BECTU History Project - Interview No. 3

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Interviewer: Roy Fowler & Alan Lawson

Interviewee: Bill Girdlestone

Tape 1, Side 1

Roy Fowler & Alan Lawson: Now, Bill, where were you born, and when?

Bill Girdlestone: Well I was born 17th of September 1899 in Camden Town

Fowler/Lawson: And where did you go to school?

Bill Girdlestone: Wimbledon Park.

Fowler/Lawson: How come - oh you moved across, did you? (Yes.) Now, did you receive any special training before you started work?

Bill Girdlestone: No, I started work in the' office of the Automobile Association in St James's Street as an office boy.

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, well how come you got into films?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I was the original film buff. I had a home cinema at about 12. A local sweet shop started to sell film, six feet a penny - inflammable film, bits of newsreels - and I used to buy these bits of film because I had a toy cinema that, a toy projector somebody bought me, and somehow or other I got to know one or two other people, not handy but round about, who had similar ideas, and. eventually I built up a proper projector. And, you won't believe this but this is absolutely true, one Saturday afternoon - I couldn't have had a football match on I suppose - at Wimbledon Park, it was a little enclave that had been built with, I suppose you'd call them working-class, upper working-class houses, not quite middle class but better than working class, and we were adjunct to Southfields and Earlsfield and Wandsworth, which was working-class, and the cinema was in Earlsfield and another, poorer cinema was in Wandsworth. And I was standing outside this cinema in Wandsworth one Saturday afternoon and a man came out and standing there, says, ‘What d'you want? What are you looking at?’ I said, ‘I was looking at your billboard, sir, to see the pictures you're running.’ Because they used to have a billboard in those days, and I'm talking about 1912, with their two Westerns, French comic, Italian comic, newsreel ... and all the bits and

pieces they were running, you see. Anyway, he says, 'Oh.' I said, 'Have you got films to sell?' So he said, 'How much money you got?' I said, 'Two shillings.' He says, 'Come in the office.' He took me down in his cinema and then he opened a roll-top desk and it was full, of bits of film, really. And he sold me one called 'The Birth of a Dragonfly', it cost me two shillings, it was a Pathé Secrets of Nature film. And of course I was king amongst all my film pals, I'd got a picture with a title on it, you know. And I sold this, I probably got five bob for it, I don't know, and went back to him - every Saturday I'd go back and buy another film. I didn't realise at the time, being young, I was, receiving stolen property because this chap had ... they used to buy films in those days, Alan, they used to hire them, I'm sorry, from all the renters in Wardour Street. Nothing was exclusive, that didn't start till later, and if somebody made a film, any film renter would buy perhaps two or three copies and they'd send them out to the different cinemas and these wicked managers - I suppose their bookkeeping was so haphazard, the whole industry was haphazard, you cannot possibly imagine really - and they didn't send them back. I eventually had 'Bronco Billy', I eventually had a full, thousand-foot Keystone with Ford Sterling in it, by the time I was 16. And when I joined the forces, the first thing my mother did was give them all away and some of those pictures would have been ... I what was the name of the man, he was a French comic who reckons he was one of his mentors - it'll come to me in ... Max Linder - you're right, right on the spot, lovely, yes, I had one of them ... and so on. Well then I was working in the AA, the War came on and there was no promotion, motoring went to the devil, so I thought well I must get a different job, I was getting 10 shillings a week and having to travel from Wimbledon Park to St James's Park and walk across the Park to St James's Street. And I answered an advertisement in the Daily Mail - now if this isn't Fate, which has played a very important part in my life, I'll tell you - I answered this advertisement and I got a reply, Please come to 199 Piccadilly for an interview. I went there and it was the offices of PCT, Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, and I got the job. And I'd a letter to go to Twickenham Studio and I went there, that's still as an office clerk, which wasn't my scene. Well, while I was there I got to know a fellow who was joining the forces who'd been working at Worton Hall in the laboratory or the dark room. I found out that he was joining up, and he said, 'You may be able to get the job there,' which was what I wanted, and I and got the job under Sidney Blythe, who saw how keen I was and took a great interest and helped me a lot. Well, my first job was to wash out the tanks with hydrochloric acid and help make up the developer in pails (the developing solution in pails), and I was so keen I wanted to know why they put carbonate of soda in, why they put Mettol in, why they put hydroquinone in and all this sort of thing. And I soon found out why they put them in and what they did. So I learnt my trade from the very beginning and Sid Blythe taught me printing and I was there about a year. In the meantime, Paul Berger, who was their foreman, left and got a job as Laboratory Chief - he was a Belgian refugee who lived in the Barons, you do know THE Barons?

Fowler/Lawson: Yes right opposite the studio, yes.

Bill Girdlestone: And he got a job as Lab Manager at London Films, you know, William Jury's company, who donated Glebelands, incidentally. And the first thing he did was send his son, Adolph, who became a newsreel cameraman to ask if I'd go and join him. And I bargained with him, I was getting a pound a week at Worton Hall and I managed to get him up to 35 bob, which wasn't bad for a 16 year old, was it, in those days?

Fowler/Lawson: No, that was money.

Bill Girdlestone: And I went there as a film printer and my first job was to print the rushes for Ernie Palmer, the American cameraman -they were nearly all Americans, there were two American

directors, American cameraman, Continental cameraman, all that sort of thing - and I had to print the rushes. And one of the first jobs I did was to print the rushes for Griffith, who made 'Hearts of the World' partly there.

Fowler/Lawson: That's at Worton Hall?

Bill Girdlestone: No, that's at Twickenham, yes. When I was now at Twickenham, and it was there I taught myself grading because every single shot was put in a little… all in little rolls and I had to test every scene for Ernie and develop it for three minutes, take it to him and he'd mark the printing light and I'd print the folly (?). That was my job. And so, after I'd doing this for some time I thought, you know, see if we might make this a bit easier, so I got these negatives out and put them on the bench and I compared some with others and when I saw two or three that looked alike, I just tested, one and put the other two alongside with it and found that I was doing it right. So I taught myself the rudiments of grading to start with. The negatives were very well developed there. I should have told you - this is of interest - the processing at Worton Hall was the most appalling. They used to have pyro, glycin and MQ. MQ development was the usual three-minute developing solution but if the cameraman was a bit contrasty, and of course the cameramen had no light meters, they had no help whatever, and they were nearly as hit-and-miss as we were in the darkroom. They would change the developer to something softer, hoping to give a better result. God only knows what the combined results were when they were all put together. You can't imagine - I don't know - but that wasn't my problem. But at London Film, this fellow Coward who was the negative developer, all his negatives were very good, and I more or less learned developing.

Fowler/Lawson: What kind of printer did you have in those days?

Bill Girdlestone: Williamson ... and Prestwich would It be?

Fowler/Lawson: There was a Prestwich, but whether they made printers I'm not sure. Anyway, Williamson's, they were a well-known firm.

Bill Girdlestone: Prestwich, I think. They were pretty old tanks.

Fowler/Lawson: Yes. What was the grading system? Was it clips or notches? …Lawley had the clips, didn't they?

Bill Girdlestone: It wasn't notches. It was a curious system I never came across afterwards. But it wasn't bad. This fellow Berg was the chief grader and Alf Darby was the developer - remember Alf Darby? (Yes, I do.) Humphries?? And one of the developers was Terry Ashworth. No. Chap who founded Humphries

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, yes, Terraneau.

Bill Girdlestone: Randy Terraneau - well that's where I met Terraneau and Alf Darby - they were both working in the darkroom there.

Fowler/Lawson: How Many hours a day did you work?

Bill Girdlestone: I think eight till six.

Fowler/Lawson: And every day? (Five days.) Only a five day week you worked?

Bill Girdlestone: No, eight till one on Saturday.

Fowler/Lawson: Where were you living then?

Bill Girdlestone: Wimbledon Park.

Fowler/Lawson: You were living at Wimbledon Park. How did you get to and from?

Bill Girdlestone: By train. Let me see, Twickenham. I bought a bicycle, I think, and did ... yes, I used to go by train from Wimbledon Park to Putney and get a bus from Putney to the studio - Peckham to Isleworth. Number 37.

