HP0190 David Attenborough – Transcript.

 David Attenborough, television director, producer.

Interviewer Norman Swallow, recorded 8 April 1991

Recordist: Alan Lawson

SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

Norman Swallow: Where and when were you born?

David Attenborough: I was born in Isleworth in 1926, May 8th, and I was the son of the then principle of Borough Road College, which was a teacher training college, and a very rough one. I gather, my father was something of a disciplinarian. He had been a don in Cambridge, in Anglo Saxon, and he got fed up with privilege, I think really. And he thought the Oxford and Cambridge system was a hotbed of privilege and he couldn't stand being a don anymore and he took this job and he brought order to a rather revolutionary gang of students. And when I was 5 or something, he moved to Leicester University College which was then a new red-brick, newly founded, city supported, there was a note university funds committee or anything, because he believed strongly in conventional universities and it was a university college attached to the University of London. So effectively I was a boy who lived in the Midlands, Leicester

Norman Swallow: And schooling

David Attenborough: Again my father was rather keen on grammar schools. He thought private schools were not to be encouraged, I can remember him saying there is no point in bringing up children if you're going to get rid of them at the most interesting time off their lives. He told me one of the main reasons he went to Leicester was that Leicester had an ancient grammar school, a Elizabethan foundation called the Wyggeston Grammar School and he thought that would be good for our education, so he went there. In the event he said it wasn't as good a school as it should have been, and I don't think it was

Norman Swallow: And from there?

David Attenborough: He also told me, it was at the end of the war, that if one wanted to go to one of these senior universities you didn't deserve to go unless you got a scholarship. It wasn't a question of his paying for it, though the salary of the head of a provincial university was pretty low, but there are, no he would have paid for it had it been the case, but he said if you want that privilege you've got to earn it and not just by money, so you've got to get a scholarship, if you don't get a scholarship you can't go. So I dutifully got a scholarship and I got a scholarship in fact, I took a paper in geology which was fairly unusual and wasn't taught at school. And I did it partly in my own time and partly by going up to Nottingham University and as it were eavesdropping on first year geological students, lectures which my father fixed, and so I got a scholarship to Cambridge. And then I had to do what was called a Wartime degree, because it was nineteen forty.., it was the end of the war, 1945 1 suppose and that meant you had to do a degree in two years which normally would have taken

Norman Swallow: I had the same

David Attenborough: Then I went into the navy and I spent two years there. And I came out of the Navy and couldn't see myself going, I think a lot of us when you're 20 or whatever it was, 21 or 22, the idea of going back to being an undergraduate, going back to being a student and not earning a living and I wanted to get married and all those sorts of things, so I thought I cannot go back to being a student and I got a job. And in a way, actually academic zoology was not what interested me, sitting in labs was not what interested me really. I didn't know what did I daresay, but certainly not cutting up dead animals. So I went into publishing and the University of London Press as it was which sounds nice, but it was a kind of X X X Sepulchre, it was simply and educational branch Hodder and Stoughton, the commercial publisher.

My job there was footling really, but perfectly OK, the right way to start, the equivalent of making the tea, it was crossing commas out or occasionally on a good day putting one in, if you felt pretty bold, in xxx scripts about tadpoles. But it was inexpressibly boring because it took so long. In those days publishing, if you had an idea for a book, if it got out, if you actually saw the finished book within two years or three years it was very remarkable, because the whole business of commissioning authors and then they writing it and then setting it up in print, it went on forever. And of course again when you're 21, 3 years sound like an infinity.

Norman Swallow: Did you specialise or were you concerned with books about geology?

David Attenborough: No, this was whatever came along, it was just educational publishing. And then I saw a job advertised in the Times for sound radio as a talks producer and I thought I don't know, I mean I suppose it's the same kind of thing as thinking up ideas for books only it's probably quicker. I don't see why shouldn't be I able to do that, I mean it might be quite interesting. Actually the BBC represented a kind of

Norman Swallow: publisher

David Attenborough: Well, more than that, it represented a kind of university really, it represented a kind of college, to my mind it was above commerce which it patently was. And it was cognate, it was similar in many ways to a university in that you were concerned with the propagation of ideas. And people who worked for the BBC seemed to be on a different level really, they were public spirited, intellectuals, all sorts of things you and I know they probably weren't but that is how it seemed to me. And I applied for this job, and in a pretty short order, I think like two weeks got a letter saying thank you very much but we are not interested. And that was that, and when you're 21, you win some and lose some, I must have been older, I must have been then about 23, 24. And I was all that upset because I didn't think I was going to go on working in publishing.

Then I got a phone call in the office which absolutely horrified me, I thought it was absolutely scandalous that anyone should ring me up on the office phone and have the effrontery to suggest that I might leave the firm, the very firm whose chair I was sitting on, whose phone I was using. I thought that was absolutely, I felt like crouching underneath the desk, saying not so loud. And it was a lady called Mary Adams whom you know a lot of and she said we have seen your application and I know you didn't get the job but I work for a branch of the of the BBC called television and although a lot of people are very rude about it, we think there may be something in it, quite exciting things are going on and we would like you to think about joining us as a trainee. And I said what sort of security have you got and she said, you know, we will offer you a 3-6 months maybe and I said and I'm a married man, I have a son, I can't go on some flibbertygibbit

enterprise like that which of course was the best way to get any one enthusiastic about you and from then on she pursued me.

And then she said maybe you won't come and join us but perhaps just come and see us. So I went in office time which was pretty tricky stuff, and I went out to Alexandra Palace, and I went into the North Towers I suppose it was

where there was Andrew Miller Jones and George Nordoff and Mary and her nice silver haired secretary whose name I forget for the moment but I will remember And I then went to these extraordinary studios which looked to me like a junk shop really, I mean piles of furniture, I mean you edged your way through through this junk yard and in the middle, boiling hot lights, there's this tiny pool of light, intense light where all these things are happening.

And Mary said we're starting a new program called Joan Gilbert's Diary. She said Miss Gilbert is looking for another interviewer, a man to go along with her, she would love it if you did it. I was short of money, I was on £350 a year at that time, I was very short of money so 10 quid for doing an interview was really very big business. So I said yes, actually I would like to do it. So a fortnight later or whatever, I turned up the first thing I did was be introduced to Miss Gilbert and Miss Gilbert was a large bosomy lady with some presence I may say and she looked at me down her nose and turned on her heel and walked away. I had no idea what this meant at all. Subsequently I discovered that Miss Gilbert had a friend, a gentleman friend, who she was hoping he was going to be her co interviewer. And Mary Adams had put her foot down on account of this was improper and I was caught in this but I didn't know this at the time.

John Reid was producing it and I was told that the person I had to interview was a long distance runner called Gordon Pirie. So we were sat on a sofa and the cameras as you will well recall were so wide angled that in order to get a reasonable shot of the head and shoulders they had to be only about two feet from you which meant therefore you couldn't cross shoot. So that you had to look out straight ahead of you while you were talking to a chap who was sitting by your side which doesn't make for an easy conversation. It didn't make an easy conversation either because Gordon Pirie wasn't what you might call particularly loquacious, or with a particularly sparkling conversation. So I remember struggling hard to get to get something from him at all, looking straight out ad at the camera while this chap was sitting

out of sight as it were by my side. I remember one exchange. I said I understand you train in hobnailed boots and he said yes. I said why do you train in hobnail boots and he said you go faster when you take them off which was of course true but fairly unilluminating. Anyway that was that. I should have added that Joan Gilbert when they did a live introduction said now she was to introduce the audience to her very dear friend who was going to help her on the series which was me and that was the only time I

ever knew that she knew what my name was

Norman Swallow: She got it right?

David Attenborough: That was the end of that and I heard no more. Subsequently like 25 years later Ann Turner who was John Reid's secretary told me that John Reid had had a letter, a memorandum from Mary Adams saying thanking you for trying out young Attenborough. He's quite good and he's obviously reasonably intelligent but he can't have a future in television because unfortunately his teeth are too big and that was the end of that. Had I known I would have had my teeth capped, not likely.

Then the phone went on ringing and eventually Mary said do come and do this training course and I eventually said how much will you pay me during this and it turned out they would pay me more for three months than I would earn in publishing for a year. And so I imagine they must have paid me something like £l ,000 or £l ,200

Norman Swallow: In 1950 1'd got £890 a year as a producer at Alexander Palace.

David Attenborough: Well it wasn't as much as that, that's exaggerating. But anyway I knew that I could do that, I could take the training course and be out of work for equally the same amount of time and still be as well-off so I thought well give it a go. And so I signed on.

I went off to the training course and the training course, I think it was the second, maybe the third, but it was certainly one of the early training courses because people on it included Paddy Foy, Michael Peacock. Royston Morley was in charge of the thing. Who else was there. Ernest Maxim from light entertainment. Those were the sort of figures. And there was a chap called Pennythorne Hughes who we were told, behind our hands

people said to us he is an authority on witchcraft, he has written a book on witches, which seemed wholly appropriate because his lecture consisted entirely of, he used to XX X certainly very early and there were one or two fundamental things that this class ought to know if they were coming into the BBC, very, very important, and this would be the foundation of everything on which we would build. And he then drew a series of boxes in different coloured chalks on the board with lines going to them, which was the board of management and the board of this that and the other, which was all Greek to us, I mean all we wanted to do was go up there into the

studios. And Royston was in charge of that and then we did go up to the studios.

