the Hong Kong situation. But also because I did something that was damn stupid. I asked Mr Kenneth Griffith to be the linkman. Now in my innocence I thought if a producer asked you to do a thing, he'd follow your wishes. Not a bit of

it, he proceeded to attempt to take over the whole idea and try and do the lot. And he was wilfully disobedient on every damn thing. He said I can't write unless I'm abroad. Alright, he talks me into sending him Tel Aviv to write the script. I said there is one condition, you've to send me a verbal report every two weeks. He didn't bother with that. He then wrote a script which I thought was outrageous. It missed the point, but also I was aware that in writing the book which I was doing, I was writing the book because I wanted the book to be the book of a film, and I didn't want a travesty going out

Norman Swallow: A travesty of the book.

Aubrey Singer: That's right, and a travesty of history.

Norman Swallow: I'm surprised you chose him, why did you.

Aubrey Singer: Because he is a very good performer.

Norman Swallow: Oh yes. True. And I was a bloody fool, I had no idea that anybody would be that wilfully, what is the word I want, wilful actually

Alan Lawson: Bloody pig headed

Norman Swallow: he's very conceited presumably.

Aubrey Singer: He's conceited, pig headed and a shit to boot. Sorry.

Norman Swallow: We've interviewed him, haven't we Alan. Not you and I. **Kenneth Griffith BEHP Interview No 144**

Aubrey Singer: Is this thing on

Norman Swallow: Yes

Aubrey Singer: What's the red for

Alan Lawson: That's on

Norman Swallow: It's the red light

Alan Lawson: If that wasn't on you wouldn't be recorded

Norman Swallow: That's where you are now.

Aubrey Singer: Well I've been through the McCartney thing. We had a lot of fun out of McCartney. Running the exhibition was great fun, I didn't run it, but Frances ran it but it was great fun helping with the research on it, discovering things in Stuttgart and places and we could still do the film on it, any day they like. I've got the scripts. All I need is the permission of the Chinese which they have turned down. I was about to go and do it but they won't grant me permission.

Norman Swallow: They may one day

Aubrey Singer: I think they will one day.

Alan Lawson: Once Hong Kong is out the way

Aubrey Singer: That is the overview, shall we shut it off for the time being

[interview paused]

, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session

Norman Swallow: Can we go back to when you left the BBC, when was it and what happened

Aubrey Singer: It must have been in 1984 because that was the year of my leaving. And I know perfectly when it happened because I'd been shooting and it was after Christmas and it was towards the end of the shoot and as I said earlier I was in the car and Alasdair said

Norman Swallow: And Alasdair Milne

Aubrey Singer: Alasdair Milne said I want you to take early retirement. I was shaken by this obviously. I couldn't believe him, I thought he was drunk and joking. We were old friends and we do happen to tipple a lot and I thought this was just a joke. But it weren't no joke. I said when

do you want me to go. As soon as possible. I said but why. He said well if it's going to be done it were better it were done quickly. And he said we can give you an office here, we can give you Bill Cotton's old office. That big sort of Mussolini type office he had

Norman Swallow: When you say Bill Cotton's old office, Bill was still there wasn't he

Aubrey Singer: He was there but he would have given me Bill Cotton's office and I'd have had, mind you he wanted to put Bill in there. And I thought very hard about this. As I said in the earlier thing, I saw my friend Jo Strick and I saw my lawyer and we got this separation agreement. But I was terribly upset by the whole thing, much more so than I thought I would be. On the other hand. I'd been expecting it. I don't know why. I think maybe the edge had gone off my performance. I don't know if it had. I think it was convenient to sack an old friend rather than somebody else to a certain extent.

Norman Swallow: Was it his doing

Aubrey Singer: Alasdair's

Norman Swallow: Yes

Aubrey Singer: I think, so, yes.

Norman Swallow: Nobody else

Aubrey Singer: I don't know about that. I think that Bill worked behind the scenes on Stuart Young and I don't mind that.

Norman Swallow: Stuart Young was director general

Aubrey Singer: No, he was chairman.

Norman Swallow: Chairman, I beg your pardon

Aubrey Singer: He was chairman

Norman Swallow: Of course

Aubrey Singer: Because by that time Alasdair was director general.

So there was then the whole business of sorting the thing out. I got these very favourable severance terms which were extremely favourable. I think a lot of conscience was floating around. And I got money to set up my own office here and to invest in programmes. So really there was a lot of money floating around, so that was OK too, so that was OK. But it was a blow to my amour propre and the decision when it happened, which was the important thing. I suddenly thought well it was kind of them to offer me that big office and very, very impressive it was too, but what the hell would I have done. And I looked at this and I suddenly thought there is only one thing for it. I've now got to leave the BBC. I could have stayed but I've got to leave. So I took that decision and I left and I think it was absolutely the right decision. Others who stayed on who shall be nameless, but there are others who still stuck around, this is crazy. I don't want to stick around just to have be useless.

Norman Swallow: What would you have been doing, you don't know.

Aubrey Singer: No idea

Norman Swallow: No official title.

Aubrey Singer: They wanted me to do the job Bill was doing about satellites and things. I said no, I don't want that. So the decision came to leave the BBC which was one hell of a wrench. After all I'd been in the organisation 33 years. I'd virtually known no other organisation. And they treated me very generously, they gave me all these settlements. They gave me lovely pictures by Alexander of China which are over there. They gave me a great present of a microscope. They gave me 3 farewell dinners. They were kind enough to say, my colleagues, I gave the best farewell speech that anyone had ever given. I was touched by that but that doesn't do much for the price of tea in China. They said you can go anywhere you like in the world, go and have a holiday, go to Bermuda. I said to the chairman, no thanks, to the chairman, I'll go to Burma. So I went to Burma because I'm interested in that part of the world. And I thought Cynthia would be interested in Burma too. I went to Thailand and Burma, and Burma was lovely.

But one knew perfectly well it was the end of an era. And then came the problem of what to do next. I had a long talk with Stephen, my friend Stephen Hearst, because he at this point had just retired too. We said let's try and do something. I said well I'm interested in helicopters because we did this and he said why don't we do a helicopter history of Britain if you see what I mean. So we then started *Time Flies* and if you see the clock up there, it's a souvenir of then

Norman Swallow: You were then White City Films

Aubrey Singer: I was then an independent producer, and the question of what do I do and how do I do it.