Fowler/Lawson: Now when did you first start doing neg developing?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, well then I joined the army, see, and when I came out - we all joined at about 17 or 17\1\2, all of us, we were all potty - anyway I got through and came back and started at Shepherd's Bush and I went to the darkrooms there. And there was a chief in my section, negative development section - we used to develop the negative and make the first print, that's all - there was a chap called Turnpenny was the foreman, I was his assistant, there was a fellow called Wood and a fellow called Chambers, who used to do the drying - there was just the four of us, that's all. Well, this fellow, Turnpenny, he wasn't very interested in film work at all. He'd bought a shop in a poor part of Hammersmith, one of these corner shops, general store, and his interest was in that. And as soon as he could he would pass some of the… after, I can't think now, it's too far back, but it wasn't an awfully long time I would think, within a year, he would pass off his negative developing and all his newsreel and. the less important stuff to me. I mean, in those days they used to have boxing matches, Deckem and Cook (?) and they used to last all night, and he wouldn't do that and I used to have to go in at 10 o'clock at night and work all night developing these fights and I had to be back at 8 o'clock in the morning, because if you didn't get back at 8 o'clock in the morning, you didn't get a day's pay. You see, you got your overtime from working in the night but then they would take it off the next day. So of course, being young, somehow or other I stood up to all this and eventually this Turnpenny chap - he had no idea what negative - I seemed to have got the idea, from the beginning, believe it or not, well I'd always had a camera, I was always taking pictures and I'd studied American negatives when I was at Twickenham and I saw the class of negative they'd got and the class of negative we were getting at Shepherd's Bush, and I knew it as wrong. Well, anyway, they made a picture called 'Rob Roy' and they took Turnpenny to Scotland to process the negative in Glasgow because of the time lag. And while he was away, Basil Emmott was shooting a picture called 'Physician' -no not Physician, there was a picture about hospitals - and in those days the great problem was contrast. The film stock was very slow and the Kleig and Westminster lights were very strong and powerful and the whole thing built up to extreme contrast and the thing to do was to try and keep it down. And I thought of one or two ways of doing it. When Basil started this picture while they were away, we put our nuts together and I said, 'Do you mind if I try something?' And I tried it, and it worked. I weakened the developer, cut out the activator, the carbonate and so forth, and gave my developing time a bit longer and we got a much better picture. Well, the next year Gaumont made a picture in Egypt and they shot Turnpenny off to Egypt to Cairo. Well, you see you hadn't got aeroplanes to bring the stuff back and they would never see any rushes, and they took him over there for two months, a long time. And the day they went out to Cairo, an American company came into Shepherd's Bush (ed. John Stuart Blackton) he was reckoned to be one of the top next to Griffith. Anyway, they were going to shoot a picture called *The Gypsy Cavalier* with

Carpentier, the French boxer. And Hitchcock came to me and he says, 'What are they going to do? We've got an American company come in, what shall we do about the negative?' I said, 'Well, for crying out loud (whatever was the current expression then) I said, I hope you'll let me do it. I said, 'You've only got two choices: either I do it or somebody else does it, and if they don't like the way I do it, they'll soon take it away. Let me have a go.' Well, I had a go and this American cameraman was so much better - fellow called Musuraca - he became, he went to Warner Brothers, I think. I've got my film guide out there, I could look into that for you if you like. But I processed this negative and had no problems at all.

Fowler/Lawson: Did you go to the floor at all to talk to the cameraman, or did they come down to you?

Bill Girdlestone: No. I think I only met him once or twice. He looked like an Italian brigand, I was scared stiff of him. Well, mind you : was only a 22 year old boy, and he frightened the life out of me. I was a very timid yob, I must tell you, and I really was scared. Do you want to know the name of the producer? (It doesn't matter.) No, well anyway the fact of the matter is, I produced this negative and when Turnpenny came back, after a couple of days it so happened I'd got my holidays fixed, I went on holiday. And when I came back I found they'd taken the production… I thought had finished but I learned afterwards they'd taken it away. Well, in those days the director cut his picture. He always had a negative cutter on his elbow. Did you know that? (No.) And his negative cutter was Wyn Barry, she married Jack Harris, and we became great pals because I found Jack Harris his first flat in Boston Manor. I'd moved from Wimbledon Park after I got married, to Ealing and I lived in Boston Manor and I found Jack Harris a flat. And his wife was Wyn Barry and she came to me one day with a rubber band with lots of negative, oh about 20 or 30 bits of negative all hanging on her. She said, 'I think you'd better have these now, Bill.' This was, oh, seven years later at least. So I looked at her and said, *Gypsy Cavalier*, what are you doing with those?' She said, 'I used to hawk those round to the studios when we made another picture and I used to tell them, this way we want our negative.' She said, 'Do you know, Musuraca said your negative was better than he got in America.' Well, I put my ideas into operation, I'd by this time got more confidence. And I figured it out that if you developed a negative for three minutes, if you were in error, your limit of error was very close but if you developed your negative for ten minutes, your margin of error was much greater. So I developed my negatives for ten minutes, which of course nobody else had even thought of in those days. It so happened that when we became automatic, I was able to develop my negatives according to the Kodak principle, which was ten minutes, in my automatic machines at Shepherd's Bush, whereas Humphries and Denham was six minutes. That's why I got much better gradation and I've got a letter here which I can give you, or show you, from Bernard Knowles was one of the top cameramen of his day - I mean you've heard about *Good Companions* and *Jew Süss* when you were there?

Fowler/Lawson: No, I'd left by then.

Bill Girdlestone: No, you hadn't. What, 'Jew Süss'?

Fowler/Lawson: Yes, I'd left, yes.

Bill Girdlestone: I thought you were there till they shut. Where did you go?

Fowler/Lawson: I went to Stolls with Dick in '32. With Desmond Dickinson.

Bill Girdlestone: Was Des at Shepherd's Bush then?

Fowler/Lawson: No, he was at Stolls.

Bill Girdlestone: And you went and joined him? In his caravan, oh. Well, anyway ... a letter from Knowles, which said that in all his experience, he came to Shepherd's Bush in 1944 and shot a picture called 'Love Story', and he said, 'I've never got gradation on my negative like we get here.'

Fowler/Lawson: Now, at the Bush, when you were there on neg developing, I always got the impression there was the studio laboratory and there was the factory. (That's right.) Now what was the difference?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, my laboratory, we used to process the negative, make the first print, make the show copies and make the internegatives and dupe negatives, nothing else. The works laboratory used to print the newsreel and all the release prints. They used to do 700 newsreels twice a week, 700 feet each.

Fowler/Lawson: And they didn't do any neg processing at all though, did they?

Bill Girdlestone: I did all that.

Fowler/Lawson: Yes, I can remember in Smith's Yard.

Bill Girdlestone: They used to bring bits of scenery made of plaster and cart it right through and shove it in Smith's Yard, and drop bits of plaster all over the place.

Fowler/Lawson: We should explain about Smith's Yard, shouldn't we? What was it originally? It was a wine store. Now, did the coming of Panchromatic make much difference to your life in the darkroom?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, you see, we used to work in the dark with the aid of a torch. How I ever processed I'll never ever know - but somehow I did it and got it right. And all we had to do was change from a red torch to a green torch.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, in those days that was with frame, wasn't it, frame development- (That's right.) How many feet did the frame take?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, before sound 180 feet, after sound about 280 feet.

Fowler/Lawson: That was the dreadnoughts, wasn't it?

Bill Girdlestone: They built the frames so that you could put another bar on it, so instead of having one set of strands you got double.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, who was in charge of the studio lab? (Me.) You were in charge of the studio lab. And what was your relationship to Hitchcock?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, he was in charge of both labs, see. I was his superintendent.

Fowler/Lawson: Because we should explain also, it wasn't Alfred Hitchcock, it was another Hitchcock - Bill Hitchcock. Now, when you were doing the negs at the Bush, after the ortho days

when Pan had come in, did any of the cameramen adopt special techniques at all, like over-exposing and getting you to under-develop, or didn't you go in for that?

Bill Girdlestone: Not that I remember

Fowler/Lawson: I do remember, though - I wonder if you would agree - that some of the cameramen certainly held you in great awe.

Bill Girdlestone: Did they? No.

Fowler/Lawson: Well, they did.

Bill Girdlestone: In what respect?

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, well I mean they had great respect, that's what I mean. (Really?) Yes, oh yes.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, you see, a cameraman is only as good in those days as what his developer may be. He was completely in the hands of developer. He could make or mar it.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, when the automatic machines came in, what difference did that make to you?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, we still developed a test in those days, when we the machines we would put a test through - they would shoot 1,000 feet of film and on the end they would put a test. So first thing in the morning (or we were then working at nights), we would put a test through at what we considered our optimum time. 'We weren't completely guided by sensitometry then, we used sensitometry to get the balance of the developing solution correct, do you follow me? We would do the test and then we would develop the negative and that reel, according to what I would pass the test at. Then in later days, as it progressed as you know, it -then became the onus of the cameraman, he had to expose his negative to have it developed to a set temperature and time.

Fowler/Lawson: How long did you stay at the labs at Gaumont?

Bill Girdlestone: Till they shut. No, Harcourt (ed. Bill Harcourt, MD Denlabs) came and fetched me and asked me to go - well, he didn't ask me, he says, 'You either come to Denham or you're redundant,' He says, 'I'm sorry but that's it is, we've taken all your work away from you, what are you going to do?' I said, 'Well, what's the offer?' He said, 'Well, the trouble is I've got so many productions going through, as far as the Rank productions are concerned, they're fixed, I've got to do them.' But there were a lot of independent people who were causing a bit of trouble. Well, I didn't wonder at it because they hadn't got a handful of technicians, believe me. I mean it was, it was said, much to w embarrassment - have you heard this one? - 'The only technician Denham ever had was when Bill Girdlestone went there.' Whether that's strictly true or not, I don't know. They'd got one or two, they'd got some useful blokes but during the time I was there, they had some young chaps came along which I took in hand and several people have been kind enough to say that their progress in the film industry is entirely due to what I taught them, really. And one chap was so kind and said to me, about five years after he'd left, he said, 'How're you getting on, Bill and so forth and so on,' he said, 'We're still trying to do it the way you did it.' Isn't that nice?