And one of the first things I remember seeing, of course all this was electrifyingly exciting as we all know and I remember walking into the studio and there was a scientist called xxx who was one of the famous popularisers of science in the Fifties and was actually a very distinguished scientist to boot and he was in the very high-minded spirit of the times in television he was actually giving people a lesson in physics. And he had a bench with all the paraphernalia you expected a physicist to have. That is to say batteries with curly wires coming out of them and metres and one thing and another. And xxx said, and so you can see that the current passes as you can see from looking at the meter. And over the loud speaker boomed the voice of Jehovah or someone, said we can't see it. And Reid said but it's on the meter here. We can't see it. Now this was George Nordoff who was going mad. And this absurd altercation of you can and you can't proceeded in this booming way with Reid getting more and more upset

Norman Swallow: You weren't on the air, were you.

David Attenborough: No, no, this was the rehearsal. I was just watching and it then turned out at the last moment when the thing had a run to a huge pitch that the camera was looking back to the wrong meter of course. But it was an early lesson for me of what you didn't do with your speakers.

And, I got an office up at Alexandra Palace and was sent to work with Paul Johnston as an assistant. And Paul Johnston was an Oxford graduate in history I think who was very interested in archaeology and who had been there a whole year so was therefore extremely experienced, probably second only to you, Norman, who was more experienced than any one. You walked around with a great aura of wisdom and experience surrounding you. But

Paul also had this in as much as he had been there a year. And he had just produced the first programme of an archaeological quiz called Animal, Vegetable, Mineral. And his assistant who was a very nice, probably a society, girl but none the less, it's not her fault, a very nice girl who had died tragically with I think leukaemia or something and I took her place and was helping Paul do all these various things immediately. So within a very short time not only was I assisting on Animal, Vegetable and Mineral and doing all those bits but was standing by for my own little productions.

And I think my first appearance on the screen was George Nordoff, this great scientific boffin who understood about everything and was Dutch. He must have come here during the war but still had a very thick Dutch accent and was very funny and an amiable character really but burnt on a fairly quick fuse as they say. And George had by-now moved from physics and was on to race, what we want is a Caucasian, we want an example of a Caucasian. And you will do. Come along. So I naturally appeared and I was standing in profile in front as an example of a Caucasian.

But the first production I actually produced was that Mary rang me up, rang the office phone and said they have just rediscovered an example of a coelacanth, this extraordinary ancient fish just off South America, South Africa. We must get in Julian, Julian must tell us what this means, it is a very very important, we have got to have him in very quickly it. And that was both typical and admirable and laughable, I mean it was all three really because it epitomised Mary's attitude and in that it was one, it was matters of intellect and some intellectual substance that had to be in our programme. Two, Mary would know because she was in a coterie, an intellectual coterie, who was the right and person to do it, and Julian obviously was, who was Julian Huxley. And thirdly that the schedules were in such a state that you could actually put something like that in immediately, and would think of doing so. And imagine what would happen today if somebody discovered the most revolutionary animal, oh well EastEnders. Anyway there was no problem at putting it out. So I got up stuff and photographs and a dead fish which we put in the baths, in alcohol, in one of the dressing-rooms and we eventually hoicked this out. I think it was pretty terrible actually because Julian was hopeless. He was a very idle man really. He didn't silly enough to prepare, give him notes, he would simply read them. But anyway that was my first show

Norman Swallow: When was that, 1950, 1951

David Attenborough: No, I joined in 1952, so we're probably now in 1953 and I remember you of course, we were using the same cameras, the pre-war cameras, which had no turret lenses so on. But around that time Lime Grove opened and the that had and the first turret lenses in. And of course Mary Adams had as one of her senior producers Grace Wyndham Goldie and these two formidable ladies who were at one another's throats most of the time and Grace Wyndham Goldie was given the job of looking at these cameras as far as I understood it for the talks department. So she got hold of Michael Peacock and me and said I want to use you as dummies. This may have been before we got the job, I'm not quite certain, it was certainly very

early. And we went down to Lime Grove and what she wished to do was to see whether she could invent a new way of using cameras which she called cross shooting. So instead of as in my interview with Gordon Pirie looking straight forward and not, not being able to look at the man you're talking about, you could both sit on a sofa or indeed two facing chairs and you could shoot over one another's shoulders which was going to transform things. So Mike and I, Mike who subsequently had this very distinguished history, were the dummies for this thing and from all accounts it was very successful, not because of anything we said you understand but simply because of the use of cameras.

But the use of cameras obsessed us to a quite ludicrous degree really, I remember you Norman we all tiptoed into when you did, what was the name of your current affairs?

Norman Swallow: Special Enquiry with Robert Reid from Yorkshire.

David Attenborough: You will probably tell me my memory is faulty but my recollection is that us tyros came in, we stood in a line by the wall because Norman was about to demonstrate, give a run through of his opening title sequence which was extremely complex as far as I remember, with all kinds of frames that moved and cameras that moved. You weren't using film, it was far too expensive

Norman Swallow: It was all live

David Attenborough: It was all absolutely live and it was all very stylish and it was a great example to us of the sort of thing you could get with care. So the idea of using captions just as titles was really very low-grade stuff, you wanted to be integrated with the programme. No doubt we took ourselves extremely seriously, we would have produced some great intellectualisation about how there had to be continuity off XX X, and all that and sort of stuff. But you were the example and we on Animal, Vegetable and Mineral, Paul had already devised a similar one which was not as complex as yours but wasn't bad which was called the spinning box which was a crate on a spindle. It was a four-sided box with a lid and what happened was that it started spinning, the picture opened with this thing spinning round in a horizontal plane, with Bach's Partita, an orchestral arrangement by X X, as I remember well. And then it had to slow down and as it slowed down you saw that the sides of the box said and animal, vegetable, mineral? and stopped on the ?. When it stopped the lid had to open and a pair of hands had to come in. The qualification for the hands was you had to be Paul's

girlfriend which was quite important and shifted every now and again, so you got new hands. Anyway the hands came in and took out from the straw the first object and it was a very vivid and good title sequence but we rehearsed it, if we rehearsed it once we would spend, I was going to say hours but it seemed like a hell of a lot of time of your rehearsal time getting this right, because at the end the object had to go back in, the lid had come down and we would be off again, in sequence, and this had to be timed to music.

And then the other obsession that Paul had was that you had to superimpose, now that was not true, there were in other programmes where you had the name of the person who was taking part who was sitting at a desk and it absolutely obsessed Paul that this had to be parallel to the base of the picture frame. But since you were shooting at an angle on a desk which was at sort of 45 degrees to the camera, all of these things looked very odd in the long shot. So what was continually happening was that you would spend hours just getting it absolutely right, horizontal to the frame on the camera. You would go and do something else and some idiot and would come in and turn it again and this went on for hours and hours and hours, actually doing a rehearsal. The next thing you did at rehearsals was trying to work out the camera moves that were going to allow you to get close enough to get the close-ups which of course was always very popular. So I then started off on Animal, Vegetable and Mineral.

Norman Swallow: As producer.

David Attenborough: No, as Paul's assistant.

Norman Swallow: You weren't in gallery directing.

David Attenborough: I was very soon. Paul allowed me to take over. He was a marvellous man, he was the most altruistic and public spirited and kindly soul who took the career opportunities of his assistants very seriously indeed and he was very anxious that I should be properly trained. And he himself was a very quiet, academic sort of man.

The first night of Animal, Vegetable and Mineral, that I was there, we packed up all our things and put them all in strong rooms and one thing and another, and saw off our contributors. And by that time I was emotionally rung out. It was the middle of the night and one thing and another, all I want to do was have a drink really, not that we had been short of drinks because the dive just opposite, we'd been down there, so we went in and had a drink.

But after that, when you might have thought that you would get a car or a drink or something and just get home, Paul went back to his office to my surprise and sat down at the desk with a Quarto notebook. And this was his faults book and he went through and he wrote down all the things he thought he had done wrong in the programme and what he should have done instead and that was nearly always of course to do with camera movements and how he hadn't anticipated that one of the cameras would have gone down and what he should have done when it did go down.

Norman Swallow: This was for himself?

David Attenborough: Absolutely, nobody else.

Norman Swallow: You said you'd done this little bit with Andreid as a programme, when did you really start

David Attenborough: Well I would have to look. I don't remember the exact sequence. I can give you a whole list of different things that we did because the point was as others will have told you and as you know anyway that talks department was a casual department, it was something that did everything that wasn't drama or light entertainment or music, everything else, it was really non-fiction. And I suppose there were half a dozen of us, probably not more. There was Norman, there was John Reid, there was Paul, George Nordoff, Andrew Miller Jones, Michael Peacock

Norman Swallow: Because Panorama began in 1953 1 think, for example.

David Attenborough: But there were not more than a dozen of us and rather less I would think. And we between us did all non-fictions including current affairs, all kind of things which have totally banished from the schedules like short stories which was a great thing. And I in that four years did gardening, there was a man called SE Reynolds who did programmes for women from which stable Miss Gilbert had emerged and he did cooking things. There were programmes on knitting with James Norbury. We did the religious programmes, I used to do the things which were called benedictions or something, epilogue.

Norman Swallow: Yes epilogue, I did one or two epilogues.