Norman Swallow: You were not a company

Aubrey Singer: Yes, we formed a company. I stole the name White City Films quite deliberately, partly because nobody used it, and partly because they'd been talking about this before White City Films. I thought the hell with you. I'll take that name, thanks very much. If you're going to kick me around like this, I'll kick you around. There was a great deal of shock horror. I said well I can always sell it back to you if you want it. But no they didn't want it.

Norman Swallow: So the helicopter project was for White City Films

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: And then what happened to it.

Aubrey Singer: We worked with IBM and one Mike Dann and Mike Dann is really a strange man. He was in charge of programming for CBS, a little man, full of aggression. Have you met him. Full of aggression, and he then ran this strange relationship for IBM getting the best of television in the world at IBM's beck and call, which involved Richard Somerset Ward, Humphrey Burton, Huw Wheldon and everybody else. And they became very interested in *Time Flies*. They put a lot of money in. Now it was a tricky project because they couldn't afford it all. And I had to get a lot of co production in. And I learned very fast that doing co production from a BBC base was one thing. And doing co production as White City Films, Aubrey Singer, was a totally different thing. Anyway, we finally had, or IBM

finally had a bad year and pulled out leaving me with £70,000 in the bank which they were happy to leave there for me. So we then went and tried other things. And we tried project after project, and the first thing to realise is no matter what your reputation you're going to fail, you're not going to place every project. And I certainly didn't place, we reckoned that the strike rate on these projects is one in five. If that, if that

Norman Swallow: You mean 4 out of 5 don't get off the ground.

Aubrey Singer: That's right, not at all, for reasons which are frequently nothing to do with the fact that is the idea a good one, but to do with the fact that you can't fund it. So we did a programme on Needham, Joseph Needham which Channel 4 wanted. And that was fine. We did a programme on Boshart, this missionary who had been taken, lived in Manchester and had been taken on the Long March for 4 years. We managed to do a strike rate of about one programme a year.

Norman Swallow: These were all completed.

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes. These were completed

Norman Swallow: And transmitted.

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes

Norman Swallow: Both on Channel 4

Aubrey Singer: Yes, both on Channel 4. And then we, we didn't get on very well with Channel 4. We did with Bob Towler because he and Stephen were great buddies, they'd worked together on research projects. But the other commissioning editors. The most disastrous thing that happened, it was a total disaster. I took Liz, I invited Liz Forgan out for lunch. And then I was busy writing this book about McCartney. And I forgot the lunch date and I stood her up at the White Tower restaurant. That was the end of my relationship with Channel 4 actually. I sent round the biggest bunch of flowers I could buy but it didn't help much. 30 quids or 40 quids worth of flowers.

Norman Swallow: Who was your director on these projects, for Channel 4

Aubrey Singer: Stephen usually.

Norman Swallow: Directed by Stephen Hearst on the credits

Aubrey Singer: Yes. I think it was on the credits, I think so it was on the credits. But not me. I didn't try and direct. I acted as producer of it. I really didn't want to.

Norman Swallow: You were credited as producer

Aubrey Singer: Yes. I really didn't want to as I said earlier, I'm prepared to direct but I'd rather not, simply because I was always worried about directing. I didn't know how to deal with actors, I have never known how to deal with actors, I don't know why. I love the theatre but I can't deal with actors. And I suddenly thought well there are going to be people directing who are better at this than I am, so use their talents and let me get on with the organisation which is my talent really. Which I thought was a fair division of labour actually. So that is really why I never settled for a directorial career as such, though I would have loved to, now I can see what I should be doing is producing big feature films, not directing them

Norman Swallow: I think you mentioned that before, I'll come to that in a minute. One of your quotes, this is your phrase, I like development.

Aubrey Singer: Yes, I do like development. I like to take the idea and develop it and then hand it over to a director.

Norman Swallow: Apart from the fact, you added, that you have travel and good lunches

Aubrey Singer: That's right

Norman Swallow: If you remember to turn up

Aubrey Singer: That's right. Absolutely. But those days are gone now. They're not, we're still developing this thing *Sir* if we can ever get the BBC to view the pilot.

Norman Swallow: You just mentioned feature films, you did before, you said I became more disillusioned with television as time went on and I do like feature films.

Those seem to me to be points you might well develop, the two together

Aubrey Singer: Well, I did become disillusioned with television because especially at the moment, there's not much that's any good on. The only good thing I thought, the only good series I saw was this one *Between The Lines*, the Tony Garnett one which I thought was first class. And *Casualty* is very good too. But the other series we do, I don't give a tinker's toot about, they really are bad. Feature films are good when they are good. But the BBC's feature films have not been very good.

Norman Swallow: No, BBC feature film policy is disastrous you said

Aubrey Singer: Yes,

Norman Swallow: You're now reinforcing the same point

Aubrey Singer: Absolutely.

Norman Swallow: Do they have a features film policy. Whatever that policy might mean.

Aubrey Singer: Well they had a policy to produce feature films.

Alan Lawson: That's the policy.

Aubrey Singer: And of course, like many who produced feature films before them, they discovered that there is no formula for success. You produce these things and they go flump

Norman Swallow: Now Charles Denton is there it might be better.

Aubrey Singer: It might indeed. But it think to see all those resources and all those films being made at the expense of single dramas really. So I think that the BBC has failed in its feature film policy though I think that may pick up. It may or it may not. I don't think Channel 4's feature film policy has been all that outstanding if you take the run of things. I mean there have been some outstanding ones and the BBC has had some outstanding ones like *Truly Madly Deeply*. I didn't think that was the

world's best film. It was alright, but it was not a ball breaking winner like *The Crying Game* for instance, which was made with exactly the same sort of resources, the same sort of ideas. So but then I find too the run of the mill programming. There is far too much emphasis on current affairs now. Well, on factual and documentary programming and current affairs

Norman Swallow: Topical.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. And it goes on forever, and to get a break in this is very difficult especially with the new line up in commercial television which is all quiz shows. I think television is going down hill at the moment.

Norman Swallow: I think so.

Aubrey Singer: And I regret this very much because I think it has a role to serve the public

Norman Swallow: We know why ITV is going downhill don't we, because advertising and the maximum amount of money, I mean the kind of documentary films that I used to make you can't sell to ITV any more. I mean the single documentary is finished.