Fowler/Lawson: Yes, it is nice. Now, what did you start to do then when you went to Denham?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I took, over all the non-Rank production stuff and commercials. And there were a lot of people like ICI, ESSO all sorts of various companies were making pictures in those days ... Crown, and so forth. I took over all their work.

Fowler/Lawson: As neg developer? (No!) Supervisor?

Bill Girdlestone: Just printing and grading, and responsible for all their not post-production - dailies. All the dailies which had been causing trouble.

Fowler/Lawson: How long did you stay at Denham then?

Bill Girdlestone: Twenty-odd years. I stayed from 1950 to 1970, that's right.

Fowler/Lawson: What did you do during the war years? Were you there?

Bill Girdlestone: No, during the war years I was at Shepherd's Bush. I didn't go to Denham till 1950 and after three or four years they made me Chief Contact.

Tape 1, Side 2

Fowler/Lawson: In those early days of Gaumont British at the Bush, what kind of pressures were on the cameramen, well, also on yourself? Let's talk about you first. What kind of pressures did you have in those days?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, one of the pressures was that Balcon didn't want to process with us, he would have much preferred to process with Humphries because when they shot 'Friday the Thirteenth' - Flat Light Charlie shot it ...

Fowler/Lawson: (Laughs) Who's Flat Light Charlie?

Bill Girdlestone: Charlie Van Enger. Now he, he was the top cameraman in America because he shot for Lubitch with Warner Brothers on the Clara Bow series - do you remember that, do they ring a bell? (Yes, they do.) Well, anyway, he came in one night, he says, [in an American accent] 'Who's the laboratory foreman here?' looking at all the big boys there. And I said, 'I'm afraid I am.' He said, 'Well, what's the beef?' I said, 'I'm sorry, sir, I don't know what you're talking about. Who are you?' He said, 'I'm Charlie Van Enger.' 'Oh,' I said, 'I'm delighted to meet you, I know all about your record,' and so forth, 'how are you?' - fine and all that. He said, 'Well, why can't I have my negative processed by you?' I said, 'Ask Mr Balcon, nothing to do with me, sir. I'd be delighted to process your negative.' He says, 'Right, we'll soon get that changed.' And the next lot came to me. They were processing at Humphries. And Hitchcock was in mortal dread of - I no kid - mortal dread of Humphries for all his life - really. That's the only pressure I remember. I was so confident, even in those days, that we were doing a good job that I didn't have any great worries.

Fowler/Lawson: You did speak earlier of kinds of pressures on cameramen as well well. Would you like to talk about that at all?

Bill Girdlestone: I don't really know what to say about that.

Fowler/Lawson: You know, you were saying that Percy Strong was there.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I don't think any of the others had any pressures on them to an extent. I mean I know they changed cameramen now and again on a picture, they changed Krampf for Bernard Knowles on *Jew Süss* but more or less they were all ... Oh, Courant came and did a couple of pictures. He didn't last, for some reason.

Fowler/Lawson: When Gunter Krampf came off *Jew Süss* and Bernie Knowles took over was there, you know, could you see a particular reason for it?

Bill Girdlestone: Nobody told me of any reason but obviously they weren't satisfied with the quality.

Fowler/Lawson: From your point of view, what was the difference between the two cameramen's negative?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I would have said that Knowles' work was considerably better - much better quality, better composition and all the rest of it.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, did you ever do any work with Glen McWilliams at all?

Bill Girdlestone: All his - he shot all the Jessie Matthews pictures. Oh, I know he was a peculiar chap. He was king there because he had all the big Jessie Matthews pictures and he was as nervous of Victor Saville as any stage grip because Victor Saville… now again I was dead lucky, when Victor Saville first started, he came to Shepherd's Bush and he was producer to Maurice Elvey, Now Maurice Elvey produced schedules, he didn't produce pictures. If you gave him a picture for four weeks, you'd get it in four weeks; if it was for £5,000, it was for £5,000 no kidding, never. And they looked like it. But when Victor Saville (laugh) was his producer, they began to look like pictures and they started with a film called *Mademoiselle from Armentieres* and I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw it. It got form, it had got heart, it had got shape and I couldn't think how it had happened because I didn't know who Victor Saville was then. Anyway, there was this trio, there was Saville, Gundry who was the script man, and Elvey, and they produced *Mademoiselle*, they produced *The Glad Ey*e, *Quinney's*, *Hindle Wakes*, about five pictures. And then they decided to give - or I suppose Saville had decided that he wanted to be a director - and do you know what the buggers did to him? They gave him *The Arcadians* to make a silent picture of, which was an Edwardian musical comedy. And Saville from the very start was no man's fool, believe me. He goes to America, well somehow or other, and he picks up... what was his name, oh gee his name's gone ... he picked up a young man to play the leading part, who was one of Bob Hope's gagmen - I wish I could remember his name .. it'll come - and this chap… And they made *The Arcadians* and it so happened I was - oh, I was very lucky. Kodak had just started to bring out a new line of pos. film. In those early days, if we wanted a colour film, to colour a scene, you used to have to put in aniline dye, yellow, blue, pink, red, whatever. But Kodak brought out a new series of positive films called Sonachrome and they all had the dye impregnated in the base and I got hold of all these and I made all of Victor Saville's picture on Sonachrome, different coloured bases. And he was tickled pink. Oh, he thought I was an angel, he thought I was a miracle man, well, it was just happened to be lucky. And he was my friend. Well, when he came back after he'd made *Sport of Kings*, *Love on Wheels*, remaking *The Wakes* and all these other pictures, he was top director and he was the

scourge of everybody. He used to frighten the life out of everybody including Glen McWilliams, really. And I said to Glen, I went on the set, he says, [whisper] 'Don't stop today, Victor's in a bad temper. Jessie's not very well,' because Jessie was not very well pretty often, because he used to work her too hard and she was going through all this trauma with (Sonny) Evelyn May - no, not Sonny, she was married to Sonny then. And I said, 'For Christ's sake, you've got nothing to worry about, it's my job to come and see you and talk about it. ' And. he used to frighten the life out of him, I'm not kidding. Anyway, I went over there one day and he says, [whisper] 'Don't stop, Victor's in a very bad temper today.' And his musical director that day was old Charlie Williams, who wrote 'Dream of Olwen' and several other very well-known film tunes, a very mild, lovely little Welshman - do you know him? (No.) Don't you? Oh, you must have heard of him, Charlie Williams. And he was directing the orchestra and old Saville was venting his spite on… because Jessie'd been playing up - eventually he went for Charlie and Jessie said, 'Stop! Victor ..' (I remember this, this is 1934.) She said, 'Victor, if your picture's half as good as Charlie's music, it'll be a good film.' You can use that! That's true.

Fowler/Lawson: When did Micky Balcon come into your line of fire?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, before he came to the Bush, he was making, he'd got American cameraman called Roy Overbaugh and they were shooting *The Rat* or *The Triumph of the Rat* or something, and they sent their negative to me to process.

Fowler/Lawson: That was at Gainsborough, wasn't it?

Bill Girdlestone: That was at Islington,

Fowler/Lawson: so that was when you first kind of came across him.

Bill Girdlestone: And then of course I met him - because he's a keen cricketer and I played for their cricket team, Gaumont British at Norbury, and we were ... I don't think he ever really.. I've got a picture I can show you with him in the cricket team. I don't think we were ever really bosom pals.

Fowler/Lawson: No. Why do you think that was?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I think Humphries used to give hand-outs, backhanders. Well, old Terry was a very up to date chap, you know. I mean he was very progressive, he would have.. If I hadn't been under a seven-year contract ... Oh, Victor Saville got me a seven-year contract, I might tell you. I only got this second-hand - I'd been, you know, promoted to be negative developer and I was working from eight in the morning till half past nine at night, I was developing negatives from all over the place. One negative that was shot by my first boss at Samuelson's ... I've forgotten his name now, for

Anyway, he shot a film and I developed that for him, I've forgotten his hame now, he became cameraman at Twickenham for Hagen ...

Fowler/Lawson: Not Jimmy Wilson?

Bill Girdlestone: No. Anyway, he shot a film and I developed that for him.

Fowler/Lawson: Geoff Faithful?

Bill Girdlestone: No. Sidney Blythe. And he came along with Colonel Bromhead, our Managing Director, he says, 'I did want to meet you. I'm sure you were the boy that I started off.' I said, 'Yes, that was 12 years ago.' He said, 'Isn't it marvellous,' he said, 'You did me a lovely job.'