David Attenborough: We used to do those, we used to do political programmes, natural history programmes, exploration, any of those things. And I remember we had an organiser called Cyril Jackson and Cyril called

me into the office one day and he said Mary has bought this short story by William Sampson and I've had it on the books for several years now and I have to keep bringing it forward. We had paid £25 for it, maybe it was 50 but we have the rights, and I'm fed up, nobody seems to want to produce it, well you've got to produce it he said because I'm not bringing it forward any more.

So I was given it and it was perfectly clear to me why nobody wanted to do it — and that was because it was extremely poetic, it was a highly poetic story about a fishmonger, a young boy who goes to work in a fishmonger's, gets all his pleasure out of arranging a fish on a marble slab, and meets a girl over the scallops and cod fish and she persuades him to go on the cash register and to leave the skate and the dogfish and so on in order to marry her. But then he loses all interest in life. So there was a lot of poetic stuff about what this stuff looked like and of course telling it as a short story, god knows why Mary had, well Mary simply hadn't thought it through, not the actual decision of an intellectual you might have thought, because you

couldn't possibly do it with fish, it would be too absurd. So I thought well in for a penny in for a pound and so will do it as a ballet, can you imagine a ballet. And I got an actor to read it in a highly rhythmic way so it had some, very florid poetic. And then there was a chap called Michel xxx who did ballet for beginners at that time and I persuaded Michel, god knows how he had become a ballet dancer, he was only about 3ft 9 as far as I remember with a beard and his girlfriend to do this. And we had a stylised xxx. So anyway we did the short story to ballet, as a ballet and the Mirror I think it was said the following day, OK we understand that BBC Television will try new things and has tried doing a ballet as a short story, ok we've tried it and it doesn't work, forget it. And that was fair do's - I think it was absolutely right

Norman Swallow: And you did

David Attenborough: We did but the point was that was the sort of thing that was possible and that was the sort of thing which we did. And while doing that I was also producing the Prime Minister, prime-ministerial broadcasts, perhaps that was a bit later

Norman Swallow: Grace Wyndham Goldie of course, you mentioned her earlier, she was current-affairs, the department was slightly fragmented and she was current affairs boss

David Attenborough: And there was this very doctrinaire thing that current affairs was not news, which still dogs the BBC, because current affairs could include comment, not editorialised but it could allow people to put opinion in and news in those naive simplistic days was hard fact. Except of course there wasn't any news on television, one has to add, there wasn't any news on television at that time, because all there was a weekly newsreel which was compiled largely from the commercial news in the cinema.

Norman Swallow: Movietone etc

David Attenborough: It was regarded that if you put pictures to what Alvar Liddell or anyone else like that said on the radio you were immediately editorialising, so that wasn't allowed, so talks department handled all these things, press conference, you must have done dozens of press conferences.

Norman Swallow: One or two.

David Attenborough: Yes, I bet and I did one or two but not many. What we didn't want, any of us, want to do were the party political broadcast or the ministerial broadcasts, all of which were very precisely defined as to what they were and how many the party could have and which party could have them and how long would they lasted and how frequent they would be. There was the most Byzantine set of rules about the whole thing. And since nobody really wanted to do this we were put in charge of it by rota. And my turn came and it so happened that just by the rota I had to do Anthony Eden and Eden decided, that he approved of the way I'd done it, god knows how many different ways do you take a shot of a man sitting in a chair at a desk. He obviously thought I had done it with enormous flair and so I became his producer and the most critical time I had in that category of things was that I was his producer at the time of Suez

Norman Swallow: I did one with him at that time because I think you were on leave, I think I stepped in, one of his Suez broadcasts, I think the first one before the actual thing started. I remember I was your stand in because you were away playing tennis some where.

David Attenborough: The particular broadcast which I remember with most horror and which was I suppose politically significant in a really historical sense was the time when we were on the verge of war, in fact we were, it was the time which said we were going to war. And it was a Saturday as I

recall because I was living at Chelsea, no Richmond. But anyway I was summoned to go up to number 10 because the Prime Minister was not going to leave number 10 for reasons which would be subsequently discovered, because of illness in fact, that I had to get up to number 10 as quickly as possible. So being however old I was, I felt history throbbing around me and I felt I had some sense of urgency and mission. And we drove up and as we got to Chelsea all the crowds were either coming in or going out of Chelsea football and we got stuck on that bridge, Stamford Bridge and couldn't move. And I thought the world is about to explode and I can't stop it because I'm stuck with these silly people. However, we eventually got up there and Jane, my wife, because I don't drive, dropped me at Downing Street and I went in and the first thing I did was to go to see William Clark who was an Observer journalist who had been taken on by Eden as his public relations man and press man.

And Willie had a basement office at number 10. I went up to Willie and I said Willie what the hell is going on and he said I've no idea. I think the old man has gone off his trolley, he won't see me, he won't take any advice and you better go up and see what you can do. And William was clearly very distraught and walking up and down and had been cut off. Eden wouldn't have anything to do with him.

So I went to up to the top flat and Eden was in bed. And at his head board, there was a whole line of bottles, of tablets, and around him were members of the Cabinet and these society girls in tweed skirts and twinsets and pearls who were taking notes of what he said. And he said David, come in, I'm just going through my speech. And he had jumbo typewriter sheets and was reading out to the members of the Cabinet, saying, so we must go forth my friends, and he looked at me and he looked at me and said do you think my friends is right there, do you think I should say my friends. And I said prime minister, and mumbled away. And so he would then make alterations and give them to a girl on the right of his bed who was take it away and retype it. And then it would come up and be given to a girl on the left of the bed. So this speech never came to an end, it simply went on and on and on. And it became clear to me that he was in no condition to do anything, let alone take a decision as to whether we were going to go to war. And of course as we know he was very, very ill. And eventually I think I said perhaps prime minister you should get some rest. Maybe I'm flattering myself. But I have the impression that I contributed to a suggestion that there was nothing further to be gained by going on with the speech.

And when we came to do it, we did it in number 10 drawing-room, or one of the rooms in number 10 of course. And we had 0B cameras and lights and one thing and another, and Lady Eden, Clarissa. It was well known that Clarissa really upset Eden, had a power over him, if you wanted to produce anything get rid of Clarissa and I said to XX X, could you keep Lady Eden just out the way please and don't for God's sake, and I recall this very vividly, don't for god's sake let her see a monitor. However, Lady Eden found a monitor. And as we all know, obviously it was black and white, but as we all know there was so much ambient light around that you could hardly see what was on the monitor anyway. We all know it looks like, sort of whitewash, and we were just about to go on the air when Lady Eden let out a shriek and said stop, we can't go one, this is a plot. What is the matter

Lady Eden. You can't see his moustache, you've deliberately lit this so you can't see his moustache. I said no, no, no, it's the monitor. No-no stop. And she walked in front of the camera which was on the verge of becoming live, opened her handbag and took out her mascara and mascaraed Eden' s moustache so that it would show.

SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

And troops then started parachuting onto Egypt. But for me it was a horrifying time, because I couldn't believe that momentous world events and decisions could possibly be taken in such a way. And I dare say well one is older and wiser and one realises whoever takes these things, they're only human beings and they have indigestion and bad tempers and so on. But to me I suppose one had thought that they were some kind of demi gods or some people with other human attributes

Norman Swallow I remember, we're now 1956 obviously Suez I remember it soon after that you had an office in Ealing

David Attenborough: A long, long time after that, what happened then was, if we revert to what we were doing all of us as producers and what the BBC was doing was that people were moving away from Alexandra Palace until all that was left was the news, OBs, I'm not sure and talks department , and all the rest and down in the glitzy likes of Shepherd's Bush.

Norman Swallow: We had offices, were you involved in that, just by Madame Tussauds?

David Attenborough: No I wasn't there. I continued on, I think I stayed quite a long time up in those curious offices opposite the dive by the car-park and then we eventually moved down to Lime Grove and I was in Lime Grove for long time, it seemed like a long time but of course again when you 're in your twenties a year seems a long time and I think it was only for two or three years.

And by this time the power struggle between Grace and Mary had reached fairly high and fairly strong proportions. And Mary retired, was she forcibly retired and or just shifted, but anyway we heard with some pleasure really that a very distinguished American correspondent from New York, BBC correspondent, called Leonard Mile whose voice we all knew because he did radio broadcasts, was coming over to head this department and Leonard in due course arrived and took over. Everybody was a little surprised that Grace had not, that Grace was his winger. Well, Grace's subject was current affairs and so was Leonard Mile's. Leonard I think got our sympathy very

quickly, he certainly got mine, I thought he was an excellent head and a very humane man and he must have had his struggles with Grace which we didn't know of.

And it was at that time that I had started thinking about using my science background, naturalist background to make programmes about animals. The genesis of that was at that time there were really only two kinds of animal programmes, there was a chap called George Cansdale who did programmes called, it wasn't called Zoo Time but it was some name like that and that consisted of George, who was superintendent of mammals at the London zoo standing in the studio with a kind of table with a doormat on it. And keepers in the zoo had gone in the middle of the night to some poor benighted animal and caught it by the scruff of the neck and stuffed it in a sack, put it in the back of a car and brought it up to Alexandra Palace where it was brought up in these lights and handed to George Cansdale. And it was hardly surprising they didn't care for this all that much. And George would say things like ah he's just a little bit upset, it's probably the brightness of the lights, you know, and deftly preventing this thing from biting his hand off by holding it by the genitals in a very firm grip. And that was a terrific programme because, it was the first time you'd seen a wombat. Also they escaped and they bit him and they peed down his front, they wouldn't do what they were told. So it was great television because as we all know everything was live. Now that was one set.