Aubrey Singer: Well case in point. This tender came around for PACT for a slew of documentaries about local things. So I wrote to the head of midlands productions saying there is one thing I want to do about this guy who lives on the marshes at Norfolk

Norman Swallow: This is Central

Aubrey Singer: It is BBC Central, BBC Pebble Mill. And they wrote back and said no, we have to consider this in, if you want to submit this idea I'd be happy to receive a treatment. The usual shit. And well fair enough, I don't mind. I thought he replied very courteously to me. But I thought well he could have said well it's an interesting idea, do you want to send it in. Which he has in effect, but in his thing. And I don't really want to tender for 50 programmes. God help us.

Norman Swallow: The BBC nonetheless is still better than ITV in this particular area.

Aubrey Singer: Yes.

Norman Swallow: It could hardly be worse to be fair

Aubrey Singer: Yes, it is better

Norman Swallow: *40 Minutes* is going

Aubrey Singer: That's right. Well the old order is changing, giving place to the new. And Michael Jackson will have different ideas to other controllers, especially since he is trained in media studies. It was Humphrey Burton who I think had the nerve to say to me, he has very ambitious eyes, Michael Jackson.

Norman Swallow: But I see he is advertising for, now that *40 Minutes* is for the chop for a new documentary editor that will take over from *40 Minutes*.

Aubrey Singer: Yes

Norman Swallow: He's a bit vague about what it is.

Aubrey Singer: In plain words I would like to get rid of Paul Watson because I'm fed up with him, and let's start something new

Norman Swallow: You're saying it

Aubrey Singer: That's right. Maybe he's right to do that, I don't know, maybe. Who am I to say. But I think that really in a way the heady days of features group was when we had the best of it. When you could commission things very simply. And you had these wonderful, this wonderful team of chaps and I better talk about them.

Norman Swallow: One of the questions I was going to ask you was when did you become head of features group, presumably you were first head of the group. It was founded at that time.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. Now let me try and think, it was

Norman Swallow: 1967, I'm guessing

Aubrey Singer: No, it was later than that I think. Maybe 1972. When did Peacock defect

Norman Swallow: Another question I was going to put to you. I don't know.

Aubrey Singer: It was the year that Peacock defected

Norman Swallow: I came to the group as the editor of *Omnibus*

Aubrey Singer: When did you come

Norman Swallow: That was 1968, so I'm sure it must have been before that.

Aubrey Singer: Well Stephen was running your department before, wasn't he.

Aubrey Singer: Yes,

Norman Swallow: I'm sure you were head of the group then

Aubrey Singer: Let's say 1966. 1966. That's it.

Norman Swallow: I think it's very important, because if I may interrupt briefly, because for me because I worked for you in that group for 6 years actually and I thought it was a marvellously creative time and to a great extent because of the human beings involved, I mean Stephen and yourself, as head of the group, and Paul Fox, controller 1, David Attenborough, controller 2. Huw Wheldon at the top, managing director. I thought it was a marvellous group and could you say something about it and about those people who I thought were all terrific

Aubrey Singer: Undoubtedly I think it was a marvellous group. I think Huw was really my mentor if anything, and as he was mentor to many people. But he was a great leader and a great intuitive Huw. He saw things before anyone else did, instinctively almost. And of all the people I worked for I think that I loved Huw. He was a sort of father figure to me, he was wonderful, wonderful. Of the others, Paul Fox

Norman Swallow: What about him

Aubrey Singer: Well Paul is a great opportunist. He has always been the great opportunist. You've got to like him

actually. But there is a chameleon quality about him he changes his colour and his character with each different job he does. Over night he became from head of sport to head of *Panorama*, and then a layer of seriousness was drawn on. And then he became controller and another layer was drawn on. And you watch this roaring with laughter. I see him quite often and we're great buddies really. But he is a totally different chap to me in that he was mad on his horse racing and sort of venal pursuits like that. Others of us were mad on other things like culture or whatever.

Norman Swallow: I found him very, very supportive when I was in the arts

Aubrey Singer: Absolutely

Norman Swallow: Even though he knew nothing as you just implied really about the arts. The great joke was that he thought Michelangelo played for Inter Milan.

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: But nonetheless, when I was doing *Omnibus* through you to him, and presumably it was his decision, I seem to think in one 12 month period I had 42 slots. They don't have that now. It was Paul Fox presumably who gave the 42 slots. Extraordinary

Aubrey Singer: Yes he did. He was very supportive. And then there was David Attenborough

Norman Swallow: Who was the controller of 2

Aubrey Singer: Yes he was the controller of 2. I never knew what to make of David. He worried me because it seemed to me that he was too good to be true. I think that is a good way of putting it actually.

Norman Swallow: Interesting. I found him supportive as well, like Paul was. I thought the two were marvellous

Aubrey Singer: I found him very supportive. I found him supportive, a wonderful raconteur, but I just felt at times his heart wasn't in it. I don't know, I don't know. There was something there that, our chemistries didn't quite match. I'm deeply paranoid anyway. So but I always suspected David was too good to be true. And maybe, maybe

not. I don't know. Very clever, very able. Knew exactly what he wanted to do and exactly what he was going to do. But there was something there. He said what are you doing at the moment recently, I said I'm doing this book on McCartney. Ho, ho, ho, he said. That won't sell anything. I said David I know but it might make a good film and I've enjoyed writing it. But therefore you can see the way his mind works, it's strictly commercial actually. He made millions after all.

Norman Swallow: Still does probably.

Aubrey Singer: Of course. So I've nothing against David. I just found him a very cold fish. Under all this charm there is an absolutely ice cold killer. In my opinion.

Norman Swallow: The only time, when he was obviously controller 2 indirectly via you worked with him and after he'd left that position, after he left the director of programmes, his first assignment was for our group which was *Tribal Eye*.

Aubrey Singer: No *Tribal Eye* was done for Dick Cawston's lot.

Norman Swallow: No, really. I know because it was my department, arts features

Aubrey Singer: How did Montagnon get involved then

Norman Swallow: He didn't. David Collinson produced it. You're probably thinking of another series

Aubrey Singer: Yes I am.

Norman Swallow: *Tribal Eye*

Aubrey Singer: Yes, I remember, you're quite right. Well we did *Tribal Eye*. I forget about *Tribal Eye* really, it was one of those series that faded into the distance.

Norman Swallow: No, it wasn't very powerful. It was sufficient.

