David Robson (projectionist, television engineer) 1921 - ?

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Description to follow

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Interviewer: Alan Lawson
Interviewee: David Robson

[Tape 1, Side 1]

The copyright of this recording is vested in the BECTU History Project. David Robson, one time cinema projectionist, television telecine operator, recording engineer, one of the pioneers of the BECTU History Project. Interviewer Alan Lawson. Recorded on 25/3/98, side 1.

Alan Lawson: Well we'll start with the traditional opening - first, when and where were you born?

David Robson: I was born in a place called Enfield in 1921. I've never been back to Enfield because my mother died when I was about two, two and a half, and my father was the Chief Projectionist at the Plaza, Lower Regents Street. So there was nobody to look after me as a baby. I was shipped off to Welwyn Garden City, my grandparents, his mother and father. And I was brought up at Welwyn for quite some time. I don't know whether you know Welwyn, it's a beautiful place.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: The main Cambridge line runs through the centre, so on one side you've got the Shredded Wheat factory and Welwyn studios and those sort of things, and on the other side you've got the residential part. But it was the first of the socialist communities which worked. There was children's welfare and clubs and it was really a wonderful place to be you know. Anyway, I went back for sort of... Father married again, his second wife was again seriously ill and so I came back to Welwyn for another bit. I did my three Rs there with the school. I remember coming back one day and saying, "I can read, I can read!" Just like that, suddenly, isn't it funny? I don't know why it happened like that, I remember getting caught up with words like England, and saying "Eggland" because I didn't know how to do the "ng" bit, you know. But it

was sudden, quick, like that. Anyway, actually a marvellous time, sorry to leave it really. But my family settled then in Upper Norwood, eventually, opposite the Crystal Palace. My father was now Chief Engineer for a circuit called the AC Matthews Circuit. He was an Australian entrepreneur and he built about four or five theatres. He was mad about cinemas and architecture, this man [laughs]. And he built some very good theatres which were very good acoustically, because we were just about on the breakthrough for sound, and this would be about 1927-ish. And he built the Rialto up in Norwood, the Albany which was virtually next door, the State Sydenham and State Thornton Heath. And my father was in charge of equipment, putting equipment in, engaging the staff, usual Chief Engineer stuff. This is before he went to [indecipherable], we'll talk about that later anyway. So that was the situation. I was already very keen on television. Incidentally, when I came back to Upper Norwood, I first went to a primary school and my parents said, my father said, "I don't like the idea very much. I'd like you to go a better school." So I went to Dulwich College Prep. from there. I didn't like it at all, didn't do at all well because I went straight into things like Latin and oh God it was murder, you know [laughs]. And I failed the entrance exam into the college later anyway. But about that time I suddenly started getting interested in television. I used to buy Cans[?] comics, a sort of a technical paper, a technical book for people building amateur radios and stuff like that. And this was the time when the BBC were transmitting 30 line TV on long-wave I think, and medium-wave.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: And I built the Nipkow disk and the picture element I think was a neon lamp...

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: ...and a few valves to pick up the RF, you know. And it worked, but it was dreadful, I mean it was just a joke really. I used to go in the dark with all the lights out and look at this little orangey-looking picture. And I couldn't sync it, I didn't know how to sync it. I had to wire the actual motor speaker for the disk you know, but it was television, it was a new and exciting thing. It really got to me. A little while later, I was about thirteen I suppose then, a little while later my parents took me to the Ideal Homes Exhibition which was at the Crystal Palace in those days. The Crystal Palace was just in the next road to us, we had the station in the middle. And while they were looking round the stands I saw a booth where there was a man standing outside, a barker. And he was saying, "Come in and be televised." So I thought, "Sounds interesting - television." So I said to my pop, "Can I go?" And so he gave me a sixpence and I went in and he said, "We'll be at stand so and so when you come out." So I went in and the man got on the stage, there was about twenty of us I suppose, and he said, "This is the thing of the future. Every home will have one of these, will have a television receiver." There wasn't one there but he was explaining the theory of it. And he said, "I'm going to turn the lights out," he said, "and you'll be scanned. And you'll see the picture come up." So he turns the lights off and a myriad of bright lights, it was optical scanning of some sort.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: Anyway, up comes the picture. And it was thirty or fifty line, I don't know what, it was very, very, very low resolution indeed. The only reason you could tell it was you was because you waved to yourself, you know. And sound[?] was coming back. So I was in there for about half an hour, really fascinating, people were encouraged to talk to each other and then watch the pictures you see. At the end of it, I went out to go round the back to see how they did it. But they wouldn't let me in [laughs]. I was dying to see. I could see some smoke coming out of what I think was an arc.

Alan Lawson: Yes, it was, it was a Zeiss.

David Robson: Was it?

Alan Lawson: A Zeiss Arc, yes.

David Robson: Oh really. Oh well we'll talk about that later anyway. So that was it, it was now burnt into my mind that this was something that needed more investigation, more study and so forth. Now...how far did I get? Yes. Well I carried on at Dulwich, and then one afternoon got a call from Flora, and she said, "I know you're more interested in what goes on behind the camera rather than in front," she said, "all these technical things they don't interest me but they obviously do you!" [Laughs.] She said, "We're making a film called Fire Over England at Denham Studios. Would you like to come and watch it being made?" So I said, "Yes!" It was during the school holidays. So she'd taken a house as near to the studio as you could get. I was looking up the station the other day...it was um...

Alan Lawson: Well there's Denham station...or was it Uxbridge?

David Robson: No, we actually...it was the station after Rickmansworth on the thing. Anyway, she'd taken a house there for a few weeks so that it was as close to the studio as possible and Flannagan was her chauffeur, she had the car there so we used to shoot off early in the morning, about half past six. Makeup used to take ages, she had a false nose and God knows what else. So I used to wander around the studio. But actually getting there was fun because I always thought that Baker Street was a tube station. And when I got to the station, when I got there to take the train, it was steam. Steam, on the Underground, I don't believe it! They hadn't electrified beyond Rickmansworth, then. So that was fascinating for a start - steam, you know. Could hardly see it anywhere, even then. And it was a [indecipherable] you know, one shop.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: And we used to shoot off early in the morning and it was there that I met my first American, and I've loved working with Americans ever since. His name was William K. Howard and he was the director of the film.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: And they're marvellous people, easy to get on with, they're positive, you know exactly where you stand with them. And this man was very kind to me, he let me be on the set