Now there was another kind of animal programme and that was on film. And it wasn't shot by the BBC. Cecil Madden whose history will already have appeared in these archives was the world's first television producer but he was in a way without a job. Now exactly why he hadn't got a job wasn't apparent to us junior guys and no doubt there will be plenty of people to explain why it was he wasn't running a department and why he wasn't head of television, but he wasn't and he was sort of slumming around in a kind of unattached way, in theory doing rather important things, he was far too important to be tied down to having any responsibility of any kind. But anyway he was fixated by showbiz really and he discovered there was a couple called Armand and Michaela Dennis who had a film I think called Below the Sahara or something like that which was trying to go in the cinemas and it was of African wildlife and it was a supporting B feature. And they had come over to London to try and drum up some interest in it and one of ways of doing that was on television. So they used sections of it

and off cuts to produce a programme about African wildlife. And this was a fantastic success. So Cecil, because one has to remember that television in really was in Europe only just starting and it wasn't an obvious medium for an African film-maker, Cecil persuaded on Armand and Michaela to start on a series called On Safari. And it was a huge success.

And those two things were going very well, each had its strengths but each also had its limitations. The thing about the On Safari was that the animals were on film so you lost the unpredictability of George's thing. And thing about George's was that the animals were behaving in a totally unnatural way on the doormat and you could see that they really lived in a xxx tree or something. So I thought why don't we combine these two things and go on an animal catching expedition with the zoo, because at the time there were no lenses that would give you the sort of close-ups that I was wanting and what we could do I thought would be that if we had a sequence in which some body from the zoo crawled up and caught some poor unsuspecting animal by the neck and tied it up, we would end up with this shot of this thing. And then you would dissolve and you would be live in the studio. And there it would be and you'd to do the Cansdale bit and after you've done the Cansdale bit you go and do another bit as it were of Armand and Michaela Dennis.

So I went to the zoo and there was a very nice man called Jack Lester who was curator of reptiles and I said why don't we put up this expedition. He said fine, you tell the BBC the zoo is going to do it and I'll tell the zoo that the BBC wants to do it. And we'll do well.

And in due course that is what we fixed and we went off to Sierra Leone and we caught various things and filmed various things and we came back. And the idea was of course that I was directing in the studio and Jack Lester would be presenting the things. Now two things happened on the first programme. One was that Jack was not really very good I have to say. But also he was not well either. Anyway Leonard Mile, head of the Department, has a story that in fact Jack was catastrophic and that Cecil McGivern said to him you get Lester out of this because otherwise it's no good. And according to Leonard he was told by Cecil McGivern, Leonard told me I had to do it anyway, so I did it. And it was quite a success.

And then I was summoned by Cecil McGivern, with the unerring skill and accuracy and skill that the BBC still has of putting its foot absolutely full square into it, it so happened that my series on Sierra Leone was in exactly overlapping the same time as Armand and Michaela's series promoted by Cecil Madden, so we had two in the same week. And I was told that Madden and the Dennis's said they were never going to do any more if this was what was going on, this was deliberate undermining of their position by this new series called Zoo Quest, which is what my series was called. And so Cecil set up a dinner in Sangers 35 in which there was going to be a great reconciliation between me and Armand Dennis.

So I turned up for this and as far as I was concerned the Dennises were demi gods, they knew it and they'd done it and they were very great people. So I was a bit upset when Michaela refused to shake my hand, wouldn't speak. So we sat down to dinner and suddenly in the middle of dinner Michaela lent across to me and said who is the spy who is giving you our scripts? To me. I said I'm afraid I don't know. Yes, you do she said, last week you showed a sequence of weaver birds weaving in West Africa and it was almost word for word what we were going to say in weeks to come about our weaver birds. This cannot be an accident. And I said I do assure you, the number of things you can say about weaver birds is not all that great. Anyway there was a huge row and Armand said now Michaela that is enough. And she said I must have one more word. And Armand said alright, and she said now he, and he said that's the word. And then he actually escorted her out and she had to stand in the corridor outside during the rest of the dinner. And it was agreed that we would try and separate the programmes.

Norman Swallow: Cecil Madden who was in the background, Cecil Madden presumably was not in the talks department.

David Attenborough: No, absolutely not, he was a free wheel

Norman Swallow: Confusing situation

David Attenborough: Absolutely, that is why I mentioned earlier, Cecil was obviously a freelance and wherever he moved there was somebody else already there

Norman Swallow: The film in Sierra Leone was obviously 35mm black and white

David Attenborough: No, when I first put up this idea, I said of course we will have to take 16mm film because I couldn't afford the cost of 35mm film, but neither could you afford the porters or the strength to hump around all this huge quantity of film cans and gear. And the answer that came back was that the BBC didn't use 16mm but I said it has to. And there was a great ruction. And then there was a great ruction and a meeting was set up with Leonard Mile and Philip Daute who was the head of films. And I dare say maybe you were there Alan, and me, and Daute said that 16mm was bootlace stuff and it was amateur and hopeless and it was dreadful material and we simply couldn't use it, the BBC stood for quality. And then I advanced all my arguments and pointed out that Armand and Michaela had been using I think 16, at that stage I think they were using 16 Kodachrome, but I'm not sure. So eventually an agreement was reached that I could use 16mm cameras. But Philip Daute, and I remember his words very well, the day that talks department regards this as standard gauge for filming will be over my dead body. That is what he said, those were his precise words that I remember vividly. And 6 months later he left, he went to Rediffusion or something.

But anyway, but then of course we discovered there wasn't anybody in the BBC in the film department who really wanted to use 16mm. They all came from the feature film industry and from newsreels, Ken Higgins and people like that, they all used 35mm. And Alan. So there wasn’t anyone who wanted to, so I had to go out and find somebody and then there was an expedition run by the Daily Mail, which is a perennial thing, to look for the abominable snowman, even then, and not find it of course. And I discovered there was a young Czech, his father had been a refugee, had come over during the war, he was about my age, his name was Charles Legus, he had made this film for Tom Stobart who was a name one conjured with because he had shot the Everest film which was the first time 16mm film, it must have been 16mm, had been blown up and used in the cinema for The

Conquest of Everest. So I found this young chap and we met at the pub at the top of Lime Grove and I said look, you want to come on a trip, and he said yes, why not. It's a bit early, because I've only just got back. Have you got your own camera. He said yes, he'd got one and it was a Cine Special, a

Kodak Cine Special. I said could you bring that. And he said yes he could, so that was it.

And I seem to recall that our budget was £1,000 for the series. There were, £300 would go on fares, £300 would go on film stock and £300 on odds and sods. And we would go for 3 to 4 months, and produce 6 programmes. Of course what you did, shooting ratio was only 5 to 1, 7 to 1 maybe, because when you got into a difficulty which you would do if you were making a film now and you hadn't got the actual sequence, you dissolved to the studio and got over it that way. So really it was almost just landscape shots. Not quite but we filmed a lot of animals but it was build up stuff and of course we haven't got lenses. We hadn't got long lenses to get the tight close ups that you need and it was in the studio that you got the close ups of the animals concerned. So what had been a blurred shape disappearing back end into the distance and me pounding after it or Jack, then you saw the thing in the studio. And that is how it was done

Norman Swallow: That was a black-and-white was it, did you shoot colour on that

David Attenborough: No, Sierra Leone was the first trip. And the second trip was to British Guyana where the same thing happened, Jack became very ill and I don't think he even presented the first one, I did them all, and Jack subsequently died from an illness contracted probably overseas.

And the third one was Indonesian, it was called Zoo Quest for a Dragon, and we were asked to shoot some trials stuff on Kodachrome so we took a few rolls of this but it was all in black-and-white still mostly and of course it was transmitted in black-and-white. Quite early on, we landed in Jakarta and then we took a ship to the East coast of Borneo to place called Santa Marinda and there we got a canoe and paddled up the river, no we got a motor launch, we went up the river for about a week and we finally reached a very, very, remote long house and that was where we were going to live for another month or so.

And one evening I were sitting on the veranda of the long house, which are of course communal houses, entire village lives in one community, a

wonderful thing, full kind of Heart of Darkness stuff and bare-breasted women going down to the river with pots on their heads and hunters coming

in with monkeys shot with blow pipes strapped on their shoulders, really thrilling. And I was sitting drinking coconut wine or something and I saw coming up the river a canoe going like mad, I mean the chap at the back was pounding with his paddle so there was a sort of white spume coming out the back. I thought gosh this fellow in a hurry and he came steaming up and I noticed through my binoculars, because I had been watching birds, that in front of the canoe he had a stick with a white rectangle across it at the top, like a double flack. And I couldn't make out what this was and as he came closer through the binoculars I realised that it was a piece of paper of some kind and suddenly I realised that this was the famous cleft stick, this was a message in a cleft stick. Because if you don't have trousers and you don't have pockets and you give a message to a chap in the far-flung part of the Empire you don't want him to stuff it down his loincloth and so he put it in a cleft stick and he holds the stick. Well he had the cleft stick with a message in the front. And I thought how extraordinary and this canoe came up and it stopped at the logs, the floating logs which was the landing stage for this long house. And he got out the canoe and he ran up the notched logs which went up the muddy riverbank towards our house and said xxx, XX X, some thing in Bakanese. And it turned out this message was for me.