Aubrey Singer: I don't want to be unfair to David really because he's a man of considerable talent. Great talent actually but great, great manipulative skills, probably

based on the fact he did so much ethology and animal behaviour you know. And he regarded everybody as an experiment animal in a funny way. Very cold man.

Norman Swallow: On the surface he's cold certainly I think but maybe deeply within him he's not

Aubrey Singer: Maybe that's true and maybe I'm being totally unfair. But I never felt as close to David as I did to Huw or I did to Paul for that matter.

Norman Swallow: Talking again about the features group in general which as I said I thought was a very important period in television history apart from your own career, the other departments, we've talked about arts features because I was in it, but of course there was general features, marvellous, *Man Alive* which you mentioned briefly last time. You refer to Desmond and Bill, meaning Desmond Wilcox and Bill Morton. *Man Alive* was a great breakthrough wasn't it.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. General feature department started under Gordon Watkins. And Gordon who again one liked, one couldn't help but like but was really not up to running a department. He wrote very well but he wasn't up to running a department. He didn't like the continual interchange and thrust and cut of personalities. So we had to find a new head of features and we chose Chris Brasher, and Chris did it very well. Chris was tough, able, he tended to do what I call muscular Christian programmes, like climbing the Eiger and things like that. But on the other hand he was extremely good. We wanted to find somebody to run, a new producer actually. And Chris said to me you've got to get Wilcox on board, Desmond Wilcox.

So the negotiation began, it turned out to get Desmond on board we had to have Bill Morton as well. Because they worked as a team. Then it turned out that he couldn't work with BBC furniture, so we had to hire in furniture, much to the fury of various people. And he used to behave rather like, rather like he had nothing to do with the BBC. That was alright, I didn't mind, except that they got rather angry in the administrative places. He came in and they started this series *Man Alive*. Now Desmond had been a *Daily Mirror* journalist and he knew perfectly well that the ideas that made it were right on the border line of sleeze, sex, etc, etc. But just this side of the border line which was

very difficult for the BBC. So they did a programme on child molesting, I remember that which I thought was perfectly alright in terms of going out. I could see nothing wrong with it but there were howls.

Norman Swallow: There wouldn't be now of course

Aubrey Singer: No, it would be pretty mild stuff, very mild indeed. But Desmond is a first class writer, a first class filmmaker, a first class commentator, I mean he is a very good all rounder and I think he has been underrated, partly because he has to push himself so hard. If he didn't push himself hard, he would bubble to the surface and be there. As it is he is risen to the surface, he's there, but I have a lot of time for Desmond, I thought he was wonderful. Bill Morton with whom he worked, was in a way the counterbalance, that Bill was always pulling Desmond back, but gradually, gradually, gradually the partnership divided up and Bill wanted to go and do arts features.

Norman Swallow: He did.

Aubrey Singer: That's fine. I've nothing against that. Then of course the tragedy was he got Parkinson's Disease, and I remember seeing him when I became MD tel. That was a long time later on, I couldn't understand what was going on because he's sort of slouch into the office. And he could talk alright. I said Bill, what's the matter. He hadn't told anybody. He said actually I've got Parkinson's Disease. I said you better tell somebody because the least we can do is help as much as possible but you can't. And of course what happens is you have this rigor and you have to take Eldopa which he did, and that's fine provided you don't eat. If you eat then the food destroys the drug and so you can't really sleep at night. Just awful. So the poor man, and I knew him very well, the poor man got a bottle of Dom Perignon and went into a hotel room, drank the Dom Perignon and killed himself with sleeping tablets.

Norman Swallow: Very sad.

Aubrey Singer: And that was the end in a way. But in a way the Wilcox Morton partnership had broken up before then. But I think Desmond's contribution to television was outstanding actually.

SIDE 4, TAPE 2

Norman Swallow: How about the other department of the features group which was science features

Aubrey Singer: Science features in a way was closest to my heart because I'd started that one and with Phil Daly we did *Eye On Research* you remember and Phil was one of the great producers of science features. Very good indeed. And we had all sorts of very good producers floating around. We had Adrian Malone, we had Humphrey Fisher, Humphrey was head of the department to begin with and Humphrey was brilliant, Humphrey was very, very clever except that he was bone bloody idle. If he could have applied himself he'd have been up there doing something. As it was he had a wonderful time being a sort of social butterfly, that's alright, the Archbishop of Canterbury's son

Norman Swallow: He went to Australia didn't he

Aubrey Singer: He went to Australia as the representative there. He's the only man I know who, the Archbishop of Canterbury's son got arrested, for not having a television licence. But there we are.

Norman Swallow: He is still in Australia

Aubrey Singer: Yes he is. I don't know if life has used him well or not. I really don't know. I see him occasionally when he comes back. But he is never very close, he stands off, I don't know what it is because I liked him very much too. He was great fun, enormous fun. Then I remember working on an idea for a programme called *The Fearful Symmetry*. This is Humphrey, I gave him the idea. I said look Humphrey, there is something out there that needs to be done that welds together particle physics and astro physics. This is going to come as sure as night follows day. So Humphrey goes round, he goes everywhere, to Australia. And he comes back and he says there isn't a programme in . I said Jesus Christ Humphrey how wrong can you get. He said well there isn't a programme in it, that's it.

Norman Swallow: There never was one therefore.

Aubrey Singer: Until years later when there was a real merging of particle physics, I was right, but maybe I was a

couple of years too early, I don't know. But Humphrey also worked with Bill Duncalf on *Your Life In Their Hands*.

Norman Swallow: That was quite a success wasn't it

Aubrey Singer: Yes. And then into this came Bob Reed, ex *Tonight* director, scientist. And he produced some very elegant beautifully thought out programmes. And he became head of science features until very sad he committed suicide.

Norman Swallow: Too many of them. This is a kind of footnote. We've talked about two suicides.

Aubrey Singer: Colin Nears committed suicide. Jim Mossman

Norman Swallow: Colin didn't

Aubrey Singer: No, not Colin.

Aubrey Singer: Julian Jebb did.

Aubrey Singer: But who was the other one.