most of the time, or sit with the sound recordist, you know. There were other films being made there at the time - 'Land Without Music' and various things like that. But the atmosphere was absolutely wonderful, I used to think, "People are being paid for this - I'd do it for nothing! If only I could do this, this is what I really want. When I leave school I'm going to do this. Film's for me, definitely." I looked at the camera, and I thought, "If you could take the output of this, if this was a television camera, you could feed the output of this straight home." I was a long way, a long, long way ahead. Because that year - this was 1936, at the end of that year, the high definition service was started at Alexandra Palace and people were already talking about it then. They weren't worried, it was a novelty. We had - Crystal Palace was still - hadn't been burnt down or anything at that stage. Anyway, I was extremely popular at school. I told them all about the excitement of watching a film being made. Then I had a tragic accident that really affected my life enormously. A school friend of mine had a very large garden, had tennis courts and things like that and it had a huge grassy bank, which at the end of the year, the grass would turn to hay and you could ski down it. Absolutely marvellous, used to keep skiing. So all my mates at home made skis. We were skiing down this bank one evening and the tip of the ski I was on, broke off, and I went over - it went in. It didn't penetrate, but it... I don't know how I got home. But next morning I was at death's door, I couldn't breathe. What had happened was, I'd got internal bruising and got pleurisy with it - just went on generating, you know. So they got me into an ambulance quickly and I got to hospital, they put some tubes in and drained this fluid out. I remember looking over the side of the bed and there were rows and rows of these pots full of this fluid! [laughs] Wasn't funny at the time but looking back on it. So they said - I was in hospital for about three weeks and the doctor said, "When you're discharged you mustn't go back to school." I was only fifteen, coming up to sixteen nearly. And he said, "You mustn't think about doing any work or anything. Even going out for a walk is - got to take it very easy." So I was sent down to my grandparents who'd moved now from Welwyn, fortunately, to West Hove [laughs]. So I went down there to recuperate. I was told to do it for twelve months. After six months I couldn't stand it, I couldn't stand doing nothing. I'm an active person, I couldn't stand it. So after six months I thanked them very much, I said, "I've loved being here and this is brilliant but I'll go mad if I stay here any longer." [Laughs.] So I got on the train, I came home and this was during the slump. They had terrible unemployment, 1936, terrible unemployment. The children were walking about without stockings and shoes and you know, very little. The dole was very, very small. Not like it is now where live in luxury and can afford cars and television sets! Nothing like that. Anyway, my father said, "I don't want you hanging about the house boy. I want you to understand what a slump is really all about." He said, "And I want you to get a job - any job. I don't care if it's sweeping the street, anything. And if you can hold that job for a week without getting the sack, I'll see what I can do for you." Now, the reason he was strict about this was because he didn't like College boys. All the business, all the time he was Chief Engineer with the Matthews Circuit, he had the business of engaging staff, and he said, "College boys are a damn nuisance," he said, "they can't even put a screw in a piece of wood. I wouldn't touch them with a barge pole." And he thought I was like that you see because I'd been to Dulwich. And he thought, "I've got a weak one here [laughs], and he's got to go out, he's got to be pushed out." It's a good job he did actually. Anyway, so he said, "I want you to go out and get a job." So the first place I went to, was the bit of the Palace which had been spared the fire, was the Logie Baird bit at the end.

Alan Lawson: Old man Baird's bit.

David Robson: So they were doing some research work and making television sets there, I thought, "This is it, this is it." I got in there, I didn't write or anything, I just went there, to the door, you know. And they said, "Oh, yes. Do you have any qualifications?" I said, "No, I've only just left school." He said, "I'm sorry, we haven't got a position for you." But they were very kind, they said, "Go out and get some papers and come back in a year's time and we'll see what we can do." So I thought to myself, "Qualifications, that sounds very sensible." So, in those days most people went to night school. I mean nowadays we call it colleges of further education. But I signed on at Knight's Hill. I was doing two nights a week, one in maths, which I badly needed because I failed the exam in maths. I got through in English and French but maths was the weak subject and I knew I'd be lost without it. So I did maths and electrical engineering, which also covered electronics in those days. Anyway, I came back, signed up and came back. And I had to address my father again, he was very strict in those days, was Dave Robson! He said, "How about this job?" So I said, "Ah, I didn't get it. I went to Logie Baird's place, John Logie Baird's place, to try to get in there." He said, "How did you get on?" I said, "I didn't, I didn't get the job." He said, "Well, what's holding you up? You're going to get turned down lots of times." He said, "You've got to keep on and on until you get a job. I'm not interested until you get a job [laughs]." Next day, I went to the Labour Exchange, the place where you went for jobs in those days. Is this all right...?

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: And the lady behind the counter said, "What can you do?" So I said, "I'll do anything, I'll do anything." So she said, "How would you like to be a rewind boy at the Ritz Cinema in Stockwell?" So I though, "How fantastic! My father's business!" I'd never heard of such an amazing bit of coincidence. So I said, "Yes, love to, I'd love to have a go at that." So she said, "Well there'll be about twenty other boys after the same job. You should wear your best bib and tucker. And get there early." So with a chit, and the papers I had to take, I went to this cinema in Stockwell. Very early, it was still locked up, the chain was still on the door [laughs]. And I looked through and I could see the cleaner's busy scrubbing the floor, you see. So I rattled the chains and eventually they opened the door and said, "What do you want?" I said, "I've come for the job." "Oh," they said, "Mr Lumley, the manager, won't be here just yet. But anyway, while you're here you might as well sit down in the foyer." So I'm sitting there waiting for this terrible moment to arrive [laughs] and in comes a man with a briefcase who turns out to be Mr Lumley the manager. He walked past, he did a sort of double-take. He came back and said, "What do you want? Who are you?" So I... "Sir..." You know, I stood up. In those days it was caps off and everything. "I've come for the job Sir." "Ah I see," he said, "Well I've got to see about twenty others yet, it's a bit early." Then he has second thoughts, he said, "I'll take you now." So we went into the office, he took his coat off and opened his briefcase and did all the necessary, you know. And the interview started, I can't remember what it was about but it was a terrible interview - first time. And he said, "Well I can't say yes or no to you because I've got a lot of other boys to see yet. I suggest you wait in the foyer and if it's positive I'll let you know." So I thought, "That's over anyway." [laughs] So I sat in the foyer and about ten minutes later an awful crowd of boys who got to see him came in. They were the sweepings of London! I thought, "I can't possibly..." I'm not a snob, but I mean, if you work people like this, it's hopeless! Anyway, the thing I noticed about this was that a boy would go in for an interview, be in the office for about ten minutes, then he'd come out and then he'd leave the building, through the