So I thought God and this must be something absolutely awful, my wife, my children. With trembling fingers I opened this message and it was of course from Mary Adams and it said latest tests have shown imperative use reflectors when shooting Kodachrome, recommend you contact Tom Harrison, Sarawak, immediately. Signed Mary. Now Tom Harrison was another character and part of the intellectual establishment who Mary would clearly had known, he was curator of the museum in Sarawak and was absolutely true that it had gone from where we were to Tom Harrison but only three people, I think the journey had taken them 18 months and two of them had died. So I felt maybe I would actually disregard Mary's instructions. But that was the first time we shot in Kodachrome.

Norman Swallow: How to the message physically get to you?

David Attenborough: They must have sent it down by radio to the BBC office in Singapore, who sent it to…

Alan Lawson: Did you send the message back in a cleft stick?

David Attenborough: No

Norman Swallow: You were forgiven by Mary when you got back.

David Attenborough: I wouldn't think Mary would even remember she had sent it.

Norman Swallow: Incidentally was it a fair comment?

David Attenborough: We only had two rolls anyway which we weren't going to use and the fact of the matter was you could hardly shoot black and white in the rain forest in those days, it was so insensitive that if you wanted to shoot in a rain forest you would have to cut down the rain forest first to get the sunlight in.

Norman Swallow: So you're now hooked on as they say on natural history from now on as a producer…

David Attenborough: Not totally because in effect what happened was that I would do a trip which took three months and then processing that material and making programmes with it took another three months and then for the other six months of the year I was theirs for the talks department to use how they thought fit which meant that I went on doing things like Eden and I did Animal, Vegetable and Mineral, all sorts of programmes really, folksong programmes. I did a lot of folksongs, and I was very keen, again Mary rang up and said David, you will be aware that the great folklorist Alan Lomax is in town. Indeed I did because, Alan Lomax again, he was part of the intellectual ferment of which Mary was part and Alan had done programmes on the Third programme, about Library of Congress recordings, Jelly Roll Morton and Cowboy xxx, he was a very interesting character. And I did a series called Songs Hunter which was with Alan and folks singers from all over a country

Norman Swallow: And we are now in the 1960s I assume?

David Attenborough: Yes, I would think Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger and all that group of there, all of whom Mary viewed with considerable warmth because Mary was very left-wing, which everyone else thought was really subversive and saying terrible things, you know singing songs about colliery disasters, what kind of thing is this going on. And Alan was a

tremendous iconoclast, he couldn't understand why one couldn't do anything. He was iconoclastic about the studio. What kind of studio is this, you can't get a shot of it. And deliberately subverted one, he deliberately put bumps in the way by interfering. There was this chap called Paddy Gorman who was a porter in Paddington but a marvellous Irish fiddle player and I remember him saying when he came one day, he said it will take a little time and to get going because my fingers, they are bit stiff from holding all these cases you know. But of course he did get going. And we had this tremendous ceilidh band routine which he ran. And I was up in the gallery directing this thing, trying to get to see his callused fingers on the neck of the violin because they were not like Menuhin's in anyway and it seemed to me important. And I was just about getting there, crabbing forward, this was at Alexandra Palace and suddenly everything disappeared, I couldn't see him through the monitor, I mean it was as though a bomb had dropped. And Alan Lomax had gone in and said take no notice of what Attenborough said to you, when the spirit moves you, just get up and dance around. They all stood up and all danced about and the cameras were scrabbling everywhere just trying to get a glimpse of them, it was absolutely pandemonium, those were the sort of things

Norman Swallow: You're talking about Ewan MacColl and music, am I right in my feeling is David that if natural history hadn't become your forte, music might have been

David Attenborough: I would have enjoyed that very much. One of the great singers was another Irish woman called Margaret Barry and Margaret Barry was in Alan's mind very important, because she had a version of a great Irish ballad called As She Moved Through The Fair, it was all about a ghost lover. So Alan said we can't possibly do a series about English folk song or British song unless you have As She Moves Through The Fair you've got to have it. The only problem about it was that Margaret Barry was a tinker and there was no known address. So we got onto a chap called Seamus Ennis who was in Ireland a great folk figure and Seamus said it's easy, all you have to do is send a telegram to all the police stations on the west coast and next time she's brought in drunk and incapable tell her she's got a ticket. We didn't know whether Margaret was going to be drunk and incapable during the run of the programme. But fortunately, or unfortunately, she was and we were rung up from some police station in Sligo or somewhere

around there and said Margaret Barry was in there and we said yes give her a ticket to London which we will pay for.

So she turned up. And that was quite extraordinary because she couldn't sing with her teeth in, she had to take her teeth out and that left her with two yellow tusks on either side and no front teeth at all and this banjo which was terrible because it was wildly out of tune. So she came on live and started singing As She Moved Through The Fair, wildly esoteric stuff really. And all the phones started ringing in the gallery because as you remember it was possible for viewers to get through to the gallery, because the telephonists had had enough of this chap blowing his top and said well I'll put you on to the person concerned. So while the programme came on the phone rings and it's a colonel saying, look I've heard the BBC can't afford to pay proper fees, we know all about that but this is ridiculous, you've got this woman with no teeth, get her off, get her off. However there were others who were more prescient and more intellectual about the matter, including a woman whose name I've forgotten whose husband was the Lord Chief Justice, but anyway she thought Margaret Barry was wonderful and thought the thing to do was to take Margaret Barry to Covent Garden where they were doing Carmen.

So Margaret Barry, unbeknown to us cashed in her ticket and blew all the results on whisky and a very strident print frock from Marks and Spencer's and they turned out in the stalls of Covent Garden to listen to Carmen. I wasn't there but the story is that Margaret was saying things ah she's all right but she's the spirit in the woman

Norman Swallow: In a loud voice

David Attenborough: Yes, of course. But then a course we had the problem as to how to get her back to Ireland because she had blown her ticket and of course that caused problems in the accounts department, which one wouldn't like to think about

Norman Swallow: Crisis. Then what David, I'm not quite sure what year we're in but we're still in the Sixties are we

David Attenborough: That might have been earlier because it was Alexandra Palace anyway

Norman Swallow: Yes, it would be Fifties

Alan Lawson: You said Song Hunter was 1960

David Attenborough: No, he said it was 1960 and I was politely agreeing

with him

Norman Swallow: But I was wrong

David Attenborough: Then these things became the routine and I did in fact 10 of them I think. I certainly did 10 but at some stage, they became more and more anthropological or ethnographical. And I thought I didn 't know much about ethnology which was perfectly true and of course the department was growing, every week, it got bigger and bigger and bigger and the hours expanded and so on.

And Grace by this stage had tasted blood and was looking for more people to eat and I thought the thing to do was to get out of her way really and lead my own quiet existence. And so Ealing had then been bought and there were a lot of old dressing rooms and things up at Ealing and I had moved down to Lime Grove where congestion was great and so volunteers I think were asked for someone to move to Ealing. Most people didn't want to move too Ealing, I thought it was a great idea to move to Ealing, get out the way of Grace.

So I duly did and then did the disparity between my output, it was time I specialised as it were, so I suggested I should be responsible for both the natural history and travel and exploration. By this stage West Region had come on the air and the West region under Desmond Hawkins wanted to start their own natural history unit. In fact I had been by a whisker ahead of them on air, but they none the less had a very strong claims to that area because the West region under Desmond had done naturalists and so on. So it was eventually agreed that West Region, the Natural History Unit would specialise in British Natural history and I would keep doing my own trips, but otherwise would leave natural history to them and I would do travel and exploration in between.

And then Brian Branson joined me as assistant, and we had a little unit out at Ealing. But then as I say after having done that for a bit and it was a very

productive unit and we had quite a good time - we just used other people's films of course and we found travellers who had happened to have shot 16 mm films and we developed quite an expertise in turning these shambolic

Norman Swallow: I seem to remember seeing, you must have bought it I think, for the first time on television screen, a naked female body

David Attenborough: A naked male body was the real thing, the real advance. We had a film of Australian Aboriginals and we were very, very exercised about this because there was a shot in which these very, very black men and very, very hairy but with not a stitch on were in a line chanting, stamping and moving closer and closer to the camera. And we had great heart searchings as to whether we should put this on. We'd duly did and it didn't matter a damn because the contrast ratio of Kodachrome on which it was shot was pretty bad anyway but by the time it got to the sets which were always as we all know grossly mis tuned and with the contrast ratio so high, nobody could see anything, and since they were black and hairy it didn't make any difference.

But anyway we were using all that material. And we developed an expertise which was really quite good of taking this stuff and cutting it to form a story and then constructing a sound track, because hardly any of them ever had tracks and synthesising it in the kinds of ways we all know - with trays of gravel and the London telephone directory and glasses of water, and getting records of donkey's chewing hay and playing them at quarter speed which made them like human footsteps going through a bog and so on. And after having done that for quite some time, and we must have done a lot of programmes then, called things like Travellers' Tales or whatever, I resigned in order to go off and do a postgraduate degree in social anthropology at the LSE.