Norman Swallow: Ken Shepherd

Aubrey Singer: That's right, Ken Shepherd. I think, I've thought about this quite a lot actually. And I think the trouble with this industry of ours is, I don't want to make any hostage to fortune, it could happen to me I suppose, the, you have to have some stability. The people I notice who are the most vulnerable are the ones who are not married or in the process of running a mistress or something else. Unless that stability is there, sooner or later that sort of production life catches up with them. And I think that's the only thing I can think of. But Bob Reed the same thing happened

Norman Swallow: Much later of course

Aubrey Singer: Much later. When you look at all these tragedies surrounding your colleagues, they're awful. I'll never forget the Mossman thing. Such talent. And I think there was a price to pay for all this excitement of working hard and working hard and working continuously. You know the price was unless you had firm roots, in the end you'll be blown over.

Norman Swallow: True.

Aubrey Singer: So anyway Humphrey then became head of department. Then he went to Australia, then we had Phil Daly and he became head of department. Phil was a great character, my best friend as I said, and a very good producer, thorough, a bit of a plodder actually, he'd plod on, that didn't matter. He produced it and the one thing that Phil had was this wonderful, wonderful talent for ingratiating himself with performers, like Richard Fineman. He really managed to get close to them. And he was very good. And then after Phil Daly Bob Reed.

Norman Swallow: Very successful department, very successful group, let's be fair.

Aubrey Singer: It was actually, it was very successful.

Norman Swallow: And in about 1972 you went upwards again.

Aubrey Singer: Then I went to be controller of BBC 2 following on Robin Scott. Of course the one thing, when they made me head of features group, about that time they made Robin Scott, no a couple of years later, controller of BBC 2. And I was furious at that because I wanted the job, but Huw had rightly judged I think that I was doing alright thank you very much in features group, and don't mess around. And I think he was right. Being made controller of BBC 2 though, I've talked about commissioning programmes and I won't bore you with that any more, but that was a different world. Again you fell further and further away from programmes. Until finally I think this is one of the factors leading to my departure from the BBC, when I got into the MD tel, I was so far away from programmes that really all I wanted to do was play with ideas and work with programmes and not keep my head to the grindstone.

Norman Swallow: Who succeeded you as controller of 2, I can't remember, I'd left by then myself. Never mind

Aubrey Singer: I went on to become MD R at that stage. And that again was a wonderful transposition, I've talked about it but it was wonderful because you had all these development like not only the musicians strike but also the development of local radio for instance. And it was very

exciting being MD R. And I did a good job there, I felt I did a good job there. But I didn't do a good job as MD tel. Terrible isn't it.

Norman Swallow: Maybe there isn't a good job to do.

Aubrey Singer: Could be, Norman

Norman Swallow: Except Huw Wheldon one thinks of.

Aubrey Singer: Yes

Alan Lawson: That's a different personality.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. But I just felt I made a mistake going for MD tel. And I got it against Alasdair's best wishes too. That's another thing to remember, because Alasdair said I want you to go and do this job on satellites and things, but you know about science. I said I don't want to do it, I want to do programmes. And I think I made one error. I then went to George and said I know Alasdair wants me to

Norman Swallow: George

Aubrey Singer: George Howard, the chairman. I know Alasdair wants me to do this, but I don't want to do it George, I really don't. In my hearts of hearts I'm not in it.

Norman Swallow: Alasdair Milne was then DG.

Aubrey Singer: Yes. He had just been made DG. And I want to be MD tel. And George said make Singer MD tel.

Norman Swallow: And he did

Aubrey Singer: And George did things on a whim as you will remember only too well.

Norman Swallow: Another character

Aubrey Singer: Well George Howard was a great character, he used to call me part of his Yorkshire mafia but he was a great character. He ran broadcasting house in the same way as I suspect that he ran the stables at Castle Howard, you know a sort of off shoot. Had he been an 18<sup>th</sup> century landowner, we were the sort of stable thing. But he was

very good. He had taste, enormous taste, he loved his music. I'm not so sure he was a good administrator, but he was great fun, going up to Castle Howard to shoot was a great experience which I'd never have had as a broadcasting parachik you know. So there we are. Hot soups on the tailgate of the Landrover, rather than other things that were going on there. But there we are. Where do you want me to go from here.

Norman Swallow: One or two points I want to take up again from the earlier part of your career in television. I was going to say, first of all you just mentioned Yorkshire, George Howard. Is there a big Yorkshire influence, Aubrey, in your career, your life, your approach to television and radio. I don't know, I'm a Lancashire man, the wrong side of the Pennines.

Aubrey Singer: Well, there was always, yes, I was, to answer the question, I was born and brought up in Bradford, and I didn't leave Bradford until I was 15, 15½, it was obvious the war was on and it was obvious that I didn't want to go to university with the idea of breaking it up and things liked that. And I thought I wasn't very academically minded. I didn't know what to do. I thought I'd be a scientist but I discovered I couldn't do mathematics, I hated mathematics. That was no good and I thought I could be a writer, that's why I wrote a lot of poetry and stuff, but that wasn't going to earn me any money.

Norman Swallow: Did you sell your poems

Aubrey Singer: No, never.

Norman Swallow: You still write them you said

Aubrey Singer: Occasionally yes.

Norman Swallow: I won't ask you to read any

Aubrey Singer: I'll read you one if you want one which I wrote some time ago, you can have it if you want it now, I'll give it to you.

Norman Swallow: I might come back to it as a postscript, end of interview we'll have it.

Aubrey Singer: Yorkshire, I enjoyed Yorkshire, I liked it. I started off by going to Cattle Hall preparatory school. And I quite liked that when I got used to being beaten and things, I hated it really.

Norman Swallow: A topical subject now.

Aubrey Singer: Then I had to be taken out of Cattle Hall because my mother couldn't afford the fees, that was great by me, I was sent to Bradford Grammar School. And that was terrific, that was terrific. The masters were good. You were really being taught there. The English master Glassey was terrific and the chemistry master Bentley was superb. And I enjoyed that but I was in the lowest form, 5 D. But that didn't matter. I was learning something. And I then took O Levels. I didn't bother with A Levels, I quit, because it was decided I wasn't academically inclined. So I thought what the hell can I do, and the one thing I was passionately interested in was film. I used to go to Bradford Civic Theatre and I knew the lady who arranged the programmes. I used to be taken to London from time to time to go to the BFI screenings. And you get 30 films over a weekend. You wouldn't see a whole film but you would see quite a hunk, *Le Jour Se Leve*, the lot, Raimu, all the classics, the Odessa steps, the lot were there. And I suddenly thought I'm interested in documentary film. I'd read Paul Rotha's book on the documentary film.