main entrance. And this went on for about three-quarters of an hour, something like that, until they'd all gone in and gone out. I was the only one there, and I thought, "They've forgotten, he's bloody well forgotten. What am I going to do? I feel an idiot." Suddenly he came out with a grey-haired man, an old man who was only about forty probably but I was only sixteen, just on sixteen, you know. So he said to the man, "This is the boy I was talking about. What do you think?" So he said something quietly to the manager. And he said, "When can you start boy?" And I said, "Right away Sir. Now. Right away Sir." "Ok," he said, "you've got the job. Seventeen and sixpence a week. You work six days a week and have Sunday off. And because you're underage, we'll let you off at six o'clock every day so that you can carry on with your technical studies." Wonderful, wonderful! This was the highlight of my life! So the chief said, "Okay, follow me." So I went up the stairs, into the projection room. The theatre had just been rebuilt and re-opened again, it was a stadium type cinema - third run place really but very high standards as they all were then. It was spotlessly clean, like a hospital, the floor was one of the jobs I had, was red ochre concrete and highly polished and the projectors were on plinths on concrete plinths, painted with sealelight[?] I think - white - when I used to use them. Spotless. I realised why it had to be spotless later on. But anyway, they - I used to have to fill the fire buckets up to within an inch of the top, exactly an inch. And they had beautiful white enamel and red on the outside and I remember the sand buckets had to be, the sand had to be ruffled up every day to make it look as if...[laughs]. There was a wonderful Second there, who took me under his wing I suppose really. I suppose he was about nineteen I would imagine. And he showed me everything. I mean it was absolutely marvellous. I learned how to make joins - of course there were no splicers in those days. I learned to make thin, very thin, narrow joints. And he showed me how to bloop and all these sort of things.

Alan Lawson: Did you have a hand joiner or...?

David Robson: No. There weren't any in those days. No hand joiners in any of the cinemas I ever worked. All hand made. I used to - you could tell, from joins you could tell about a person and you could tell if - as we were the third run, that meant that we were getting our films from another theatre and Joe Soaps, the second there, you recognised his joins, you know, because when we spooled off, or even the rewind boys' joins, you, you knew. It's like, it's like a signature, a splice was a signature. Anyway, I learned to get up ladders and I'm getting too far ahead. That night, I went home and my father was waiting. He said, "Where have you been, we've been panic-stricken." I said, "I've got a job." "A job!" he said, "Where?" So I said, "Ritz Cinema, Stockwell." "Ritz Cinema" he said, "who's the manager there?" So I said, "Mr Lumley." "I don't think I know him. Oh that's interesting. What equipment have you got there?" So I said, "We've got a front-shutter Simplex. We've got RCA sound, we've got intermediate arcs, about 45 amps on the KD[?] arcs." He said, "You learned all that in one day?" I said, "I didn't learn it, I mean it's - I love it, I can't get enough of it, I want to go back." So he said, "What are they paying you there?" So I said, "Seventeen and sixpence." He said, "Well give your mother six and sixpence of that for your keep." So I still had over ten bob, I mean, I didn't know what to do with it. I mean you could get your trousers pressed for sixpence in those days. You could have a meal in Woolworths for sixpence, you know, a poached egg on toast and a cup of tea - sixpence, incredible! [Laughs.] I'd never had so much money in my life! Anyway, the interesting thing about it was, now that I was bringing money into the house, the atmosphere in the house had changed. I was a man at last. My mother would ask me, "What would you like to have for supper

tonight?" Never asked me before. There was always a plate of food, that was fair enough - used to eat it and that's it. But now, "What would you like for supper tonight?" This is really incredible, I can't believe it. [laughs] So anyway, he said, "Well I don't want you to get too interested in that business. I've been it, I know all about it, A-Z. It's dead man's shoes. You're not going to make much progress." He said, "You could get the sack at the drop of a hat. High standards required. Do it for a week, and if you haven't got the sack give a week's notice and I'll honour my promise, I'll do what I can for you." But I said, "I'm not leaving. I love every minute of it. I've made friends I know the staff, I know." This went on for weeks, kept on and on and on, pressing you know, for me to leave this job. "No! I love every minute of it!" So I started to learn all about the business, I wasn't allowed to go on the machines or anything like that at that stage. I had to be able to lace up in ten seconds from the top box to bottom. And I soon realised why this was necessary. You only had to make one mistake and you were out. Nobody ever got the sack, what they used to do, you had to have your jacket handy - never happened to me fortunately. But if you missed a changeover or something like that, it was the sack. And what you did, you went straight down to the Manager's office and you resigned, you asked for your cards back. Because if you ever got the sack in the business you'd never get another job.

Alan Lawson: Really.

David Robson: They'd always ask, "Why did you leave your last employment?" If you said you were sacked, "Come back another time," you know. So you always resigned. And then what happened was, the Manager would call the Chief down and say, "Look do you want to lose this boy? He's handed in his resignation." If you were well in, probably the Chief would say, "No. He made a mistake. I'm prepared to overlook it if you are." And the manager then would say, "Take everything back and go back. Don't do it again, otherwise you're out." So there was always this sort of sword of Damocles hanging over your head. But it didn't worry us, I mean it was part of the job. That was it. Anyway, one day, the second took me aside, I'd been there for about two or three weeks. He said, "I'm going to show you something. And I want you to remember this for the rest of your life because it could cost your life if you're not careful. There's such a thing as film fire in the projector." And he said, "I'm going to show you what happens." So he got a foot of leader, rolled it up tightly and set fire to it. Whoosh! The flame went straight up to the ceiling like that, and the dust fell on my lovely clean floor [laughs]. He said, "Right, now you've seen Nitrate go up. You've got 2000 feet of that in the top box. What you've got to learn, there's three things you must learn. If you've got a big fire, the three things are: first - shut off, second - switch off and third - fuck off." I said, "Fuck off?" [AL laughs.] He said, "Yes, you can't fight a film fire. Get to the nearest exit and get going quick - go. There's no way. Film fire is a film fire, that's it. No way, it explodes." What he should have said was you should have released the fire shutters. But he didn't mention that, it was very, very important about these three things [laughs] I've always remembered that [laughs] never happened fortunately. Anyway, one of the jobs I had to do, because they weren't - there were only four of us, the Chief, Second, Third and myself, the boy - I was the boy. I had to go out and get their meals, because there weren't any meal breaks, nobody worried about things like that in those days, it's strange isn't it? Used to eat on the machine, or I used to eat in the rewind room, you know, thought nothing of it. And the great meal of the day was - there was a little, in the high street, quite near the theatre was one of these little huts...

Alan Lawson: In the street?

David Robson: In the street, yes. And the thing we used to have, the thing they used to like was a sav and a slice. A sav is a saveloy and a slice of bread and butter. And we always had tin mugs - er enamelled mugs, so I used to get a tray and bring these back. It was delicious, I used to love it! And the other thing that we had on special days was, we used to buy a thing called Tikky[?] Snacks.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: They cost thruppence each and it was...

Alan Lawson: A meat pie!

David Robson: It was gravy and beef, beef pie. And if you spoke to this man he'd make a hole in the middle and pour brown sauce in [laughs]. This gluttonous mess, we used to take back and eat on the machines [laughs], or in the rewind room as the case may be. But that's how we lived and loved it, didn't know any other way, you know, it was grand! Anyway, the next rather frightening thing that happened there was the thing that put me off trade unions for many, many, many years. And it has a sequel later on, which we'll be talking about. But, during that period, there was the big strike which brought out all the theatres, the Gaumonts, the Granadas, everything. All shut down because projectionists were pulled out on strike by the ETU, which was the organiser for projectionists.