Fowler/Lawson: You were talking about stuff going to Humphries because of backhanders, was there a lot of that around, do you think, in those days?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, yes. When I was at Denham, our great trouble was getting processing from non-Rank companies and Humphries did a very good commercial job, let's face it. They were doing a much better commercial job than Denham in those days, much better. Because Alf Darby was a good technician, and so was Terraneau and it wasn't until we had two of the most bloody awful graders you've ever seen, in all your life at Denham in those days - well I used to grade all my films myself, all of them. I was very much disliked, I wasn't liked at all at Denham for a long time because… I kept my mouth shut, I might tell you and kept a very low profile but just to make sure I got it right, I'll tell you another thing. This is a story if you like, one of the first pictures I did, it was a feature film, was a thing for Ralph Thomas called, something called *Daisy* about a cow called Daisy, shot in Guernsey, and the cameraman was Ernie Steward. Now Ernie Steward had been promoted cameraman because - well so the story went, I don't know, I wasn't there - but he was an operator and the rostrum had been built and somehow or other he fell off this rostrum and hurt himself. And I don't think anybody was quite sure how bad. I don't think it turned out to be very bad at all but to make sure that he kept his mouth shut and didn't claim a lot of damages, they promoted him to lighting cameraman. Well this is the story I'm told, whether it's true or not, I can't say - I don't think I'd say too much about this, old chap. But this first picture he did was a thing called .. something called, about a cow ... do find it?

Fowler/Lawson: No, it's all right. 'A Cow Named Daisy' I think it was.

Bill Girdlestone: No, let me find it. *Appointment with Venus*, yes, nothing to do with Daisy. And his next picture was *Venetian Bird* and I took his show copy out and showed it with Ralph Thomas. He said, 'I've only got one thing to say to you, Bill,' he says, 'It's too bloody good for him.' You could use that if you like.

Fowler/Lawson: When the Rank organisation took over the Bush and, you know, going to Denham, what were your feelings about that?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, that didn't happen while I was away. That didn't till about '45. You see, now - I don't think you should repeat this story but I'll tell you what it is off the record. Rank came to Bill Hitchcock and said, 'I've got a site reserved Great West Road,' he said, 'I want to build you a lovely new laboratory after the War, to take all our output because this place will shut because she's old. My place was brand new. I've got new machinery, new everything but the rest of it's all old. He says, 'We'll have a really new laboratory.' Well, Hitch had three sons, two of them worked for me and they both got lei lied during the War: one was a bomb disposal boy, the other was a flier, they both got killed. And Hitchcock was due to retire and he said to Rank, he said, 'Well, I would rather you waited a while until we find which way the cat jumps,' he says, 'I can't tell you what is going to happen after the War, there'll be all sorts of changes that you don't know what different things may happen.' Well, he was right, there was 3-D and VistaVision and Cinemascope and all that - he was right. He says, 'Let's wait.' Well, about 1944, Prudential was short of money and they owned Denham Labs, they put it on the market, Rank bought it. And so Shepherd's Bush became redundant

immediately - we were shut, you see. So Rank had transferred his allegiance from, us to Denham and that's how we lost our jobs.

Fowler/Lawson: Did Bill Hitchcock go over to Denham or not?

Bill Girdlestone: No, he retired. Long before he went, as soon as the War was over he retired. And he wanted to promote me to Lab Manager but the other man, his assistant who looked after the works, he'd been with him all his life. We were then running under GFD if you don't mind .. distribution, and they let this fellow Page take over and he was useless. Anyway, we won't go into that.

Fowler/Lawson: Did you have anything to do with Sidney Box at all?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, yes. He liked me. He gave me a bottle of whisky for a picture I did for him, which thoroughly upset the Rank people because he hadn't distributed any bottles of whisky to some of them, you know, the Denham people I mean. Sidney and I got on all right.

Fowler/Lawson: Did you often work on his pictures?

Bill Girdlestone: Not a lot because he sort of gradually faded out after I got to Denham and Shepherd's Bush shut. We had a .. I remember, I've got it in my desk there, a list of pictures that were going to be produced by Sidney Box about 1952, and I doubt whether more than two were ever done.

Fowler/Lawson: How, you've, had a very wide experience in the laboratory field, which part of it, if you like, has given you most satisfaction?

Bill Girdlestone: Without doubt, my last years when I had complete control of my destiny. I could pick the grader I wanted and they were young men and they had sufficient sense to know that I knew what I was doing.

Fowler/Lawson: Where was this?

Bill Girdlestone: At Denham, the last five years. They had sufficient sense to know what I was doing and I was able to produce the best colour pictures that this country ever saw. When I did *Oh, What a Lovely War*, 1968, we showed it at the Plaza, I sat with Dickie Attenborough, it was a Paramount picture. The Paramount executive came to me and he said, 'Bill, this is the best colour print I've ever seen.' I said, 'Well, it's a very good print but ... I think we've toned it down a little bit.' Peter Hall, the Manager of the Plaza whom I knew very well, he had been at the Odeon and had been - I don't know whether he was promoted or what, he said, 'Bill, it's time you retired.' Well, I was then 70, he says, 'You've been talking about retiring,' he says, 'you'll, never do another one like this.' Well, I did one called *The Waltz of the Toreadors* for John Wilcox, he said, 'This is the best colour print I've ever seen and it's done me such a lot of good. Thank you, Bill.' And I was able - most of the time you were pressed for time. My great trouble at Denham was, they got a few people who were very untechnical, you know careless, they caused me a lot of trouble, a lot of bother, so if I was printing a copy like *Oh, What a Lovely War*, when the printer had finished it I would get an assistant, I would get him to get the negatives and we'd put it down in my office where I knew where it was for when I wanted to make the next print. It hadn't gone to the vaults and got mixed up

with some other picture and they might lose a reel, because there were 16 reels, it was .. do you know A and B Printing? (Yes.) - marvellous.

Fowler/Lawson: I think describe that, Bill, because a lot of people won't know.

Bill Girdlestone: That was the first picture was done by A and B Printing at Denham.

Fowler/Lawson: Explain how it was done.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, if you want to make an optical in colour film, on

Technicolor film with three negatives, you couldn't possibly do it by internegatives. You have got to devise some other scheme. So this scheme was devised so that you made two reels of negative: Scene A would have a notch put in it and that fade out at a given point; reel B would fade in at that point and so make the dissolve. Now reel B would run until the next dissolve without and then reel A would take over, so it was A and B with fade-outs or fade-ins. And we adopted that for *Oh, What a Lovely War* because it was far better than making colour internegatives which were very poor.

Fowler/Lawson: What's been the greatest change in laboratory practice

Bill Girdlestone: I suppose it must be from black and white to colour.

Fowler/Lawson: Well obviously you didn't work on Technicolor but you worked on Eastmancolor. Did that progress fairly quickly, the quality?

Bill Girdlestone: That's a question of what you call quickly, isn't it? Nothing in the film industry's quick enough. I had a calendar printed which said, 'Of course I want it today, if I wanted it , I'd give it tomorrow.'

Fowler/Lawson: That's true, yes.

Bill Girdlestone: I would think that before we got really efficient, it must have been four or five years.

Fowler/Lawson: Yes. Did you work on any of the earlier colour systems at all? You know, the Dufay and, of course there was the old Pathecolour, Cinecolor, you didn't work on any of those? Now, again in your lifetime you've worked with a lot of cameramen. Which do you reckon perhaps is the top one?

Bill Girdlestone: I knew you were going to ask me that one. (Laugh) Well… I grade my cameramen in a league, I've had it in mind a long time ago. I think that Bobby Krasker was probably as good as any.

Fowler/Lawson: Because he disappeared, didn't he?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I didn't catch up with Bobby Krasker until we did picture called *Billy Budd*, black and white it was, lovely job. And then he did a picture in British Columbia, Canada, called *The Trap* which I did for him, colour, and he was so pally with me, oh he got so matey with me. But at that time he was suffering from diabetes and he turned down several pictures and I don't think he ever*did another picture. I think Bernard Knowles was very I good. I think *Good Companions* was

very good. Jack Hildyard was very good. I liked Jack Hildyard. And I liked him in spite of the the rotten, dirty deeds he did to me. Chris Challis was very good. But they were very good at different types of pictures. Now Chris Challis had the best camera unit anybody could ever have (big, fat boy) ...

Fowler/Lawson: Goddard, was it? Oh, I know, Mike Wilson - no.

Bill Girdlestone: And he had a marvellous operator who got himself killed during *The Battle of Britain*. Nothing was ever any trouble. Whatever trouble they had on sets or anything, it was always settled just like that. His cameraman was a big chap, they've both gone. He got a lighting job, he lit the Beatrix Potter picture. Anyway, Chris could do outdoor pictures, men's pictures but I think Jack was better at the more social sort of thing. I tell you another chap who showed a lot of promise, I thought, but he got dropped because he took too long and he took far too long, that was Jack Asher. He was very good - he was on close-ups.

Fowler/Lawson: What about Guy Green?

Bill Girdlestone: I never did a picture with Guy, only as a director. Lovely, oh what a lovely boy. I liked his work, he did that army film, didn't he.

Fowler/Lawson: What do you think are the qualities of a great cameraman? What makes a great cameraman, do you think?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, of course the recognised top man now is the late Ealing boy ... I read an American cameraman who said about this chap, he said, there's only one thing wrong with him, he says, he makes every picture look like a painting. He said, he shouldn't do that, you should make some of it look not so good. You must know who I mean. He's been shooting just recently ... Slocombe yes, Dougie Slocombe. I did two or three pictures with him. I thought he was good but I didn't think he was all that good but he got good afterwards, I believe, very good.