Norman Swallow: And he worked in television for a time.

Aubrey Singer: For a time.

Norman Swallow: 3 years. No good

Aubrey Singer: No good at all. His book wasn't very good either. Actually believe it or not it influenced me because I saw that this movement of the great social influence, that's what I want to do. You know I was coming out of the war, we were all idealistic at that time. And so I said well what I want to do, I want to make documentaries. So I was taken by my mother to a relative who knew someone high up in Denham Studios. So I went round Denham and did I want a job as a clapper loader, I didn't want to be in the camera department I thought. Did I want this, I suddenly thought, no I don't want this, I want documentary. So I was then taken to see the Crown Film Unit. Humphrey Jennings and everybody else. He was there but there were no

vacancies there. And then I was taken to GBI, GB instructional, who gave me a job as a trainee at £2.10s a week. And there I was able to edit and direct, I was an assistant director trainee editor. And so I had a very good training, I went through the cutting rooms, I directed films, I became assistant director, unit manager. It was a very good training indeed looking back on it now. And then we went, they set up GB Africa, so I went out to Africa. And that was the end of the Bradford experience really, when I went out to London, from Bradford to London

Norman Swallow: You still kept Bradford connections, I'm thinking of the Museum.

Aubrey Singer: Well that is quite accidental actually

Norman Swallow: I know you have connections with it

Aubrey Singer: It's accidentally on purpose yes, they saw I'd been in Bradford and said how convenient. But no I go to Museum meetings, I went to one yesterday. They're very interesting and I like the museum, it's wonderful. And I've given them quite a lot of stuff, illicitly, which was the BBC's. This was a long time ago. I had a whole lot of mini teles, the teles round there. They've four different kinds of mini teles that I gave them, so they can have a display of mini teles, you know little ones that, and I managed to arrange to sell them cheaply Thompson's book on China, the big 4 volume, 3 volume on China. And a whole lot of stuff. I thought why having it lying around here. Give it to the museum.

Norman Swallow: A good idea. And then you come into television, we covered a little bit of this ground last time

Aubrey Singer: So we're repeating ourselves

Alan Lawson: A bit fuller.

Aubrey Singer: But the going into television was really, or going into film was quite something. I worked a lot with Mary Field in those days. And it is very interesting, I find I work quite well with women.

Norman Swallow: Children's films

Aubrey Singer: Yes. The same way I worked quite well with Joanna

Norman Swallow: Spicer

Aubrey Singer: Mary Field yes, and Mary Adams.

Norman Swallow: Not Grace Wyndham-Gouldie

Aubrey Singer: Not Grace. Not Grace. I thought Grace was a monster actually. James McCloy described Grace brilliantly, as one of those wasps that lays its eggs in caterpillar and you then get eaten from the inside.

Norman Swallow: She was a personality.

Aubrey Singer: She was. And she was very clever and very able and she appointed

Alan Lawson: She knew it

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes.

Norman Swallow: I never really got on with her, she was my boss

Aubrey Singer: the most fortunate thing that ever happened to me in television was that I never went into talks department under Grace.

Norman Swallow: Point taken

Aubrey Singer: I nearly did

Norman Swallow: A name I'd like to hear more about who was around at that time was Cecil McGivern who was then controller of programmes. I know when I joined BBC television in 1950 Cecil was head of programmes even then at Alexander Palace

Aubrey Singer: Yes

Norman Swallow: And he was obviously extremely important in rather important days. And he held that job for quite a while. Did you work closely with him. And what did you make of him, he's a mysterious figure. I think unfairly ignored

by people who talk about television and its recent history or not so recent history.

Aubrey Singer: well I agree with you except that there were comparatively few people who were close to him. I wasn't close to him. I was just an urk and he was up there. On the other hand I thought he was a wonderful man, I thought he was a great leader. And he was really, I remember Cecil, I mean Cecil's problem was that he drank too much, but who doesn't in this industry,

Norman Swallow: That was his big problem wasn't it

Aubrey Singer: Yes

Norman Swallow: Eventually

Aubrey Singer: That's right. But I thought he had one of these instinctive minds for an idea and I was very excited by the radio documentaries he did before I joined television, radar and things like that

Norman Swallow: Features. And *A Harbour called Mulberry*

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: And *Junction X*

Aubrey Singer: That's it. And these were wonderful. And I remember he interviewed me for my job when I first joined the BBC, I was passed, obviously they were very suspicious of this 22 year old who wanted to become a producer. And the final interview was with McGivern. He said what do you want to do. I said I want to direct. Direct what. Direct documentaries I said. Outside broadcasting would do me fine. We then had some searching questions and exchanged notes about and ideas and things. I made him laugh and that worked quite well. So that is how I got the job. But then following on that, we had quite a lot to do with one other. When I came back from America, he said what do you want to do. I said I want to do something big. So we did the IGY really because the opportunity presented itself. And even then, finally after that Cecil couldn't get used to my free spending ways. I mean I spent £30,000 on the IGY documentary and in those days that was a hell of a lot of

Norman Swallow: A lot of money then

Aubrey Singer: A lot of money. The most expensive programme ever produced

Alan Lawson: I got the can

Aubrey Singer: You did

Alan Lawson: From Joanna

Aubrey Singer: Why

Alan Lawson: I shouldn't have let you have all that.

Aubrey Singer: Well then, I think Cecil was again like Huw, another intuitive, and I just felt so sorry for him at the end of it all. And I remember the last time I saw Cecil, he'd been sent over to France to go and stay in Jean Darcy's house I think or something. Why I don't know, to get him out of the way I think. And I came across him in the Paris office, and I said I don't know, I'd love to go and see Chartres, so why don't you. I can't afford it, Will you authorise it. Sure he said. I said well let's go together. So we went to look at Chartres, but he really ended up as a fish out of water because the industry had overtaken him.

Norman Swallow: He had to leave, didn't he.

Aubrey Singer: Yes,

Norman Swallow: I know he went to Granada.

Aubrey Singer: That was sad too. Baverstock went to Granada too, if you remember

Norman Swallow: No Yorkshire

Aubrey Singer: No, when Baverstock

Norman Swallow: Sorry, I beg your pardon, later on.

Aubrey Singer: Yes, Granada used to take in all these

Norman Swallow: Disasters

Aubrey Singer: All these strange, but Baverstock told me it was disastrous. They wouldn't talk to me he would say. They wouldn't say anything to me.