Alan Lawson: It was the ETU - oh, right.

David Robson: And we didn't take any notice of that but I wasn't a member and none of the people I worked with were members. We were with a lovely theatre and were very happy with the staff and standards were going high, the Manager used to examine the - the usherettes had to line up, this was a third run house, you know - look at fingernails and makeup and hairdos. Very, very high standards - incredible. Anyway, one afternoon we were right in the middle of the picture and suddenly the fire shutters dropped - Wham! "What the hell was that?" Lifted up the observation port and the cleaners' lights were on inside and pandemonium going in the theatre. So Lumley came up to the proj. room and said, "We've got trouble. Shut down." So what had happened was, two strikers had come in and bought tickets in the ordinary way at the box office and - I don't whether you know but all cinemas are standard in that at the back of the stalls there's a switch, a big, red switch which is the fire switch, and also cleaners' lights as well, and by the side of that is the handle which releases the fire shutters. And they'd just pushed the usherette out the way, put lights on, closed the theatre down by opening the shutters, then walked down the aisle, dishing out pamphlets, you see, to the public. But the trouble was, they also crushed - and we had new pile carpets and everything, they crushed these stink bombs all the way down and it was terrible! We had to close the theatre and had to go [indecipherable]. We had the extractor running but we couldn't get rid of the smell, it was terrible. And not only that, but the strikers took up residence across the road, with air pistols and were firing and smashing at our neon, you know. And I thought, "How can people be like that? I mean, my theatre, my job, you know it's a state. How could they do that?" I told my father and he said, "Be wary of trade unions boy. You

can get that, that can happen." Later on, in later years, it rung a bell and I wouldn't join anything because of this awful thing that had happened. We had police protection to get home. They set fire to the building next to us, and hoped that they'd burn the theatre down. I mean, it was that fierce there were no theatres open - we were packed out with people, because there were no cinemas open! Everyday we opened the doors there were queues round the place. I suppose they thought we were black-legs, you see. Well I suppose we were in a way, we weren't members of the Union. They really hated our guts and I think this probably happened in lots of cinemas in London.

Alan Lawson: I'm sure, yes.

David Robson: We weren't picked out for any reason, it was simply that we we were open.

Alan Lawson: When was that?

David Robson: That was in 1936. The strike went on for months and months. But anyway, we kept going. At the end of that period, my father really was beginning to get obstreperous about it, "Stop, you've got interested in cinema. I knew you would, it's the worst possible start to your career." He said, "You've proved you can do it, that's fine. But I don't want you there." I said, "I want to be there. I'm loving it." I told him about the strike and he said, "Well you're learning all the lessons." So anyway, he said, "I have got another job for you lined up. You must hand your notice in at the end of the week." I was in tears to say goodbye to the wonderful crew and lovely camaraderie. That's one of the things you get in a projection room. You're all working together, you're checking each others' work, you know that a mistake means the end so you double check everything. It's a way of life, it becomes a way of life very quickly. You love it, you think nothing else but that. Terrible really I suppose, but it was great fun and I enjoyed it enormously. Anyway, I left the Ritz and he said, "I want you to do the same work, since you've chosen this. But in a theatre of my choice, where my equipment is in, my boys are there." What I didn't know was that he'd arranged for a weekly report from the Chief [laughs] on what I really was like. This was at the Rialto, Norwood and we had a front shutter Simplex there, we had Peerless Arcs, not Magnum[?] Arcs but the earlier ones. And Western Electric, he was mad about Western Electric. So I started there. I didn't enjoy life as much at the Rialto somehow, although there was a lot more to do, there were stage shows, you had some amateur night on Saturday, so spot work was there, stage lighting was there to a certain extent, but only in a very limited sort of way. It was not a Granada - they said if you could last the week at a Granada you were the bees knees. You could get a job anywhere if you could last a week at a Granada. Well I didn't go to Granada [laughs]. I carried on there for about four or five weeks and then, it was very convenient because it was very close to home, and going to Knight's Hill was dead easy, you know, the tech. because it was only a short bus ride. So I was doing studies and doing projection duties as well. I was getting more responsibility, I was on the machine now, doing changeovers and things like that. They had some - in those days - the fire situation was quite jolly[?]. I mean the local authority fire people would kind of visit projection rooms and you didn't know when they were coming, so you had to be very careful. I suspect the management gave them passes and things like that to keep them sweet, you know. The standard word for fire - have you been in the business? You don't...

Alan Lawson: Well you know, I've been in a projection box, but no more than that.

David Robson: The standard word...you weren't allowed to use the word "fire" anywhere. Drage - Mr Drage! It was standard in everywhere I went to.

Alan Lawson: Oh really?

David Robson: Yes. "Mr Drage, is in the rear circle," for instance. So we used to have to do fire drills at the theatre every day at one o'clock. And Mr Drage was in a different place every day, the fire shutters would come down and then the Assistant Manager would go and give instructions to the usherettes, "Mr Drage, is..." so that then they opened all the push bars and all that. We had a regular routine for Mr Drage. And I'm surprised you haven't heard that, it's standard wherever you go that thing. And so a little bit more. We had, because of the strict fire regulations in those days a lot of the cinemas had anti-fire devices. And in some theatres there was a platform, and when you were on the projector you stood on it. You had to - if you moved off it shut everything down. So it kept you close to the projector the whole time, so you could reach the lamp, the arc and the projector and faders and stuff like that, but you couldn't move off it. But the Rialto didn't have that, it had a thing called 'Safety Sentry', which is an American device, quite clever. Off the - we had rear shutter Simplex. My father was mad about American equipment and so am I. I think they're really beautiful. Anyway, the rear shutter Simplex still had the front shutter shaft.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: These would have been actually on the machines we had, they were being refitted. And on it, there was a pulley wheel and a belt, which drove a little generator. So when the machine's up to about 22 and a half, 23 frames per sec., it actually generated enough DC to hold the dowser open. You couldn't even open it until it got there. In the winter it was a great problem because the heavy universal base of the Western Electric would take ages to get up to 24 frames. You'd have to run the machines up for about half an hour before the show started. And even then on the first changeover - it was, "Was it going to make it or not?" You know. It had a safety release on top of the thing. If you didn't make it, you could press a button and open it. But the idea was, if the machine slowed down for any reason - in other words, you'd got a gate fire, the solenoid would be de-energised and the weighted dowser would drop down and shut you down and also shut the motor off, the whole lot was shut down. That was quite hairy, I found that quite hairy because it meant that you had to hold your nerve, you'd got your motor cue and we had 12 foot leaders and our changeover devices there were disks, so that you could see - see the numbers, you could see the numbers going through if you had a your dowser open, but you couldn't open the dowser so you couldn't see the numbers. So you had to - in your mind - say, "eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five..." [counts down in seconds] And you'd try it, "Still not there - no. Three, two..." It's open - changeover! - We'd just do it with seconds to spare, it was really hairy. And I don't think we ever, ever missed a changeover but it was always this risky business for the first two changeovers of the day in the winter. And of course you had no central heating in the projection room. It was a very large projection room with a flat roof - lovely, lovely theatre really. Beautiful acoustics. As a boy there, my mother had the cinema pass because Dad was Chief Engineer there, so I used to go to the pictures very regularly, they did one change

a week, and change on the Sunday. We never went Sunday - the rabble [laughs]. On Mondays we always went, and we used to have afternoon tea in the circle, those were the days. People went to the pictures and they had a lovely time of it. In the very early days of sound was - we hadn't got Western in there yet. There were German systems and ...