Fowler/Lawson: Now then, let's go onto editors, you know, who've come and…

Bill Girdlestone: Well, you know I'm an honorary member. They made me an honorary member, I'm the only one apart from Bill Whatsisname, the American. They gave me that because I gave them so much help, they said.

Fowler/Lawson: Tell us about coping with editors. If you like the problems they present to you.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, one, Sid Ayres who's now a director in America - you could be quite sure that if he sent a negative to Denham Labs to be cut, he'd have it back within about two hours. I used to reckon his negatives had got a long string on them!

Fowler/Lawson: Why was this?

Bill Girdlestone: Because he'd got a new idea, I suppose, and changed something. Backwards and forwards, Sid Ayres. I suppose Jack Harris was as good as any.

Fowler/Lawson: Which perhaps of the editors, if you like, had the most understanding of the problems that you had in the labs?

Bill Girdlestone: I think Jack did and I think Peter ... and John Shirley, I've got a great respect for John Shirley, he cut *Reach for the Sky*. You must look tonight, your BBC have got British heroes and they're all ...

Tape 2, Side 3

Bill Girdlestone: … he learned so quick. See Alan Hume learned quick but nobody learned as quick as Gerry, and he went silly. Anyway, Fred was shooting a thing called *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* and he was shooting in Wales and he rang me up one day, he said, 'What are the rushes like, Bill.' I said, 'They're not very good,' He said, 'What do you mean, they're not very good?' I said, 'Fred, simply that. They're not very good.' He said, 'You don't know the weather I shot them in,' 'Fred, we're not talking about weather forecasts, we're talking about your rushes, boy,' I said, 'I'm not going to tell you they're good because they're not good but,' I said, 'I'm quite sure you've done the best possible job under the circumstances but that still leaves them not very good.' And I don't think he liked it. You see, now, if you'd go to Technicolor who said 'Oh, Fred, everything's fine.' And this is the way they all worked, believe me. But I never did. Well, there's no sense in it, is there? I mean if I said the stuff's good and they see it it isn't, this chap's an idiot, it isn't good.

Fowler/Lawson: We'd better make it clear that we were talking about Freddie Young there. We missed the beginning and that was Freddie you were talking about, wasn't it? Freddie Young.

Bill Girdlestone: I don't think you ought to use that.

Fowler/Lawson: Freddie wouldn't mind, I'm. sure.

Bill Girdlestone: I'd rather you didn't, because Fred is so, he's so fond of me, it's a bit embarrassing really. I mean I've never done much for Fred really, because I've hardly ever handled any of his pictures. I handled his very first picture, a thing called *Victory*.

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, yes. That was at the Bush.

Bill Girdlestone: But I've never done much for Fred. I mean I think that's the only picture I handled for him while I was at Denham.

Fowler/Lawson: What, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*?

Bill Girdlestone: We had a terrible experience, you must listen, this is good - you can have this. A very well-known cameraman, Ossie Morris, was shooting a picture which had a working title of *China Story*, it was Bill Holden and a top American star, I think she was in the club, I'm not sure, but she was a bit of a trouble. But the director was a great director who'd had better days, Leo McCary, and he was on drugs and he started this picture and in no time at all he'd gone on the blink. And he was hardly capable of directing at all, he was only just about able to get to the studio and direct. And eventually it got so bad, he'd say, 'I'll be in after lunch,' and there was no work done in the morning, or he'd go home and there was no work done in the afternoon. And everybody took a hand, Ossie Morris took a hand, the art director took a hand, the assistant directors took a hand. Eventually they finished the film and they finished it very, very late. Now Tommy Howard had got

several travelling matte shots in this picture - Tommy's gone, isn't he, he's not alive? - No, he's dead, so I can say what I want to. And this picture - when American companies make a film, the finishing date's fixed, every date's fixed, the date of delivery of the negative to America is fixed, and that stays there, irrespective of what happens in between, and I'm the last link. The last. link on that picture was very close to the date when it had got to go to America and we didn't have time to make a show copy and we didn't have time for Tommy Howard to get his travelling mattes right and they were awful. And Ossie Morris rang me up, he says, 'You've done the most bloody awful job on my picture,' he said, 'I'll never get another job. ' I said, 'You know the circumstances, be sensible, Ossie. I've only had this picture a week, to cut it and grade, I can't do it. We want another month.' I said, 'You know what's happened to you, the picture's got to go to America, we hadn't even got a show copy. Your director's let everybody down, including you, but,' I said, 'it's not my fault, mate.' But he's never spoken to me since. And Howard's travelling mattes were terrible, they were really very bad because he hadn't had time to do them.

Fowler/Lawson: What do you think of present-day films? I don't mean on television, I mean in the cinema.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I don't go, but what I see on the box it looks as though they've given the dolly pusher the job of shooting the camera, putting the lights up. I think the quality's gone to buggery. Well, hasn't it? Do you agree? Or is it a different style? British films are all right but American films - I don't know any of the cameramen.

Fowler/Lawson: Well, I think we're not seeing a lot of the new stuff on the box anyway. I mean it's specially shot for television, isn't it? Which is a different medium.

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, the television stuff like this 'Dynasty' is all right, but it's all the same. It's got no character, but it's good. It's very good. But I remember seeing ... mind you I'm prejudiced, let's face it - this thing called 'Somebody versus Somebody' it looks as if it's shot in somebody's lavatory underground.

Fowler/Lawson: *Kramer versus Kramer*.

Bill Girdlestone: Yes. Do you remember it?

Fowler/Lawson: I never saw it.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, they had lots of it - in its day it was very popular, it was always on the box and it looked . .. Well, my God, the balance was wrong. Oh, I'll tell you. another story - there was a cameraman called Walter Lassally, who got somehow or other I think he must have done .. because Alfred Hitchcock was such a great man in the eyes of the British public because he used to spend half his income feeding up the critics, did you know that? Well, I heard -that while he was actually working at Shepherd's Bush, he used to entertain the critics all the time, really. Well, I don't know whether this fellow Lassally had done this because he used to get good notices, and he did - do you remember Madame, she married the Duke of Bedford, a Frenchwoman producer - when she came to Denham Labs, our commissioner used to drool at the mouth. She was, I suppose, attractive - do you remember her name?

Fowler/Lawson: I don't remember her name - Nicole someone.

Bill Girdlestone: That's right, and she was doing a film for Columbia and this Lassally was lighting it and the first day's rushes were bloody awful, black and white. Because Steve Dade did most of her work and he was very good. So I go over there with it, with the first day's rushes, always went the first day, you know, and the Columbia chap - obviously somebody said to him that I was the lab man. He came up to me and says, 'How bloody bad is it?' I said, 'Who are you?' He said, 'I'm the Columbia representative..' I said, 'Well, what makes you think it's bad?' He said, 'Well, I saw the way it was lit.' I said, 'Oh, pity you didn't light it.' I said, 'you're quite right, the balance is all wrong, absolutely wrong.' He said, 'I guessed it.' So, you know .

Fowler/Lawson: He was a documentary cameraman, Walter Lassally.

Bill Girdlestone: Yes. He was all right outdoors.

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, yes. But I mean he'd never worked in a studio.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, didn't he shoot *Tom Jones*?

Fowler/Lawson: Well a lot of that was outside. Now you've ...

Bill Girdlestone: Editors, you were talking about editors. Peter Tanner, Jack Harris, John Shirley ...

Fowler/Lawson: Did you ever work with David Lean when he was an editor?

Bill Girdlestone: No. Isn't that funny. When you were at Shepherd's Bush, do you remember him starting? He started as a boy and he was on the door of a picture called *The Physician* which was shot by Ventimiglia, you probably were on that. (No.) But he was on the door, you see, and I go in to see Ventimiglia and David says, 'You can't come in here.' I said, 'Oh, piss off, of course I can come in, I've come to see Ventimiglia, I'm from the labs.' 'Oh,' he says, 'that's all right.' Well, about 30 or 40 years later, I reminded David of that. He says, 'Yes, I haven't forgotten.' Use that.

Fowler/Lawson: Did yon work with David when he was an editor?

Bill Girdlestone: No, only when he became a director.

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, I see, never. Your paths never crossed again. How interesting.

Bill Girdlestone: I met him when he came to Denham to see *Adam and Evelyn*. My memory keeps working sometimes.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, did you ever play any role at all in ACT in the early days?

Bill Girdlestone: Before ACT, they started a thing called the British Association of Cameramen and Associated Technicians, and I played a part in that.

Fowler/Lawson: Where was it based, can you remember?

Bill Girdlestone: I forget. It was one of the cameramen got me on that.

Fowler/Lawson: It wasn't Bernie Knowles? No. Can you remember what year that was, approximately?

Bill Girdlestone: '25, '27. And I did apply to join ACT when it started at Shepherd's Bush but I wasn't eligible, being management. Because I felt that I would have helped put the grading rates right. They were grossly out of order. They were grading - in the days when we were negative developing on a machine, in which a negative developer was nothing more nor less than a machine minder, they got his rate more than a colour grader and I thought that was wrong. Well, it was obviously wrong.

Fowler/Lawson: You had Sid Bailey, didn't you, at Denham, in the neg room, didn't you?