Norman Swallow: I remember seeing him there. And he didn't really have anything to do, he just sat alone in an office.

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: And nobody speaking to him and doing nothing, sod all. Cecil McGivern had virtually no job there either.

Aubrey Singer: No.

Norman Swallow: But I think that was Sydney Bernstein's charity.

Aubrey Singer: I think that's true.

Norman Swallow: And it was Cecil who unfortunately, as we mentioned earlier, who appointed Paul Rotha

Aubrey Singer: Yes

Norman Swallow: As head of documentaries.

Aubrey Singer; A great mistake.

Norman Swallow: Big mistake.

Aubrey Singer: I mean Paul Rotha, he used to work at GBI of course and he was a terrible man to work, he would wait days for the right sunshine to get the right cloud. Christ. One thing television taught you was you can't afford that leisurely existence.

Norman Swallow: Never was and never will be I suppose.

Norman Swallow: You did tell us earlier on Aubrey quite a lot about your early days with OBs. And you mentioned Marcus Smith and you also mentioned directing a Scottish drama in a theatre, and you haven't mentioned the name of the drama, I don't think.

Aubrey Singer: It was called, I mentioned it early, a James Bridie drama,

Norman Swallow: It will come

Aubrey Singer: The something, anyway there we are, it will come as you say. I did that with, it was the first show I did from Scotland. What happened I think I described this process how Britain was divided up amongst the OB department and Derek Rawle Davis[?] being a likely Yorkshire lad got Manchester and I got Scotland, which was rather unsatisfactory because the problem wasn't to get into Scotland but to get out of Scotland. And I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't got out of Scotland, I would have gone mad I think. Because there was nothing there. Anyway, what the hell was that play.

Norman Swallow: It will come to us. James Bridey, that's a big clue.

Aubrey Singer: I'll find it in a moment. So what do you want me to talk about now. Scotland

Norman Swallow: Not necessarily. You did say shortly after that, you referred somewhat mysteriously to the Rodgers and Hammerstein occasion, without saying what it was and I didn't prod you.

Aubrey Singer: Oh that was when I was in America. That was when I was in America and they were going filmed, one of Cecil Madden's great shows, you know Cecil Madden used to run these shows like *Showtime* or *Picturepage* or what not. And they wanted a piece from me on Rodgers and Hammerstein, so I said I will interview them. So I went out there with my camera team and we set up in this lovely brownstone house, and I'd written my introduction, I'm standing in one of the most elegant brownstone houses in New York and behind me at the piano, Mr Rodgers and Mr Hammerstein, so let's go in and meet them. And I turned round and I fell flat on myself on my face on the floor. And I said oh Christ cut. That was that. Unfortunately Mr Alan **Sleath**, my old friend Alan, I sent the stuff back, I didn't bother to process it obviously and I didn't bother to say which take. So they developed the lot and they use this take. And it has been the staple diet of BBC bloopers ever since. It has appeared on American television, every television in the world.

Norman Swallow: BBC didn't show it for a while I don't think.

Aubrey Singer: No, and then they did.

Norman Swallow: And still will no doubt

Another name it will be useful to hear more about from your point of view was Richard Dimbleby. The same period.

Aubrey Singer: Yes.

Norman Swallow: You just mentioned him without saying,

Aubrey Singer: I worked a lot with Richard

Norman Swallow: Exactly

Aubrey Singer: He used to do a whole lot of these so called features we did in OBs. I remember doing one from Kodaks. And what else, I worked on a lot of events with him like the Festival of Britain, opening service, I think he did the commentary for that. And he did the commentary for the first Telstar. Though by that time he had cancer and was in great pain and just managed to do it. Richard was a wonderful guy, he was a real gentleman actually, a very nice man. And he was, he liked his food, he liked his wine, but he really was a professional through and through. And he never let you down. He always had done his research. And this was the important thing about Richard, that one learned from him, that to survive in this world you had to be a professional and he really was, very professional and very good.

Norman Swallow: I worked with him on *Panorama* for 3 years, when Paul Fox was the editor.

Aubrey Singer: A delightful man

Norman Swallow: He was, and as you said very practical and precise and got everything right. And was always, seemed to be relaxed and was always charming. A great man.

Aubrey Singer: I was always surprised that he never got a knighthood

Norman Swallow: Strange no honour at all, I don't think

Aubrey Singer: I don't think so. He must have dirtied his ticket somewhere or other, somehow, I've no idea.

Norman Swallow: Unless he refused it.

Aubrey Singer: I don't think he would, I think he would have taken it.

Norman Swallow: I think so. Again Aubrey, round about the same time in the interview, you made the important point which might be worth expanding, I never wanted to leave the confines of the BBC, which is quite interesting since so many people have done about that time and afterwards and you never did until late on, until 1984

Aubrey Singer: I nearly did, I nearly went to Yorkshire television. But then I couldn't face the idea of the move, I really couldn't. And I felt the BBC was very nice, it had a sort of womb like quality to it, I had my friends, I knew how to play the mighty Wurlitzer, however to get whatever facilities one wanted. And I thought why exchange this. And it wasn't until I was faced with the awful problem that there is nothing left for me to do that I quit. I never really wanted to leave the BBC. I always felt it was a great organisation. I mean I moan and groan like bloody hell, I'd complain and I'd fight within the organisation knowing damn well the BBC would never sack you provided you didn't rape a secretary or something

Norman Swallow: They listen to you.

Aubrey Singer: So I think that I didn't really want to leave the BBC. I was very comfy there, very comfy. But comfy isn't quite the word, I was stretched there too. I was over worked, I wanted this, self centred over-worker Joanna described it.

Norman Swallow: I often use the phrase creative atmosphere.

Aubrey Singer: Yes that's right

Alan Lawson: Also it was a very protective umbrella too

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Alan Lawson: It enabled you to get on with it.

Aubrey Singer: That's right. And so I just thought it was wonderful. I still think it was wonderful, I would like to go back to those BBC terms and conditions but one never will now of course, it's over and done with. And I think that it is a great tragedy because it was one of the greatest places to work in, I will never see its like again in my opinion.

Norman Swallow: And it will never be the same again itself, will it

Aubrey Singer: No

Norman Swallow: What do you make of it now

Norman Swallow: I know you have connections with it

Aubrey Singer: I see them all from time to time.

Norman Swallow: Well you're making a programme for them.