Alan Lawson: Klangfilm was it?

David Robson: I don't know what they were. I mean, I wasn't in the projection room, I was only a boy.

Alan Lawson: I see, I see.

David Robson: But the thing was, the crudity of it. I thought to myself, "Talkies will never catch on!" I mean, there was always some shorts mixed in with the main programme, they'd go on about five minutes or so and there'd be a sign saying, 'The next picture's a Talkie'. And it would be a Musical Hall artist doing this to camera - knocked off - pointless! What is the use of doing this [laughs]? Let's get on with the programme, you know. But as soon as the real talkies came out 'The Jazz Singer' and so forth, it was a different kettle of fish. By that time Western was in and - though they had disk as well, you know there was there was a choice between - it didn't last very long.

Alan Lawson: No...terrible!

David Robson: It was optical, virtually, from the word go. But my father used to give demonstrations to lots of people on how to gain sync on disk. He was very, very quick with his fingers, he could lift the pick up like that and move it a groove like that, just like that. And apparently there were problems in those days, you know, where a film had been cut. And obviously you couldn't do anything about sound and eventually you could be perhaps a few words out. You had to be very quick to click it. [DR makes a noise with his lips to imitate the needle skitting across the record grooves.] He was madly keen about sound. Anyway, he was now at the GPO Film Unit. And he was getting these reports and so one day he said to me, "How would you like to work with me?" Well by now he was satisfied. [laughs] I said, "Doing what?" He said, "Well, I'm at the GPO Film Unit, Blackheath." He was in charge of the technical aspect of everything there. "I'd like you to start there with me," he said, "and we'll go though everything, dubbing, film cutting. [Down at the/Dulwich] studio, they do everything there, they do everything there. Make films and everything." So I said, "Yes, lovely - Love to do it." So I used to go on the top of the 108 bus every day, with my Pop to Blackheath. And I started, I went into dubbing - had a go at that. Terribly old-fashioned equipment, Kalee 6's I think they were. I said to my dad, "I had better stuff than this in the theatres I worked in - it's terrible!" "Ah," he said, "Don't worry about that, that's dubbing, that's nothing to with us." He said, "It works, and you'll get used to doing all these things." I was very disappointed with Blackheath because I'd already had a basin full of modern equipment and high standards in cinemas and although I loved the studio stuff, I thought, "Well, I don't know whether this is for me at all." But anyway, eventually I ended up on the next floor, with my Pop and his men. He was in an office, of course. And he used to arrange for courses. In those days, the Post Office used to supply projectionists and equipment to a lot of the museums, like the Science Museum had its own theatre. And my

father was responsible for training staff there to put on a proper professional show and also to maintain the equipment, which I think was Phillips. Very high-tech. stuff, in 35mm. And the equipment was exchanged on a six-monthly basis. The two machines would come out and come back to GPO Film Unit for maintenance and another two machines would go in - all this sort of thing. And he ran the courses because when they were doing an exhibition, say in Glasgow, GPO were very interested to get people interested in telephones. They wanted them to buy telephones and learn how to use them... [End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Alan Lawson: All right, we're going.

David Robson: Right, well, so a lot of the maintenance that was done in that area, my father's team of engineers and also they were trained there to work mobile equipment. If they went to Glasgow for instance, the GPO Film Unit, my father would go there, set up the equipment and take the projection [indecipherable] with him, make sure that everything was okay, which meant you had to learn how to deal with local authorities, so far as seat battening was concerned, and the positioning of exits and all the fire regulations. Although it was all non-flam. Our theatre, we never used nitrate, even 35.

Alan Lawson: Really? And this - where are we in date now?

David Robson: Pardon?

Alan Lawson: Where are we in dates now?

David Robson: We're now '37.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: So it was all safety film we used to call it, safety film.

Alan Lawson: Was it 16 or 35?

David Robson: No it was all 35.

Alan Lawson: 35?

David Robson: Uh-huh. Awful stuff to work with, it buckled very, very - quite nasty and unpleasant. Not at all like the non-flam which came out after the war, which was much better. It was very difficult to make joins, they used to buckle. So training consisted of how to deal with local fire brigades and stuff like that. And then how to work out the sight-lines so that you didn't have people like that or down like that and you know. It was all laid down with legal - legally laid out. Also the amount of reflectants off a screen was laid down. Anyway, one day he said to me, "Look, I've got a machine coming in from the States. It's called a Bell and Howell, and it's 16mm. and it's a model 120." Now I must tell you about 16 mm. 16 millimetre in 1937 was a