Bill Girdlestone: You mean negative development? When I first went there - now what was his name?

Fowler/Lawson: He'd come from Stolls, the lab at Stolls.

Bill Girdlestone: No, he came from Olympic, the chap came from Olympic and he left and a fellow called … he left, I don't know why he left but I felt that one of the reasons he left was because I'd been put there in a top job and he felt he was entitled to it. And a boy called Dick Poppit took over and he made a very good job of it, well such as it was. It was only putting stuff on and taking it off. The chap who was the developer, Sid something, I think. But he came from Olympic.

Fowler/Lawson: I've always thought of you as a cricketer but when we were interviewing Freddie Young, he showed me a picture of you as a footballer, I didn't know that.

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, yes, I've got that picture. He said I wasn't in it, course I'm in it. And do you know ... I know it's not why he was in it but one of the reasons why he might not have been in it - but you could use this as a story - one of our great rivals in those days was a team called Harrow Mission, a team of hooligans who were sponsored by Harrow School, from North Kensington, they really were a rough lot. And every time we played them - because we were a good side, we used to win always.

Fowler/Lawson: What was your side? Gaumont.

Bill Girdlestone: (I'll tell you another story you can use) ... The score was 2-1, we were winning, I'd scored two goals that day and we were winning 2-1, and from a corner, Freddie elbowed one of their players and this chap says, 'You bastard.' Old Fred hit him. Well, Fred had been a bit of a boxer in his youth and he hit him and knocked him over and the referee…and there was a fight started and Fred got sent off and they had a penalty and they it 2-2. Anyway, they won the league. Fred was sent off I've always said that picture was because Freddie wasn't playing because he was suspended. No, it wasn't true because before Fred was suspended. But you could use it if like.

Fowler/Lawson: Can you remember any of the other people in the team? There was Vic Tupper, wasn't there?

Bill Girdlestone: No. Cyril Smith, who was an actor. He was quite a actor, he was in *Friday the Thirteenth*, he was the bus driver, do you remember, he was an actor? Well, he was assistant director in those days but he became an actor. He was in a play at Hammersmith when we were living at Chiswick, when we first got married, in a play called *It Pays to Advertise* and he was a leading part and he was very, very good. And he came to me the next day and he said, 'What did you think of it, Bill?' I said, 'It was wonderful, you were so good.' And he went round telling everybody, he said,

'Everybody was queuing up because it was such a big queue.' There wasn't, but still. Old Cyril was a typical actor. He used to say, 'Carry my bag, Girdle. Buy me a cup of tea, Girdle.' He'd never got any money. Actors never had.

Fowler/Lawson: Can you remember any of the other people in the team?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I can remember all of them but they wouldn't be of great interest to you, I think. There was a boy called Strutt. who used to be our negative cutter. There was Arthur Rutter, who was Dispatch Manager; Bedwell, who was a projectionist? Lofty Hilling, who was stage hand; Nicky Wood, who was in the drying, when it was all done on the drums; Humphries, who was the newsreel cameraman. ...

Fowler/Lawson: Well, now let's go onto cricket because I know that you did make quite a name for yourself in the cricket team, or did you?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I used to open the bowling but I can't get my arm up now any more.

Fowler/Lawson: Of course, that was a slightly different team, wasn't it? Still Gaumont's.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, we played as the Gaumont Company and we had a pitch in Boston Manor Park. And I got up a Christmas Draw about 1928, I suppose, and we made so much money we built a hut where we made teas for the teams and anybody else that liked to come along, and we had enough money to buy all the players a blazer, a coloured blazer. Well, then when the Rank Organisation started- no, Gaumont British, sorry - and they bought this big ground at Norbury, I said, well sorry boys it's our duty to support this, and they were most upset with me, they didn't want to do it. They wanted to continue. But I left and went.. my brother left and we went and played for the Gaumont British team at Norbury. He was a very good cricketer, my brother. He was an opening bat. I'd got him the job at Shepherd's Bush because he was in the Air Force and he was drafted to go to India about the same time as he'd got engaged and he didn't want to go. And you couldn't come out of the Forces unless you could, show you'd got a job to go to, so I bought him out, very small money,- and got him a job at Shepherd's Bush where he became our accountant. And they kept our accounts completely different from any other part of the Shepherd's Bush lab, my brother was the accountant. And he became an accountant in the Air Force, then he became an accountant with Taurus, then he became an accountant with British Transport and then he became a producer for British Transport and then he finished up with Ogilvy & Mather as a producer.

Fowler/Lawson: I knew him then. It was Benson & Mather then, Ogilvy, Benson & Mather.

Bill Girdlestone: And I played for them, but I only played for a few years because our children started to come along and it was too far for Ma to go from Ealing, we were living in Ealing then, to Norbury, so I started to play for Ealing but I didn't get on with them because they played their best cricket in the Millet Arms and I don't play cricket in the Millet Arms. When I finish cricket, I go home. See, my brother doesn't, he stays and drinks there till they close, but I don't, I don't drink. So I transferred to another team. But I played for Ealing for two years.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, looking back over your career, if you bad the chance to start again, would you change course, do you think?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I don't know, I've thought about that. You see, I think that I was vice-cameraman and coach-cameraman so much that I think I ought to have gone on the stage and been a cameraman. But, the reason I didn't was because in 1927 I had a seven-year contract with Gaumont and I was getting more per year than some of the cameramen were getting who were not engaged, only from picture to picture. They got more a week but over a year… See, my future was assured. Mind you, I don't think I got the opportunity. I mean Hitchcock wouldn't have allowed it anyway. I had an assistant who you may have heard of, young Thompson, he was the scruffiest-looking little boy from Kennington or Camberwell, he really was. He came to me and he was a good kid and he learned and I showed him and after about four years, five years, he said, 'Do you think you could get me in the labs?' He was Percy Strong's clapper boy, I think - no, he was my assistant and I said, I'll try, and I asked Percy Strong if he'd have him. I said, 'I've got a very good boy who's very keen you need a new clapper boy, I think he'll do you well.' And he never looked back. He became a top operator, he operated for Otto and others, did a lot of second unit work and he's telephoned me, he's retired in Somerset. I got him that job and Hitchcock was furious, he said, 'What did you do that for? They don't grow on trees.' I said, 'Hitch, you can get me a boy anywhere. You couldn't have got me any boy less promising than that boy. I nearly had a fit,' and I said, 'I've got to train him, it's not your problem, get me another boy.' I said, 'If that boy wants to get on I'd have him on my mind for the rest of my life if I didn't help him.' Well, I've helped all sorts of people like that, common sense. And another thing I've done, if it was possible and there was any praise going for something, I would always try and take a back seat because I always felt that my future was assured. I have never, ever, believe me, had to look over my shoulder to see who was trying to take my job. If anybody wanted to take it they could have it,but I knew bloody well they couldn't do it as well or better and I've never had to look. I've helped - well, so many people have said so, so I have helped them and I look upon that as only being a Christian, I mean I'm not a Christian because I swear and I gamble, I do all sorts of things that are forbidden but I believe I play a straight bat and have lived, what I call, by the right principles. It's another thing though, this is when we were young we used to read a book called the Gem or the Magnet - I used to buy the Magnet, my pal used to buy the if you've read those books you know that cheats never prosper, anybody that does dirty tricks comes to a bad end. Only the Harry Wartons and the Bob Cherrys who do the right things at the right time, tell the truth, do what the master says and have the right principles, they succeed in life. Well, I grew up like that. Now I read a letter in the Telegraph from a chap at Cambridge, who said this was the most pernicious literature that was ever written. It was all couched in terms to make the working class know their place, that the upper classes were meant to be the upper classes and the working class were meant to be working classes. And this made me so furious I wrote him a letter and the correspondence went on for a long time. Now, believe it or not, my brother goes along with that. Very left wing my brother, he goes along with that. I don't know whether you go along with it but ...

Fowler/Lawson: Tell me, what's given you the greatest satisfaction in your career?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, I can't answer that off the record, can I? In what sort of field?

Fowler/Lawson: Well, I mean, what has given you the most satisfaction in your working life?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, to be respected. To be respected by directors, producers, cameramen, editors as somebody who knew what he was, yes. As somebody who was really OK for the job and knew s was doing, and could be relied upon to do, not only a good job, but to make sure it was a good job. That's all, I've another satisfaction, I've got two of the most wonderful daughters ever happened, I really have.

Tape 2, Side 4

Fowler/Lawson: Bill, do you think the passing of black and white was a good thing or do you think we've lost something?

Bill Girdlestone: To me, I think the cameramen have lost something. When you see old black and white films photographed by the masters like Charlie Rosher and Perverill Marley and some of the big American boys, they put so much beautiful work into it, face textures and all that.

Fowler/Lawson: So we really have now…

Bill Girdlestone: I think that, for the masses, of course, the colour is everything, you can't sell a black and white picture now, can you?

Fowler/Lawson: No, not really. Were you ever involved in any wet gate printing at all?

Bill Girdlestone: No, that's optical printing. I know the principle but I never had anything to do with opticals, ever.