Aubrey Singer: Everybody, well I don't see many people making a programme for them. They never bother to get in touch with me or make contact. Nobody asked to see a rough cut even, it was only I who said look chaps you've got to see a rough cut because we have problems with this, and here you are, you won't get much out of it, you'll see it, but until we do the online you won't get the, but you'll see I'll run it for you. But the end of the battle was that in a way one could see that I was lucky to be the first person to go. That there were others and I watched this whole scene. I watched Alasdair getting rid of Dick Francis, I watched Alasdair getting rid of, who else did he get rid of, oh another board of management character, I forget who it was. I remember at a party seeing him saying, those who live by the dirk shall perish by the dirk. And he looked at me rather wryly. And I said that's right, you watch.

Norman Swallow: Pointing at him

Aubrey Singer: And it happened to him.

Norman Swallow: It did indeed.

Aubrey Singer: Yes, so I don't know. I think the BBC was a fantastic place to work, it was a wonderful, wonderful forcing house of talent in a way. And it was also a rather cruel place to work if you were junior and not very good, you suffered, as I said before De Lotbiniere certainly changed me totally by forcing me into this BBC mold and ethos, which in certain cases was very good. In other cases one can see, looking at the industry is not so good, not so good at all.

Norman Swallow: Producers in the days we were talking about, I'm thinking again about the late 60s and thereabout, 60s and early 70s, producers were given an enormous amount of freedom, weren't they. When you were head of features, as far as I can remember you didn't really see any programme before transmission, or very few, unless we felt, the producers felt somebody should look at it, it's a bit dodgy. I do remember your sitting in on one of these occasions when the reference upwards was the right thing, was Tony Palmer's *All My Loving*, I seem to remember you sat in on that and you said OK. And whoever else was there said OK, and I must have said OK.

Aubrey Singer: Yes

Norman Swallow: That was an *Omnibus*, 1968

Aubrey Singer: That's right. I think *All My Loving* is one of the most incredible films I ever saw

Norman Swallow: It has been shown 3 times now

Aubrey Singer: Rightly so

Norman Swallow: Mary Whitehouse threatened legal action

Aubrey Singer: Oh yes. But I thought, still to this day I think that Palmer was one of the great talents but mad and unemployable. You could not control it in any way. And you couldn't just say let it go because he wouldn't let it go

Norman Swallow: Sometimes

Aubrey Singer: Do you remember that scene with Peter Sellers with the tank of shit

Norman Swallow: Oh that was something you saw, I remember you made a cut. You ordered a cut in it

Aubrey Singer: That's right

Norman Swallow: And Tony took his name off it

Aubrey Singer: That's right.

Norman Swallow: *The World Of Peter Sellers*

Aubrey Singer: That's right. I said well take your name off it, I don't mind.

Norman Swallow: I remember that, I was involved in that.

Aubrey Singer: But I think of all the people I met, save your presence, but he was actually the most brilliant, a maverick talent. I don't know what he's doing now, nothing is he

Norman Swallow: Oh yes. He's been doing a few things for *The South Bank Show* for example

Aubrey Singer: But *All My Loving*, I remember seeing the film and seeing it time and time again, and I must have seen it 5 times, and I couldn't pin it down, I still can't pin it down, the way it came together.

Norman Swallow: Very clever

Aubrey Singer: Very clever

Norman Swallow: Later on he did two films for me when I was at Granada

Aubrey Singer: What were they

Norman Swallow: One was called *Wigan Casino* which was all about a youthful night haunt in Wigan, that kind of thing. And the other one was called *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, about the Wurlitzer organ. Both were sort of musicals really.

Aubrey Singer: An incredible man, and I remember him with great affection. I remember him with great pleasure. But he is so meek and mild to talk to, you think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Don't fool yourself.

Norman Swallow: He made a feature film about Shostakovich about 4 years ago

Aubrey Singer: And he also made that Wagner film

Norman Swallow: With Richard Burton.

Aubrey Singer: And there was great fury because I refused to run that on the BBC, as controller I wouldn't to run it

Norman Swallow: It wasn't very good

Aubrey Singer: It wasn't very good, so too bloody bad. And I think this is actually one of the cruel things about the BBC, you can afford in the BBC to be totally tough and ruthless in your editorial decisions

Norman Swallow: Why not

Aubrey Singer: That's right. That's right.

Norman Swallow: I think I've covered all the points on my list unless you have anything further to add.

Aubrey Singer: Of course I've not mentioned this thing the joys of travel, the real exciting part of the job was travel for me. I loved to be somewhere else. I seemed to be always running away from myself somehow, in that I'd rather be in Tashkent than London or in. I just wanted to travel and collect places, and so travelled I did. I travelled, in 1962 I went to Moscow, it was quite early then. to go to Moscow. And we did programmes from there and I discovered how frustrating it was to work with the Russians, how really frustrating. And I then got fed up with Moscow and I went to India and we made programmes there. I went to America and made a lot of programmes there. I went to Japan, the great thing the BBC did for me is that it allowed me to see the world. And I had more fun seeing the world than any other single thing.

Norman Swallow: When you said you made the programmes, you mean you were the producer of the programmes.

Aubrey Singer: In some cases yes, in other cases I was the organiser of the programmes. In other cases, we got them out anyhow, teams went over. But we went to China, when I

got fed up with Moscow which I did. I couldn't understand people who have this love affair with Moscow and the Russians, I really couldn't. I know you did but that's alright, it's up to you. But I felt after the push around I had from the Russians it wasn't worth it. With Henry [?] Troffin Yenko and Yuri Fokine. But the Chinese was a great experience. This was a really great experience for me to go to China in 1973

Norman Swallow: And many times since

Aubrey Singer: And many times since. And it's an incredible country so I will tell you the poem I wrote as an example of Singer poetry.

It's called A Winter's Visit to the Summer Palace

In Pekin's palaces one find the courtyards of the Chinese mind

In gardens now called peoples parks, Confucius strolls along with Marx

The one the social order gives, to regulate the peoples lives

The other regulates the masses, peasants, soldiers, working classes

And having done this, eyes turn west, to take from us what seems the best

Cogito ergo sum Descartes, who separated mind from heart

Workers of the world unite, producers power, consumers right

Mix with 2000 years tradition, revolution strong position

Chaos outside but rule within, go forward Comrade Mandarin

Alan Lawson: A wonderful thing to finish on