rich man's toy. We looked upon it as an amateur - you wouldn't even consider it in cinemas, you know - "16 mil. - pah!" But Shell were using it already, they were making a lot of their documentaries and I think my father realised it might be going that way. So the film with sound arrived, and he said to me and another fellow, "I want you to strip the machine down. I want you to know all about it and how good it is, what the round flat is like, how reliable it is, what happens if you lose sound, how do can get round it," and all these sort of things. So we took it apart and the more we went into it, the more we realised it was a highly professional machine - never seen anything like it! Lubrication was by wick, on the gears, the sound head was the same as the RCA, film driven sound drum - unheard of in 16 mil! Perfection, absolutely. Spots[?] up to about - I think we measured up to about 4000 Hertz, which is for optical sound running at that speed, incredible! So we put it all back together again and he said he wanted the report on his desk, so we gave him a report on his desk. And he read it and he said, "It really is this good?" I said, "Yes. It's perfection, it's not just good. 750watt lamps, illumination and reflectants measurements. You can't go wrong with this machine it's bloody fantastic!" "Oh," said he, "Do you think it could replace 35 in mobile field?" I said, "Certainly, it could. And the other thing is of course, it's very easy on staff because you can load a whole programme on a 1600ft spool!" He was quite impressed about this, so he said, "Okay, I'll talk to management and we'll get another machine down so we've got a pair. And then we'll start running courses. You know the machine so I won't bother you with the technical sides, but you'll need to know how to deal with local authorities and all that sort of stuff. And we might be starting to run mobile courses for the Post Office." So, that's what happened. And one afternoon, during the lunch break, I was reading some technical papers - we really did have lunch breaks at the GPO - and I saw and advert in one of the technical papers. It was for wanting two projectionists, mobile projectionists, Shell Mex and PP, to go all over the country with an exhibition for Shell Oils. So I thought, "This sounds good. And I won't tell any of them, I won't tell the old man about it." [laughs] So I wrote off for a interview, and they wrote back and said, "Yes. Come to Shell Mex House on the Strand." Great big tall building, you know. So I went to this - overshadowed by this huge building, went upstairs to I don't know, the 18th floor, not the 18th floor but a high floor, 12th or something. And I was interviewed there by someone and I got the job with another man called McCord[?], who was to be in charge. And we were to have two Bell and Howell 16mm 120s. I mean I'd got the job because I knew the machine inside out and I was able to tell them anything they wanted to know about it. They were amazed, "Where did he come from?" You know [laughs]. I had these two machines, we had a projection room, a folding one made from plywood, with projection ports and everything, non-sync. We had everything there, a small cinema in fact, mobile. A really mobile cinema. We didn't have a van to start with. It was a wonderful job! The salary was thirty shillings a week, plus three pounds subsistence. That's four pounds ten! I mean, a Chief Projectionist in those days would be hard pushed to get four and a half pound a week. You could get five pounds a week if you worked in a Granada or something but - a boy of sixteen, you know, four pounds a week! I had so much money, I used to send home to my mother great big boxes of Black Magic. I didn't know what to do with it! You know.

Alan Lawson: How old were you now?

David Robson: I was sixteen now.

Alan Lawson: Wow! Really?

David Robson: Going on seventeen, yes.

Alan Lawson: God. What did your father say when you moved?

David Robson: He said - I told him and he said, "Well, that's a good sign, you're moving on. You're still in the business." He wasn't too happy about that [laughs]. But after all, I was a chip off the old block I suppose. I suppose he realised that there was no way of stopping me now. And TV was gone from my mind. I was so busy and I was so enjoying every minute of it. And I knew that once I'd started with Shell I'd have to give up going to night school. Which he pointed out. But I mean, the salary was absolutely marvellous and I was able to put into practice all that I'd learned at the GPO Film Unit regarding local authorities and all that stuff. We worked - we didn't get any days off at all. How we worked it was that we'd be about two weeks in the large places like Birmingham or Manchester, and a week perhaps in a small town like Ipwsich. And in Ipswich it would have been the Corn Exchange or something like that, but you were always in the centre of the town, generally the town hall or wherever. And the exhibition consisted of mostly stands advertising Shell Oil and showing how motor cars worked - four stroke engine, two stroke, the diesel, the steering mechanism and everything. But always with a bent on Shell Oils. And our films were - we used to open at 10 o'clock the exhibition, ten o'clock in the morning for schools. And all the technical schools would come and we'd run technical stuff, always with a little bit of a Shell image, you know a little bit of advertising - subliminal advertising. [laughs]

Alan Lawson: Well there was always the logo, wasn't it really.

David Robson: Yes, right. And there'd also be - not a cartoon but a comedy as well. And we were swamped with the technical people of tech. schools. They couldn't understand how it was you could have a full-size cinema, and everything worked - absolutely beautiful pictures. And they'd come round into this tiny projection room, and I'd have to give a demo! Show them what an exciter lamp was and [laughs] where the film went and how it all worked. And I think a lot of them, I think we must have sold a lot of Bell and Howell projectors. But I think a lot of them were buying them for technical use at techs. Because it was marvellous, for the very first time you could have a 16 mm. projector which was very high quality and ordinary people could operate it, didn't have to have any great knowledge.

Alan Lawson: Were you going into theatrical digs when you moved around?

David Robson: Yes, how we used to work it, we used to travel on a Sunday. We were given chits of where we were going to - travel chits. And as soon as you got there you got digs. I used to get 25 bob a week, you know, digs - all the rest of the money was ridiculous [laughs]. And while you were there you went to the venue to look and see where it was and you were off for the rest of the day on that Sunday. On Monday you started work, you went to the venue and you started to set up the theatre. And you arranged with local authorities, you arranged with the local electrician to put the dimmer back in to the proj. rooms, so that you had control of everything. And we didn't do the drapes, the drapes were done by somebody else, all draped out and exits and everything, done. And then the exhibition was ready for opening generally, late on Monday night. And the local paper people would come and interview you and say, "You've come to us to

do this exhibition, and what do you think about it," and all this sort of thing. We were always in the papers [laughs]. Anyway, on the Tuesday of the same week we opened for real. And we carried on from 10 o'clock in the morning 'til about - exhibitions were very late in those days, I think it would close about 10 o'clock at night, something like that.

Alan Lawson: Really?

David Robson: 9 or 10 at night, long day. Meal breaks weren't a problem because either McCord would run while I had a stroll round the town, had something to eat or I would do the same for him.

Alan Lawson: I see. You run as a team.

David Robson: Because we had two machines and we could change over. But we didn't need to because we had a whole programme on one spool, but we had two machines. And I once again, I used to eat in Woolworth's for sixpence [laughs]. Couldn't go wrong in those days! So then on Saturday night the exhibition would close and then the heavy crowd would get in to strip. And we'd strip everything down, we didn't have a van at first so we used to load everything in with them. And strangely enough, it was very strange before the war because a lot of the places we went to still had DC. We went to several town halls and they had DC, so we had to take with us a lot of conversion gear. Because the gear was 110 volts anyway, so we had to down-voltage that with a sort of motor generator arrangement. But we also had gear to - DC motors to generate AC 110 volts out. Quite a lot of equipment to lug around and hook up. And the question was just to keep it well away so that the noise couldn't be heard by the audience because it was fairly close, back of the box. And crowds of these people, they'd sit in the show and they'd come round. They'd find the box was open at the back you see. They would walk round the back and see the two machines there. That's what they'd come for. "Excuse me, would you mind answering some questions?" [Laughs] They'd come up and you'd get crowded out with people, they'd never seen - I suppose a free cinema was really something in those days. I mean there were lovely theatres all over the place that we went to but a free cinema, and one as good as that, well it needed investigating [laughs]. In the end Shell got so worried about its popularity because people were coming to the exhibition, coming to the cinema and they wouldn't go [round the exhibition] - the whole object was Shell Oils. So what they had to, we had commissionaires by this time, we had to fix up a clock saying, "The next performance will be at 1.30." And then the commissionaires would get them going round the exhibition [laughs]. Because otherwise they'd have been in show after show. So, I was there until a little while before the war started. Trying to think of any problems we had. I don't think we had any problems. But going back to that very first job again, just quickly back. I said to you it was very important to keep the floor spotlessly clean and one of the reasons for this, I'd never seen it done before, and it's very naughty really. I had to learn to lace up while the machine was running, but slowly, particularly at the sound head because it was - with old films it was possible to lose the loop at the sound head and you had to be able to recover the loop. You mustn't shut down or it's gone, otherwise you look for another job. So you had to keep going whatever happened and the system was to put your fingers in there and squeeze it, just quickly, it would form a loop and with the roller open you could feed it on quickly. So you had to learn how to do that and I got quite quick at that. Not that it ever happened, but I mean, they were insistent that you had to be very quick on the machine,