And the idea was I was going to pay for this by working half the time, by working for six months and doing a kind of Zoo Quest, kind of trip. And the other six months I would be doing this degree, and I was actually going to do a research paper on the place and function and possibilities of film for ethnographic research. And I think it could have been at quite good actually, I had some ideas that now 30 years later, or whatever it is, that people are only just getting round to. And I did six months and then I did a trip to the Zambezi, going down from the source of the Zambezi down to its mouth.

And I came back and started again on my LSE degree and I was preparing, I've forgotten where I was going to go, but I was going to go somewhere else, and it was at that time that I was then summoned by Hugh Weldon, there were all the great shenanigans going on with the affair Baverstock and Hugh came to this house I remember very well, because I was in my LSE mode and said would you run BBC2?

Norman Swallow: We know it you must have said yes.

David Attenborough: What I actually said was I had no idea if I could or I would want to or whatever. But there was no point in coming to do it for less than three years and I promise you I will do that but I don't think there is any chance that I would do it for longer than five. And he said OK, on that basis come along.

Alan Lawson: Was that a hard decision to make for you?

David Attenborough: Quite hard yes because. I remember doing one of these things where you write everything down on a sheet of paper and you work it all out intellectually and you add it all up at the bottom, so that is the conclusion and you know actually it's all bogus, the whole thing, all this great rationalisation is a load of cobblers. But the lines that I took to myself is look are you, what are you primarily, are you a broadcaster or a naturalist. And the answer had to be I was actually a broadcaster, and it seemed to me then that that I couldn't have earned a living as a naturalist or earned a living as freelance, it hadn't occurred to me I think that you could be a freelance broadcaster, so I said well I'm a broadcaster. Now if you're a broadcaster and you're offered a television network with, because at that time BBC2 was less than a year old, and as we know no for reasons nothing to do with Mike but the thing was absolutely at rock bottom and that is the greatest time to go in on anything, when it is at rock bottom, because it can only go up.

Norman Swallow: What we call a challenge.

David Attenborough: I dare say, but even more than that. If it's really in dire straits, which it was, your reputation could only go up, it couldn't go down. So it was a great opportunity. And the thrill to have completely empty schedules really in effect, so it was a very exciting opportunity, and I'm grateful

Alan Lawson: But it was an enormous jump really from, I mean being a presenter, either as a producer or even in front of camera to suddenly become an administrator really

David Attenborough: Yes. Though I didn't particularly see myself as a

performer to be truthful, I saw myself as a director, a programme director, and I thought in the arrogance of whatever it was, I thought I probably knew as much about programming or had as many ideas of programmes as the

next man, and it seemed to me this was all about programmes. And little did I know, but that seemed to be what it was about. And I thought I could think of what a new network ought to do and some of the things it ought to do, and it would be very exciting to bring that about.

Norman Swallow: I'm biased but you did bring it about.

Alan Lawson: I think this is true. But again coming back again, as you say programmes is what it is all about, which is an over simplification, unfortunately it is the stuff behind that, the political…

David Attenborough: You may say that and you're right to a degree and now in the 1990s you would certainly think much more about it, but in the 1970s which is where we're looking, late 60s, the BBC was an extraordinary organisation in that it really allowed those administrators to be about programmes. And it gave you a huge though I didn't know about it at the time but when I took it on, but I soon discovered, it gave you a huge support system of enormous competence, to make sure that if you said I think we should do a programme on ping pong that there was everything there to bring it about. It didn't matter whether it was ping pong or indeed the laws of thermodynamics, it was all there and all the financial advice, the engineering advise, the planning skills, they were all there and though BBC 2 had to be created de novo with its new studios and its own engineering standards, Mike Peacock poor chap, had done all that and to get it on the air with extraordinary organisational flair, to bring it about in a very short space of time. So it was all there, a magnificent instrument for me to play with. And it was very exciting time.

Alan Lawson: Did you give it up reluctantly or did you decide you were sticking by what you said, the three years?

Norman Swallow: You were then promoted, director of programmes?

David Attenborough: I remember becoming director of programmes after four years, I stayed there for four years at BBC and was then kicked upstairs, well I was told I had to be director of programmes.

Norman Swallow: I don t feel as a mere head of department that you were kicked up.

David Attenborough: I had another four years.

Norman Swallow: You had authority.

David Attenborough: So I actually stayed for 8 years.

Norman Swallow: And speaking personally, if I dare, you made some courageous decisions, you had the authority to make them and remember the problem we had with Ken Russell's The Dance of the Seven Veils. Thanks to you it went on the air really, and why not, it was a work of art.

David Attenborough: But in fact you know it was, people can say nice things, but the fact of it was that BBC2 by definition and by its set up, by which the parameters in which worked, it had everything going for it. I mean it was the distillation of all the opportunities that the BBC's constitution provided, because you could experiment and if it didn't get a big audience, nobody said well all the shareholders have lost thousands, they just said well obviously the programme is ahead of their time. I mean sometimes they said they're lousy programmes and I hope that we would have been the first to say so. But you could put on a programme about archaeology or art history or whatever you like and you didn't expect it to get a large audience, and why should it. And so there was nothing reprehensible about that, you didn't get your fingers smacked, so it wasn't a act of huge courage on my part to say start Civilisation, I mean the series, people after said oh what a brave decision, it wasn't a brave decision at all, it was a very obvious thing to do. And when every now and again you get it right and it's a success, there was a acclam that you're surrounded, isn't it wonderful, so you were having a ball, I was having a ball.

SIDE THREE, TAPE TWO

Alan Lawson: From Director of Programmes, was that a decision you said you would do so many years and that was it?

David Attenborough: No, I enjoyed enormously BBC2. And getting things going there that were new and so on. But once you start things then slowly get set in concrete, whereas in the early days it is relatively easy to shift things about, the longer people stayed, people get entrenched, programmes get entrenched, and it's a lot less fun from the point of view of originations and trying new things.

Then through the various moves above me, Hugh was made managing director, well of course it was Kenneth Adam who went, and that's what it was. And Hugh went upstairs as it were, his post became available as director of programmes. My own view was that there was no a job there, I'd said that. It was OK, Kenneth Adam, we're talking about history now, Kenneth was a drunk, and it was deeply embarrassing to work for him and no decent decisions could ever be made by him, and certainly not after 11 o'clock in the morning, and so effectively Hugh Weldon ran the place while Kenneth was there. So when Kenneth disappeared, I mean Kenneth hadn't been doing the job anyway and Hugh simply changed his title. But then in order to preserve the fiction, that there had been such a job, instead of saying well there wasn't one anyway, so we'll forget about it, they said oh well we've that got to fill that, and Charlie Hill then said that he wanted me, or it was Hugh. Anyway it was then Charlie Hill's time and I was made director of programmes. And I told Hugh I thought there wasn't a job there. But Hugh said he wanted me to go there and that we could work together, which indeed we could.

So we divided the job between us and controller of BBC 2 was Robin Scott who took over from me. But equally having all that fun, you can't as director of programmes, still then take all that fun away with you. Robin had to have his fun so I was left with all the boring bits. I was left with management methods steering group, the computer steering group, seeing MPs, dealing with complaints, dealing with staff problems, and all the things which we are not in the least in what I was interested in. And,
furthermore one could see perfectly clearly, you didn't have, to be too conceited to see that there were only a couple of things between you and, if you were going to stay I could either take Hugh's job which I suppose would have been automatic or I had to become director general. One or the other, or else I would stay where I was. Those were the three things that could happen and I was still relatively young, late 40s, early Fifties. And I didn't want to see out my time doing that because I didn't enjoy it.

So the problem after a couple of years, I had come to the conclusion this wasn't for me and the difficulty then was simply at what stage were you going to leave? Because the BBC at that time was under great spotlight of press enquiry and so on and they were prepared to say anything, if I had resigned it would have been another man is booted out or some great conspiracy and so on. And one had put one's hand to the plough and one wanted to finish the furrow. And the question was when you have finished that furrow could you get out at particular time. And if you couldn't then you had to start on another bloody furrow. And so it took me some time to

find the right moment to get out but I didn't have any doubt I wanted to get out.

And I had actually said in taking the job that one of the things I wanted to do was to make at least one film every 18 months or two years, justifying this on the bogus grounds that it would keep me in touch with the the latest equipment and advances, which as a matter of fact it did. So one discovered very early on why there had been a huge increase in the shooting ratio. And which you only discovered when you went out into the field and you actually discovered they'd brought in these 12 mm lenses, whatever they were, which meant you were working in sync all the time and you simply kept running, and you held the camera down pointing to the floor and saying you want any more or should we go on with this. And lift it up, and get another squirt. And that is in fact what had doubled the shooting ratio from about 15 to one to 30 to 1, and those were the sort of things you discovered. But what it did mean was that I was still in touch with the programme making process and to that extent was known both to programme controllers, the people who might commission me and to the public.

Norman Swallow: And when did you stop being director of programmes?

David Attenborough: Overnight, 31st January whatever it was, I can't remember what the date was, but put you couldn't run that job and sort of let people know you were going to leave in six months. And so in fact people didn't actually know until I announced it at programme review, it was 1973.

Alan Lawson: Did you leave the staff all together and became programme contract really?