Fowler/Lawson: Now, working with Alfred Hitchcock, rather working on pictures of Alfred Hitchcock, did you have anything to do with him at all?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, only what I had to do with most of the directors, you know, just Never had discussions or problems, no problems, no. Hitchcock was the sort of chap who wouldn't. I don't think he was the sort of chap who would want much assistance, or shall we say controversy?

Fowler/Lawson: Or was it the question of, well you know your business, you get on with it and I'll get on with mine?

Bill Girdlestone: Yes, I would think so, yes. No, our paths never crossed. The last time I saw him was when he came over and made *Frenzy* - was it *Frenzy?* You know, oddly enough he married a woman called Alma Reville, who was in my time, when I was at Twickenham she used to fix the titles, when she was about 16 she had little golden ringlets, she was a most attractive little girl.

Fowler/Lawson: Can we talk about any of the cameramen, the earlier cameramen

Bill Girdlestone: What, before Des ...

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, yes. I was thinking of Percy Strong, Sid Bonnet, Ventimiglia and the people that followed on from that time. Tell us a bit about Percy strong.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, Percy made his name, as I told you, with Welsh-Pearson at their cockeyed little studio at .. north of Harlesden, it was between Harlesden and Cricklewood. And he made his name on *Squibs*, and all this low-life stuff and *Reveille*, *Blink Eyes*, *Scrooge Wins the Calcutta Sweepstake*, and all that sort of thing. And he came to Shepherd's Bush and shot quite a lot of films in the late Twenties. And as you know we've already torn him to pieces. Then Ventimiglia, he came with a reputation, as you say, he'd shot the original *Ben Hur* wasn't it? Not the American *Ben Hur*. I thought he shot part of *Quo Vadis*, he claimed he did, I think.

Fowler/Lawson: What was his style, can yon remember?

Bill Girdlestone: It didn't impress me.

Fowler/Lawson: In what way did you think…?

Bill Girdlestone: I thought it was very ordinary, I'll try and think of others because Jack Cox came along about that time.

Fowler/Lawson: Well, Jack was a little later - Bill Shenton?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, Billy Shenton. He came to us and when. Fred went in the studio, he worked with a chap called Brown who was useless. Well the man who followed Brown - now we're onto something, yes, I can talk to you about this - was that talkative Jewish boy, what was his name ... oh, he talked himself out of several jobs. And of course there was Basil Emmott. Basil Emmot, he committed a marvellous faux pas one day, we were shooting *Settled out of Court*, I think it was, with Faye Compton, and he said, 'Miss Compton,' he says, 'you've been living it up last night, your eyes are awful.' She said, 'You impudent puppy, Emmott!'

Fowler/Lawson: Do you remember Billy Shenton at all?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, yes. But he came - about that time Jewish boy's name, everybody knew him ...

Fowler/Lawson: Not Rowson?

Bill Girdlestone: No, Rowson was the son of…

Fowler/Lawson: Leslie. Son of Simeon Rowson.

Bill Girdlestone: He wasn't very good. It'll come in a minute ... He was a character, he came and shot *Claude Duval* for George Cooper.

Fowler/Lawson: It wasn't Joe Rosenthal, was it?

Bill Girdlestone: No, old Joe was a good old character, yes. He shot *Robinson Crusoe*. I had a letter from him to say how marvellous it was. I found it the other day. Yes, old Joe Frozenballs.

Fowler/Lawson: That's right. Tell us about Billy Shenton a bit.

Bill Girdlestone: Well, he came - he only had one eye, you know. And he shot *The Eleventh Commandment*. Billy Shenton shot *Happy Ending*, *Settled out of Court*, 'Somebody's Darling', then he went on to Elvey and he shot *The Fake*, he shot *Mademoiselle* and he shot all those things with Victor Saville and Elvey and Gundry and then he started to take to drink. Then he retired and then Percy Strong took over.

Fowler/Lawson: Did you ever work with dear old Cooper, Squiffy Cooper, D P Cooper?

Bill Girdlestone: No. I worked with Wilkie. I'll tell you a story about him. We were doing a picture at Nettlefold, it wasn't a very important one. I think the director was Val Guest and, I forget, we were having an after-lunch talk and I said, 'What does the director think about it?' He said, 'I never talk to him.'

Fowler/Lawson: Well, let's go on about some of the earlier cameramen. We've talked a little bit about Percy Strong and Ventimiglia - what about Sid Bonnett, can you tell us a little bit about him?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, Sid didn't do much studio work. He did get pitchforked into doing I think it was four pictures they shot at night, four-reel shorts, which he made a fair job of. But Bonny was more or less Bill Shenton's operator, Bonny was Bill's operator for many years. Oh, the things they used to get up to. With Protheroe... when he was doing his stills. They used to turn the camera slow so that old Protheroe was dashing about all over the place. Oh, and what was his assistant, who went to Ealing? (Wilf Newton.) Wilf, oh yes. Oh, here's a story for you. When we were shooting, when Bernard Knowles was directing *The Magic Bow*, Grainger was of course the leading man (of course, Grainger was the biggest bighead that you ever struck in all your puff) and he did admit that he didn't think that he was up to doing the fingerwork and the bow-work for the devil's trill and they were shooting this with just Grainger's face and the fingers doing this and the violin doing this, and they got Bretton Bird, the director of the orchestra and his leading violinist, who were doing all the work, see, out of camera, see? And Bernard, who was always one for a joke, he said, 'Right, when I've finished, I won't say cut, I'll give you a nudge, dolly back.' And they all dollied back and saw what was going on, and he said, 'I want that on the rushes,' Just to show old ... And there was another thing one day, also on *The Magic Bow'*- was his name Parker, yes Parker, was his agent. Cecil Parker. And Grainger was doing a scene with Jean Kent, and Jean - it was Grainger's scene, see, and Bernard said to me, 'Don't go, Bill, stay around, it's going to be funny in a minute.' He was a boy for a laugh, he'd even stop production to tell a joke. And Kent was fiddling about with some cards, building these cards up and all of a sudden Grainger knocked this lot away, he says, 'You bitch, you know this is my scene.' Old Bernard he's coming on. Do you want to use these things?

Fowler/Lawson: Yes, of course, very worth while to record.

Bill Girdlestone: I didn't know any others. The only time I ever had anything to do with Maurice Ostrer, we did a rehearsal during the War, Arthur Crabtree and I - he became a very, very good cameraman because he was Glen McWilliams' operator and I think he was better than Glen when he finished, he shot very well, his *Man in Grey* was very, very good - anyway, he'd shot a picture, an Anthony Asquith picture ... *Uncensored* and we went up to the Leicester Square Theatre to rehearse at 10 o'clock at night. I don't know how we got up there but I went up with Arthur and we started the picture on projector A, lovely? reel 2, projector B, hopeless - all out of focus and much too much light going through; reel 3 fine; reel 4 NG; 5 OK; 6 NG; 7 OK; 8 NG. So we had a word with the manager, said what a balls-up it was. He said, 'Nobody ever else complained about it, what's wrong with it (I don't see anything wrong with it.' And, of course, we were heartbroken, so we go back and we see Maurice Ostrer next day. He said, 'Well, why worry, it was a lousy picture anyway.' One he'd made! How about that! There's another story for you. I could keep on like that.

Fowler/Lawson: Because you were there when the Ostrer's bought into Gaumont and they became Gaumont British, didn't they? Because that's when Broomhead went.

Bill Girdlestone: That was when they started 'Rome Express' and all that sort of thing.

Fowler/Lawson: Oh, it's earlier than that because, do you remember 'Devil's Maze' which was started as a silent?

Bill Girdlestone: Were you there then?

Fowler/Lawson: Yes. Well, Rene Clama, who was the leading lady, it was alleged was one of Ostrer's girlfriends.

Bill Girdlestone: Rene who?

Fowler/Lawson: Clama. And Hayford Hobbs was the…

Bill Girdlestone: Yes. Hayford Hobbs was at London Films, he was a young lead and he was taken to court. On one of the locations they went on, one of the chambermaids came in one morning and he grabbed her and took her into bed. And another story, when Elvey came to Twickenham Studios during the War, he brought his leading lady with him, Elizabeth Ridson, who was his girlfriend and George Tucker, the American director, took her to the Isle of Man for his lead in *The Christian*, no, the next one, and came back married to her. And Elvey's pictures went out called Diploma Pictures, not London Films. They weren't up to standard because they were making very, very good pictures at that time and William Jury, who became Sir William Jury, he donated Glebelands to the Trust.

Fowler/Lawson: The Benevolent Fund, yes.

Bill Girdlestone: Curious about working styles and living styles in those days.

Fowler/Lawson: Did you all have a social life together, other than cricket and football afterwards? Would you go round to the pub? So did you go round together with colleagues?

Bill Girdlestone: Most of them went to the pubs, yes. Well, I had my family to keep up and I wasn't much of a drinker. I couldn't drink - never have been able to. I don't know with my cameramen. I mean, old Dick used to have a bottle of Pepe, Tio Pepe. And then another cameraman, chap who won an Oscar for a picture that was on last week *Man for All Seasons*, he wasn't bad, he was - I suppose he was nearly first class, he was adequate.

Fowler/Lawson: Ted Scaife, I think. Was it not Ted Scaife?