otherwise, you know, "You're not going to be here very long, Sonny, are you?" [laughs] Anyway, one of the things I used to do on Saturday night, very naughty, well not just Saturday, I might do it for Wednesday night as well, Wednesday night, Saturday night and Sunday night because there were three changes. When spooling off came, you know it's a long process, you've got to take the double off the machine, then take into the rewind room, find the halfway mark, chop, and then join on the end part the beginning of the leaders. Long process, and particularly if you don't quite know where the halfway is because you've got to feel for it, not allowed to touch the film, but feel. What they used to do there, they used to have an empty spool standing by the projector like that. And you had to hold the film just above the firetrap and as soon as you felt the join go through, you squeezed, the loop formed, opened the door quickly like that, tore the film across at the splice, another spool went on, you took it straight up and threaded... you took it straight away and spooled it off! It was as quick as that! But very naughty, but of course - if you weren't very careful. I mean the risks were terrible because you're forming a loop at 90 feet a minute. And it goes like that and you've got to keep it absolutely straight and not... Put a spool on and you'd feed it, let it take it up take it back on. It's all done in about 10 seconds. Never failed. But I mean the chances of getting it on the floor meant that it had to be spotless, otherwise you'd get scratches and muck getting on the film. So that's what they used to do there. And this second was the guy who was so quick, so brilliant, absolutely marvellous bloke. Okay?

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: Right, well, going back to Shell Mex. I was beginning to be aware that Hitler was on the rampage. At Dulwich for instance we did, on Wednesday afternoon we did the study of Europe, and we had some German there, one of them was called Schwarzmann. Horrible bloke, but he turned out to be a Nazi in the end. But anyway, I was very much aware of what was happening and at nights you used to see - this was '39 I suppose, we used to see a lot of searchlights so obviously people were getting ready. And it wasn't until I had to go to - with Shell Mix - we had to go to SS Jaguar, the company that make the cars, to do a small show there. Shell wanted us to do a show there. And they said, "Look we're going to show you things but you mustn't talk about them." So, on one assembly line was the SS Jaguar being built, without any chrome. It had got to the stage where they couldn't put chrome on cars, it was very basic. And on the other assembly line they were building military vehicles. So that was the first real indication I had and unemployment - there was none. There wasn't a beggar to be seen. Everyone was working, every factory that could be pressed into use. We'd had the famous letter from Chamberlain, you know, "No war in our time," but that was the warning to get ready quick. We only had a year to do it. And everything was pressed into service. As I say, every woman, everybody was working, it was an incredible thing to see. Bus fares went up to a penny ha'penny instead of a penny. But apart from that, there was lots and lots and lots of money about - lots of it. People were bringing home money for the first time. Factories were churning away. A few months before the war started I thought - I'd learned this lesson about you mustn't be made redundant or get the sack or anything, that was built in. So I gave my notice in, I thought, "I'll just get back home because it's going to happen and there'll be no advertising." So my father was busy digging a hole, putting the Anderson shelter in. They'd moved then to [?sounds like 'shirley corton?]. And so I helped him do that, and I thought to myself, "I'll just get a temporary job until I see what's going to happen when the war starts, it could be anything." So I went back to the Rialto for a short while. It was fun getting back onto 35mm again, onto highly professional stuff

again [laughs]. And I became very bored there, the hoi polloi of Upper Norwood used to have their cream teas in the restaurant, I thought, "This is not for me. There's a war going on, I really ought to be doing something better than that." So I saw an advert for a firm in Guildford called CP Projections. And they supplied staff and equipment to the RAF stations. Because there was a problem at the beginning of the war, when people were taken away from home for the first time - terribly homesick. And the problem was that you had to keep them as happy as you could because when you were called up, first of all, you went into a station and you were confined while you had your shots and all the rest of it. And it used to affect the morale terribly. So they wanted to sort that business out and what they did they had these cinemas everywhere. So I went to this company in Guildford and I said, "I'd like to do a bit more for the war effort." I tried to volunteer and the local - I wanted to get into the tank corps and they said, "No, we call you. We can't take you, you're too young in any case. When the time comes we'll have you I expect." Which they did. [Laughs.] So I thought, "I'll do my bit this way." So I was posted first of all to Padgate RAF station, which had its own cinema built-in, run by CP Projections.

Alan Lawson: How's that? Whereabouts is that?

David Robson: Padgate is in Warwickshire. And it was the main reception camp for the RAF. When you go there you get fitted out, kitted out, injections. And we had to live with the lads, we were basically RAF already, but without uniform. And I was there for about a month. It was really dreadful, some of the guys were almost in tears. They'd never been away before. I was used to it, I'd just come from Shell Mex. I'd only get home on leave about once every three or four months, it didn't worry me. [laughs] But for them it was the end of the world. So I then got a posting from the company. They said, "Well okay, you seem to be doing okay." I was posted to Weston, Weston super Mare. I thought, "How marvellous!" I was there with Shell Mex so I knew the town. [laughs] So I was at the RAF station at Weston, just outside of Weston. And there it was the last time I saw any more 16 mm. Once again it was two Bell and Howell 120s. It was fantastic! We had no projector equipment at all. I had to build the theatre everyday in the gym, out of a pyramid of tables, like this but much more flimsy. And I had to climb up the tables and I had the two projectors on the top and I used to run the speaker cables out and set the screen up and I used to do this every day. And we ran things like 'Alf's Button Afloat' and stuff like that, that you'd get on 16 mm. But we were packed out every day because people weren't allowed to go into the town. And while I was there the war started properly. London was bombed and Birmingham. And I wondered how the folks were getting on and I began to feel a bit peculiar. And then I had - a new posting came through. I was to go to Yatesbury RAF station which is in Wiltshire, it's near Calne, Calne is the nearest. It's lovely, [DR imitates rural accent] "Ooh ar it's a lovely place in the summer, ooh ar." It was an absolute disaster. It was one of these places, miles away from anywhere, lovely country, beautiful, very, very deserted and Calne was some distance away, it's a sausage place, you know Harris Sausages and stuff like that.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: One day, when we were there, we had a very heavy snow storm. It didn't stop, it went on and on and on all day and all night and into the next morning. You couldn't walk, it was up to your thighs. And most of the chaps on jankers[?] in the guard room were on shovels, trying to keep the place open. The first thing that happened was that overnight there was a sudden -