David Attenborough: Yes, I did. And the difficulty was asking people, you couldn't ask heads of departments, were I to resign old boy would you give me a job. But fortunately there was a very obvious job to do — by that time the sequence of Civilisation, The Ascent of Man and all that had been going, and clearly one had to be done about natural history. And so that was an obvious thing. And indeed the last couple of years that I were sitting up on the 6th floor, I thought then some bastards going to come up and suggest a series on the natural history and I can't say no. Because it's a terrific programme and you couldn't possibly turn it down and then go and do it yourself. And so it was tricky, but nobody did fortunately

Norman Swallow: I remember The Tribal Eye because my department as they called it then, with David Collinson and co…

David Attenborough: The Tribal Eye, I could see that Life on Earth as it was eventually known was going to take some time to mount. And I also wanted to do stuff about tribal sculptures and put up this idea for Tribal Eye which I then took to Norman. But I don't think I put it to look you before I left, did I?

Norman Swallow: I don't think so. You had gone I think, I'm sure.

David Attenborough: I resigned and then said Norman I am in trouble Norman, I've got a wife and…

Norman Swallow: And you were talking earlier about Michael Peacock because he was at Warner Brothers then and they put money into it.

David Attenborough: Yes, they did

Norman Swallow: So he was involved with it indirectly. Anyway I think that might have been the first series you did after you left. And since then you have gone on and on.

David Attenborough: And since then there was Life on Earth, it wasn't absolutely certain, I was clear it was going to work but it worked better than we thought and so while people were saying it was good I thought it was time was to get a bit more money for the next series. So we did Living Planet on the trot. And at the end of Living Planet I thought well that is enough of this, I can't go on doing this. And coming back from dubbing the last one with Andrew Neil who was one of the directors who had been brought down from Schools to do it, he said what are you going to do next. And I said I'll tell you what I'm not going to do, I'm not going to do series which involves climbing onto aeroplanes, flying for 36 hours, getting out, staggering around hung over with jet lag, standing behind some poor benighted bird, saying three sentences and then being bundled on the plane again. I'm going to go somewhere, and eat all that foul food, I'm going somewhere close to home, where no location is more than about three or four hours away, where the food is good and the weather's fine. And that's what I'm going to do. He said there is no such thing. I said of course there is, the Mediterranean, any bloody fool could do a series about the Mediterranean. He said right you're on. So he and I did The First Eden.

And having done The First Eden I then thought that would be really about it, because I was getting on, I suppose I must have been bashing 60. I was also doing Wildlife on One but going back and just doing little odds and pieces didn't really suit me. And I lay in the bath one day and I thought we still hadn't done the importance natural history programme, that we hadn't really done one on animal behaviour because in the past, in Zoo Quest and all these other things is what you did was that you got this one climactic shot in which the lion killed the wildebeest or whatever, or the elephants mated, and that was the nucleus of the programme and you built it up before and after it with travel shots, and that was easy. But that one crucial shot might take you a month to get and what I was suggesting with Trials of Life was there that we should make a programme which consisted exclusively of those nuclear shots as it were. And I wrote it all and I said to Peter Jones, Peter was allocated, and I said we're nuts, we will never do this. Go for it David.

Norman Swallow: This is the natural history unit of course?

David Attenborough: Yes, Live on Earth I'd put up to the Natural History Unit.

Norman Swallow: So you broke your pledge, you went beyond the Mediterranean.

David Attenborough: No, no that was First Eden, after that yes, yes I decided that perhaps sybaritic life, but perhaps I could go a bit farther than that. But then I also wanted to do a programme on fossils which I thought would be the death of any programme maker. So I put up the two ideas, one on fossils and one on animal behaviour. And I've forgotten who it was who was in power at the time, and they said great idea, lovely, we will do the one on animal behaviour and then we'll to the one on fossils. I said ha, no, no. We'll do the one on fossils and then we'll do the one on animal behaviour. He said no, he didn't want to do that. I said it's the only way we're doing it. So I rather twisted their arm on that. And we did fossils while we were setting up Trials of Life.

Alan Lawson: Can we go to technical things now. You were saying when you first started filming with Charles you were shooting 16 mm with a very limited range of lenses, also stock not terribly sensitive. When did you start to realise the equipment was getting better?

David Attenborough: It got better almost by the week, because after all Kodak Cine Special was clockwork for a start and a hundred foot load. But then you

move on to something that was battery driven, so you had to better than whatever it was, a 42nd run.

Alan Lawson: That is when the Arris came in.

David Attenborough: Then the Arris came in, with the Arris came back lenses.

Alan Lawson: Did you ever shoot on 35[mm] out in..?

David Attenborough: No, no I mean I made films on 35[mm] in the early days but never in either field. And then of course the sensitivity of the film was

increasing every six months. Oh, they'd say, you can force this, you can taking it up to 1000 sa or something. And then it turned out you didn't have to force it, that was standard and so on and so on. And coupled with that lens designs were getting better. So we had marvellous long lenses eventually. But it all took time. And Life on Earth and Living Planet, we even moved onto electronic. I'm not too keen on video cameras for a number of reasons, one of which is you can't mend them with a hammer. But in Trials of Life we wanted to do a lot of low light stuff and wanted to get flashing fireflies and so on. And that was even beyond the sensitivity of xxx which we've got now and we did it on video.

Alan Lawson: Is there a problem working with video in the bush?

David Attenborough: I think it's only reliability, and high humidity, and what happens if it goes wrong and although everybody says its much smaller gear, by the time you've got the are various, if you take it you're going to want power packs and you're going to want monitors to replay and so on and so on. And the expertise there is on 16 mm is so high, the cameramen are so good that I see no point in using a video

Alan Lawson: Do you think a playback is essential?

David Attenborough: No, absolutely not essential. And in many ways it is a problem because you have to discipline yourself. If you're continually going back and say we could have got this, that, and the other, I dare say you could get to over that with discipline.

Norman Swallow: You can't in your area go on take one, take two, take three, please do it again.

David Attenborough: But you say we've got to try again. And also there are dozens of people to say this, because the whole unit sits down and some body somewhere is going to say something. I have never ever in how many years it is, when I've turned to a cameraman and said have we got it and he said yes, he's never been wrong. Never, not once.

Norman Swallow: This is very important, you were talking about the unit, you need an enormous team, and all highly expert / and professional in this particular field of programme making, am I right?

David Attenborough: We never had more than five.

Norman Swallow: Is that all?

David Attenborough: Yes, cameraman, assistant cameraman, recordist, myself, the director, and a sort of production assistant, that's six but five without me.

Alan Lawson: With video is it exactly same or do you need more?

David Attenborough: You have slightly more but I've hardly done it. I've done it a bit underwater, but then we had a whole unit because they were going to do another series after they'd finished with its us, so we had a lot of people. And of course once you've got video there is a tendency that you can take seven cameras and do them sync and it all goes up. And the point about natural history filming is that really the best sized unit is one, and everything more than that is an impediment, that really the best stuff you get is from one chap sitting there with the animal. And these other people, including me, are a necessary evil really. So you want to keep it down, it's not simply a question of cost, though it is a question of cost, but that apart you want small operating units. You can't descend on a village in the middle of a South American rain forest and if you're 14 people without totally disrupting it. And you can't trail around after animals, you can't run day after day after day with a unit of six or eight.

Alan Lawson: It's logistics.

David Attenborough: It's not only logistics, it is logistics but it is also what are you doing to the animals.

Norman Swallow: When I said a big team, David, forgive me, I didn't really mean / unit on location, I mean preparing such an enormous series all over the world, research, etc.

David Attenborough: If you work for three and a half years and produce 13 one-hour programmes, then you have a unit. So on Trials of Life there were three directors, without getting complicated about the various terminologies and titles, three people each of whom had effective responsibility for a

group of programmes, ultimate responsibility. And with them there were pa's or bright young chaps who actually in the event would produce a lot of the sequences and there was a researcher and then there was the standard typist and unit managers, so I should think it's a couple of dozen.

Norman Swallow: From what we hear you haven't finished yet.

David Attenborough: Yes, I've got an idea.

Alan Lawson: Looking back on it, which has given you the most enjoyment.

David Attenborough: The early ones, going to Borneo for three months and learning to speak Basa, xxx, Malay, you get to know the people, you get to know the forest, you've really been away, you have moved into a different kind of existence, no radio phones, only notes in cleft sticks, total independence and moving into a different form of existence, a different plane of existence. And you get to know the forest. Everything was just wonderful. And mind you, it also helps being 25 or 35.

Norman Swallow: Natural history is so important on television now, there are so many programmes, not the only yours but mainly yours, it seems to me as a mere viewer and talking to a people of course and reading the papers, etc, is that you are making a serious contribution to the attitude of human beings to the world we all live in, which I think is a major contribution to society, you know what I'm getting at. It is an important contribution really.

David Attenborough: I think that natural history on television has done that but it is a compensation for the fact that the population of the world has become increasingly urbanised. The population of Western Europe is heavily urbanised so that people are wildly out of touch with what is happening in as it were the real world, or the non-human world. And television has put something back on the other side of the scales. It hasn't done it in the same way as it would be if they were still living in that kind of contact with nature but it has preserved some and it is the very popularity of those programmes which is demonstration of the fact it is a very important element of human life.

Alan Lawson: It doesn't trivialise, does it?