Bill Girdlestone: No, not Ted Scaife. Oh, now he took to drink, didn't he? He was hounded out. No, this chap, he used to have at least four double whiskies at lunch, nothing else - perhaps a sandwich.

Fowler/Lawson: Not Reg Wyer?

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, no. Oh, I must tell you about Reg Wyer. Oh no. This chap was pretty well known, he was one of the top men for years and on the last picture I worked on with Rank. Was a thing with that lovely American boy, called *The Most Dangerous Man in the World*. Anyway, during the course of shooting, a bit of equipment fell off the gantry and hit Ted Moore you know him - hit him on the head and he was taken to Wexford hospital and they kept him in and charged him as an alcoholic, and he never finished the picture - John Wilcox finished it, Reg Wyer, he was the meanest bloke that ever was. Every time I went to the studio, one of the stage hands said, 'All right, Reg, you're going to eat today.' Now Reg - oh, he was a bloody awful cameraman - oh, this is a good story. Bernard shot *Love Story*, which he gave me a letter for which I told you about. It was a very high-class job he made of it. And GFD, I'd printed a show copy, no I'd printed an answer print, that's all, and the news came through they wanted the show the very next week, putting out all in a hurry in London because they wanted an early release on it for some reason - I suppose they'd got an open

date. And I used to print 10 show copies for provinces and perhaps America and France, and I had one printing machine and 10 show copies would take me at least a week. So I could do one show copy, but I couldn't do the 10. So Hitchcock, who always had a running battle with somebody, especially CK (Castleton Knight), I don't know why. It was very silly because Castleton Knight was his bread and butter. But he didn't go for studio people because he thought they were toffee-nosed people and he used to leave me to deal with them. That was one godsend about Hitchcock, he never interfered with me at all. If I wanted to change developer, if I wanted to do anything, he never interfered. He knew I knew what I was doing and he left me alone, see? And when *Love Story* came up, he said, 'Right, we can't do it.' So he told them, 'Sorry, boys, I can't do your copies, you'll have to take it away.' So they said, 'Well, we'll have to send it to Humphries.' So Bernie Knowles and I and Harold Huth- who was the producer, we toddled on off to Humphries to see Alf Darby the head grader, and we showed him our copy and we told him what we wanted. So when we came back, Bernard said, 'Do you think we'll get it?' I said, 'I know you won't get it. But you'll get a good copy, you'll get a good commercial copy but it won't be like this.' So then they used my grading copy, uncorrected grading copy, for the show because we'd got all those little bits of love and little bits of personality in them, which I put in all my pictures. So, this picture goes up to Humphries, you see, and when I get back, I said, 'Well, this is the most bloody awful bit of skulduggery I've ever had. I'm sick, we've got one of the best pictures photographically and we've had to give it away.' Hitch said., 'Oh, don't worry, I've got another picture for you.' I said, 'Oh, yes, what is it?' He said, 'It's *The Seventh Veil*.' So, I said, 'Right, send it up.' So he sent this up and I went through it and I said, 'My God, Jesus couldn't make a picture out of this.' This was Reg Wyer's first picture. The close-ups, the mid-shots, the organising shots, you know, the general shots, nothing matched. Everywhere, every shot was different. He hadn't any idea at all. But it only goes to show, *Love Story* probably didn't get its money back, or only just about but *The Seventh Veil* made a fortune and made Box. So it only goes to show that all the love and the care that we put in didn't matter.

Fowler/Lawson: Because that established him as quite a lighting cameraman, *The Seventh Veil.*

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, it was dreadful. And he gradually got better the time he'd drunk himself out of the business, he was acceptable. But his first two or ... that was ... Alan have no idea. Old Sid Bonnett could have done it with his eyes shut better than that. Nothing matched! You know, all these shots of the girl and Mason, where she was close to him and then in the middle, other shot, I could never match them - it was hopeless.

Fowler/Lawson: Was that in the days of meters? It must have been. But he didn't know how to read his meter. How did people get their chance in those days. Was there a lot of cronyism?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, they'd been doing commercials for Sidney. Well, Sidney Box wouldn't do commercials for a long time and they suddenly branched out. Because his sister…

Fowler/Lawson: Betty. No, his sister was Betty, his wife was Muriel.

Bill Girdlestone: I've got his wife's book, Muriel. I've got her book and she used to do the scripts, she was a scriptwriter and she'd done the script of this thing and they must have got the money from Rank to make it and it was a very good picture at that time. At that time, if you wanted your picture to succeed, you'd got to have a classic symphony or piano ...

Fowler/Lawson: Warsaw Concerto.

Bill Girdlestone: Yes. And in *Love Story* they got the Cornish Rhapsody, it was very good - which Margaret Lockwood was playing when she was going blind. And Reg, as I say, he was so mean, it was well-known to everybody. They used to take the mickey out of him, it was terrible. It was embarrassing, really.

Fowler/Lawson: Did the people working in the labs feel neglected in those days? Did they feel that production was the more glamorous side?

Bill Girdlestone: Well, let's start from the beginning. When we first were, we were all very glad we'd got a job of any sort and we took jolly good care we didn't lose it. And we really, Alan, we really put up with the five card trick. As I told you, I to work all. night and come back. Now, if a newsreel thing broke, for instance like when the Zeppelin caught fire or big tragedy or some big item of interest, Hitchcock would send the whole of his work-staff home and come back when they knew the picture would be ready to do a special edition of the news, and then lose their money because there was no union to protect them. That was wrong, that was very wrong.

Fowler/Lawson: But I think what Roy was feeling is that, you know, shut away in as it were your closed darkrooms, did you feel very isolated?

Bill Girdlestone: There was always the feeling that if they could escape get somewhere else, they would. I didn't want to. I was ... I was doing the job I wanted to do. Somebody asked me that the other day, I don't know who it was. I said, I'm so satisfied because I've been able to do what I wanted to do. I was able to do it better than anybody else and everybody knew it. So why should I have tried to be something different that I might not have been so successful at. And then, of course, laboratory practices improved. I mean, in my day when I first started, I used to have to wear a rubber apron and rubber gloves. When I finished, our laboratory at Denham was cleaner than Eastbourne Hospital and you could process everything in daylight. The only process in the dark was the printing. So we being in oblivion to being almost more or less luxury.

Fowler/Lawson: Brian Langley was telling us, and I don't know what you feel about this, that one of the things that he always loved to do if he goes into a laboratory, he says, 'Take me to the hypo room,' he said, 'That really gets my adrenalin going,' he said, 'It's the most wonderful smell.' No? It doesn't do anything to you, the smell of hypo?

Bill Girdlestone: No. It depended what you put in the hypo. I mean, apart from hypo, they used to put in sometimes another chemical that used to have a most obnoxious ... hypo and water alone have practically no smell. But there are smells in laboratories we had no ventilation, not in those days, it wasn't until went up to Manchester to film *Hindle Wakes* that they discovered how to get rid of.. Do you remember the trouble you used to have through fog in the studio in the early days?

Fowler/Lawson: Well, yes. We used t.o have to stop, didn't we?

Bill Girdlestone: Well then they found out that Hall & Kaye made a fog extractor plant for some of their cotton manufacturers and it was put in Shepherd's Bush and got rid of all the fog. Hall & Kaye.

Fowler/Lawson: There used to be a great thing I can remember at the Bush and the same at Stoll's labs, silver recovery.

Bill Girdlestone: Oh, yes. Well in those days, in your day, the hypo was d out and put in barrels, where something was put into it which would make all the silver sink to the bottom and you emptied all the hypo out and you got the silver at the bottom. And, of course, in later days we had it at Shepherd's Bush and at Denham. This stuff was circulated… All the hypo and all other solutions were in circulation all the time to keep an even temperature, so that they used to go through hot tubes and cold tubes so that you had your temperature at 67 all the time. And the hypo used to go through and it used to go through a tank with these electro-magnetic plates and the silver used to stick to the plates, so they used to send the plates to the silver people. And they used to tell me that the amount of silver you got off those plates would pay for the staff's wages. And it cost more to make a black and white film with all its silver than a colour film, and the colour film cost more. Mind you, there, are seven layers of emulsion on a colour film, seven of them. There's the base and then there's the sub, whatever they call it, to prevent Halation, black, then there's a colour, then there's something between the colour and the next colour to prevent one colour going to the other and all that sort of thing. Most complicated thing. It's fantastic, really.

Fowler/Lawson: We're coming to the end of this tape. I was curious what your Desert Island films would be. If you could, take a mint print off with you on your desert island, which film would you choose, always to be able to run?

Bill Girdlestone: *Billy Budd.*

Fowler/Lawson: *Billy Budd*. The Peter Ustinov version of *Billy Budd*,

Bill Girdlestone: *Billy Budd*. Ustinov had that. Have you never met him? (No.) Oh, fantastic character. He came in that projection room to see it and everybody was in an uproar in no time at all. He's such a wit, and I've only spoken to him twice. I introduced myself to him because I dealt with the Bobby Krasker film and he remembered my name. Oh, that was a lovely picture. Oh, it was a shame it didn't make money. Nobody wanted it. We had a… after Jack Harris had finished with it ....

End of Tape 2