David Attenborough: It can, it is very easy to trivialise. Because you do the ultimate thing which is that you pretend that all animals are really slightly rather, or to a greater or lesser extent, imperfect human beings. That is trivialising it in a very big way. So it is perfectly possible to trivialise but one hope's that not every programme does.

Alan Lawson: What do you mean, Yogi Bears

David Attenborough: Not any Yogi Bear because that is a cartoon but you can anthropomorphise so much that you distort the reality and animals aren't human beings and they may have completely different sets of responses to situations about quite important things, like a death, let alone sex or xxx. And if you try to impose on them attitudes to death or sex or bringing up the kids which are human values, you are trivialising if it because it's not like that, and human beings are very exceptional in all kinds of points of view, and by no means typical, and by no means the only way of handling certain problems. And if you are concerned about the welfare of the world at large, you have to look at the whole thing.

Norman Swallow: My point is, which you're now confirming because of what you're doing, what other people are doing, people are becoming more concerned.

David Attenborough: Yes, that's right. You can't get worked up about whether or not you should kill whales if you have no conception of what a whale is like. But if you've seen it under water, if you're the seen it suckling its calf , if you've heard its vocalisations, if you've seen it leaping out of the surface of the water, if you know it's a sentient, intelligent mammal which will come up and be patted and swims with people, that totally changes how you feel about the shooting of whales, particularly shooting them in the kind of brutal way that they did, or do. So whereas 30 years ago if you had got up in Trafalgar Square and said stop shooting whales because there is nothing that they can produce which we can't get in some other way, people thought you were a slightly touched. But if you do it now, you Il get 10,000 people there

Norman Swallow: In general television terms, aren't we living in a time when television as we all know is going through an enormous revolution of

all sorts, is there anything you would like to say about how things are, will be, I'm talking about the future of, of, British television especially of course, the future of the BBC, ITV.

David Attenborough: Everything, particularly television is changing enormously. And it is futile and Canute like to suppose that things, any element is going to remain unchanged and that and the institution that I joined 40 years ago or whatever it was, lived in such a different environment, broadcasting environment of today, that it can't have possibly remain unchanged. And indeed it would be intolerable, it just wouldn't happen, it couldn't be, because part of the element was that it was a monopoly. And it follows by definition that today it is not. And when you think of all the other things, like the fact that it is no longer live, the fact that there is electronic recording, the fact that everybody can have electronic recording, the video shop around the corner, CNN beamed from Atlanta comes in all around the world. There are satellites, etc, etc. All that means the BBC has to change. And it means also that it loses a lot of the factors which gave it its crucial character. And the question now the BBC has to face is that in spite of all that, what is it that remains the BBC, to retain the organisation calling itself the BBC. And the one thing it needs to do in my view is to focus its mind very, very closely on those things which uniquely an organisation with the foundation like the BBC can do that nothing else can, and do those. Those are the one thing that everybody keeps telling you that you've got to throw away.

Norman Swallow: Are you optimistic, or is that a silly question?

David Attenborough: No, I'm not particularly optimistic really. Because I think the fragmentation of the funding is such that whereas this country could afford, putting certain finance in programmes if there is one network or two networks or even three networks, or just conceivably four networks. If there are 14 networks eventually the amount of money that is available which is not infinite, is going to be so reduced that if you're not very careful you won't get the kind of finance available for projects which the BBC had in its heyday. Therefore you won't be able to do the programmes of ambition that the BBC did.

Norman Swallow: I hope personally, I'm sure you too, that the licence fee will remain.

David Attenborough: The licence-fee is the basis, that is the sort of thing, lots of other things have changed but thank God so far the licence fee hasn't.

And it's the licence fee that gives the BBC its character. If you remove that, then there is no basis left.

Alan Lawson: Can we go back to some of the personalities in the hierarchy you knew. And did it you have anything to do with any of the DG's before Green.

David Attenborough: No, except as very remote of figures

Alan Lawson: Did it you have much to do with Green?

David Attenborough: Yes, a bit. I'm not as uncritical admiration of Hugh Green as many. That is to say I don't think that he was nearly as liberal a figure as was made out. The point was he was much more skilful. Now I don't necessarily think that is a disadvantage because I think the director general should have the right to take editorial decisions. And I don't think it is a scandal that nothing ever is stopped. But to the point about Hugh was that he on the one hand said I'm opening all the windows, fresh winds will blow through broadcasting, and so on, gave the impression that he was the great libertarian whereas in fact he saw very clearly that there were things that you had to do to stop things. There was the Von Speer thing which he stopped. There was the War Game which he stopped. There were other things that he stopped. He was also, was kind of waspish and wicked. And That Was the Week that Was, he enjoyed. But he did things that I thought were not very sensible. I don't think his handling of Mary Whitehouse was very sensible and his handling of Charles Hill was certainly not sensible. I mean treating Charles Hill as though he was the devil incarnate but slightly intellectually impoverished at the same time is not the way to handle a Chairman. And it was an act of vanity on his part, that shrewd old Charlie Hill managed to persuade him, drew his fangs by putting him on the board of governors, which should never have happened, and destroyed the concept of what a governor should be. Well it didn't destroy it but it certainly damaged it. The whole point about governors is that they are not broadcasters and that they are men of affairs from other xxx who will give the wisdom to the broadcasters. And if you start putting on the board of governors, a man who is a broadcaster, with a huge and reputation as a

broadcaster, or professionalism in broadcasting, he is second guessing the director general. What is the point of that?

Alan Lawson: The man who followed Greene, Curran.

David Attenborough: I worked for him

Norman Swallow: He was quite good, wasn't he, in a quiet way

David Attenborough: Yes, he had a short fuse, he could lose his cool and he was troubled because, he was in a very difficult situation because Charles Hill destroyed, who I admired and got on with and liked a lot and was unjustly treated by many people in the press, but he did one very bad thing in my view as far as the BBC is concerned, that he instead of taking the line that Lord Normanbrook had taken which was that he was the eminence grise, the man, the chairman was someone who was wisdom and all that sort of stuff, and the man who was at the flaghead and carried the banner was the director general which is how it should be. And Charles Hill took the view I'm nobody's poodle, that sort of thing and he decided that he had to be a highly visible chairman and that meant that there would inevitably conflict with the director general, as there was with Hugh Green, which was the source of their enmity. Then when Hugh, it was perfectly clear that the chairman won when Hugh Green was kicked out and he then appointed Curran. Now Curran then has a huge problem because here is this very visible charismatic chairman, what is the director general going to do. How is it going to appear to the staff on the one hand, how is he going to appear to the public on the othe. And that problem troubled Charles Curran throughout his career. And he tried very hard to be charismatic, well he didn't stand a hope with old Charlie Hill. Charles Curran was intellectual, nervous, not particularly personable, he was a perfectly reasonable looking chap but you didn't look at him and think he was a great bulldog or lothario or any figure, he was just a sort of greyish chap. And he spent a lot of time trying to persuade people he wasnt a greyish chap. And he was very good, he was wise and so on, but that was the cross he bore

Norman Swallow: How about Cecil McGibbon? I personally owe a lot to him.

David Attenborough: And so do I and Cecil McGibbon was one of these tragic figures with the personal tragedy both in his personal life, but you always got the feeling that Cecil chain smoking, wenching, drinking, but worried by collicism [?], but you always felt that he had flair, that he would create things and would do something wild and silly with the programmes, and that was great because, and you would have done anything. And of course the whole business of programming, scheduling under his influence as we all remember, there was no such thing as path and planning, we despised path and planning, the day had to be made up like a menu and it

had to be fresh every day and one thing you had to do about Tuesday, this Tuesday, was that it wasn't going to be like last Tuesday. And that was wonderful, but of course a figure of his time and he couldn't have survived in today's world.

Alan Lawson: After Curran, we had [Ian]Trethowan.

David Attenborough: Well, Ian I think did very well and he was the right man for the time because what he had to do was to calm down the political situation, he was a very skilful political operator. He had a lot of friends in government, he enjoyed the political process, he knew how to take people out to the club and you know, and I don't think he was, I don't think he inspired people into making great new advances in programming but he certainly steadied the ship and got the licence money increased, so I think it was in a better shape at the end of his career than when he arrived.

Alan Lawson: Alastair Milne.

Norman Swallow: The laird as I call him.

David Attenborough: I'm now, because I'm moving into gossip because I didn't work for him, I'm his staff, I was on the programme side, he was very nice to me because in a sense I'd been his boss, and as I say I then move into gossip because the fact of the matter is that one knows about Alastair and Alastair doesn't suffer fools gladly and it didn't help to tell the board of governors that they were inadequate.

Alan Lawson: A short fuse?

David Attenborough: Yes.

Alan Lawson: If you could start again would you change anything?

David Attenborough: No, in a way one looks back and thinks my god you managed to go along that tightrope and you never actually fell off, and if you started again I wouldn't even try, I'd just count my lucky stars that I'd got that far.

Alan Lawson: Would you perhaps rather have done different kinds of programmes?

David Attenborough: No, I've had a ball.

Norman Swallow: You certainly got a variety. I remember admiring you on Face the Music, why that's suddenly occurred to me, I don't know.

David Attenborough: Had a nice time.

Norman Swallow: We always end by saying have you any regrets?

David Attenborough: No, thank you very much.

END.