there was a temporary thaw and then suddenly a freeze, and it got right down to God knows - minus ten, minus fifteen or whatever and it brought all the telegraph poles, everything, down on the main road to Calne. So, no transport could get through to us, nothing at all. That was the first disaster. The second disaster was we lost all water. It froze. So in the mornings you had to go round and break all the icicles off the huts, melt it down, you know. We had pot-bellied stoves in the huts. You had to melt it down in the huts, make tea, and then if there was any water left you could shave with it. It was terrible. The NAFFI was closed, there was no food. The next thing that happened was we lost power, the power cables came down. And the third disaster was that all the motor transport was frozen, the radiators, the [?indecipherable] blocks, nothing worked at all. We were completely isolated, the only thing that worked was a small diesel generator which was used to supply the sick bay. And people were going down with 'flu, it was dreadful. There were some questions in Parliament about it, "Why is the station still open? Why are people dying? What's gone wrong in Yatesbury?" Anyway, I was spared, I didn't go down. But there was nothing much I could do, it was a terrible bore. You'd huddle together in the huts, the old pot-belly - no food, no water coming in, nothing at all. So eventually the Camp Commander said, "Right. I've had enough. We can shut the station, close the station down. Those that can get back, I'll give chits so that you can travel and get to the nearest rail head as best you can. Go home." And so we did. And I went home, back to [sound like Shirley Gordon?]. It was the first year of the war and right in the middle of the air-raids and things. And I was so dead-beat and worn out from this thing at Yatesbury that my parents said, "Look, you'll have to sleep with us in the shelter as it's pretty bad at nights." I said, "I'm not sleeping anywhere except on my bed, in a bedroom. I don't care what happens!" And I didn't, I slept right through it. And we had a - nearby, on the railway was a mobile ack-ack gun. And it used to make hell of a bloody din, it used to fire away like - it didn't used to hit anything, but it used to fire away. So you could never tell whether a bomb was coming down or not. And next morning, this first night, I mean I had the Stirrup pump at the side of me and you know, a bucket of sand, all the usual stuff. I just went off to sleep and went unconscious until about 9 o'clock the next morning and I pulled the curtains back and had a look. The house opposite was okay but the house beyond that was not there. There must have been a hit sometime during the night. But you couldn't tell because the ack-ack noise was dreadful. And it was dangerous to go out. I mean there was a garden and the road, we were in a cul-de-sac there - was littered with shrapnel, great big chunks of it. If it were to hit you it would kill you. Oh terrible. More damage done with shrapnel...[laughs] Anyway, I was stuck there for two weeks, I was waiting for a posting. And what I used to do - these were the days when the bombing was it its height and I used to go around and help people move their furniture because the local authority had provided places for people to go to. And you'd come to a house with a wall missing and a bed hanging, you know, like this and the poor woman, her husband's probably in the services, you know, go in and help with furniture, do anything to help. And people did in those days. They don't now, but they did. And it was very much nicer, you know. So after a couple of weeks of that I was pleased to get away in a way, I suppose! [laughs] I got a posting to Hednesford which is in the West Midlands. It's not far from Birmingham, I suppose, near Rugeley. It's right high up - all RAF stations are very isolated, terrible places to get to. And this was a terrible, depressing place, it was a coal mine area and even the ground was black, you know. And I managed to - I discovered the Padre was about to sell his - he had an Austin Chummy, and so I bought that for 25 quid I think or something like that. So I was able to go home on leave - drive home. And that was another thing I didn't mention, when I was with Shell Mex I learned to drive there because there you had to pass not only the local driving test, but

their driving test. And nearly all their vehicles were crash gearbox so you learned how to double declutch. I used to keep driving round the car park while McCord was doing the next programme, and the guys would be only too happy to show you, and learning how to double declutch. I still do it sometimes because if you double declutch with a synchro-gearbox, you can push it with your little finger. Beautiful, no wear at all. So I used to drive backwards and forwards until the petrol situation became impossible, and then I got - I then made arrangements to get a little petrol, which I mixed with paraffin. And I was able to get back with very black smoke - dare not stop. We'd drive through London with this smoke coming out the back [laughs]. Well I used to get there, used to get back. Until the petrol situation stopped altogether, then I had to leave it at home and go back by train. But for a little while I had the luxury of being able to drive back. I will never forget one day, I was driving back home on leave, and I heard a squeaking sound. I thought, "Oh that's funny, I haven't heard that before." And in those days, to economise, when you came to a hill, you went into neutral, clutch out and let the car run down, then you'd pick it up again afterwards. Not supposed to do that now but I mean in those days you could save a lot of petrol by doing that. And I did this and I heard this squeaking sound and I looked at the speedo. expecting to see it at about 45/50-ish, you know. And it wasn't, it was slowing up, it was actually dropping back to 40. I said, "Oh that's funny on a hill." Anyway, I suddenly saw some people wave, going like that, I thought "I don't suppose any motorcars nowadays, they're waving to me." So I waved back. It wasn't 'til I got home that I realised what they were waving for. That's right, I was driving along, and I saw these people waving and suddenly I saw a wheel going past me, because the car was slowing down for some reason or other. And it hadn't occurred to me that it was anything to do with me. I thought it was just a joke, some boys were playing games, you know. It wasn't until I got home that I worked out it was the spare wheel. And that squeaking noise - the nuts has undone and the wheel had fallen off and was coming along behind me [laughs]. The funny things that do happen to you. So how far did I get?

Alan Lawson: You're at Hednesford.

David Robson: Oh yes, yes, Hednesford. Well Hednesford was the first theatre I had of my own. They said, "Run it as you want." And I thought, "I'm going to make it just like the West End. It's going to be very high standard indeed." And I found at Hednesford there were a lot of people, it was a headquarters station, were a lot of people there that had been in the business. And if they smelt pear drops or the smell from a carbon arc, or could hear a projector running, it turned them on. And the only way you could get to the projection room was to climb up ladders on the side of the building. There was no stairs or anything like that. They were wooden buildings, beautiful inside, lovely furnishings and things. So I found lots of people who were quite interested, so I employed them, by giving them free tickets, to do things. Like for instance, the curtains weren't motorised, but they were lovely, red velvet, beautiful curtains, and a lovely shaped stage, a proscenium arch. So I rigged up a telephone so that as soon as the closing cue dot appeared, I'd buzz, and they'd line to close it. And we had beautiful presentation, just like the West End, it was great! I also had somebody who looked after the crowds because we'd have queues all round the theatre and it was important to keep them in twos. The PSI looked after ticket sales. I was responsible for the starting and finishing numbers and I had to do a lot of paperwork you had to send back to Guildford, like what was the weather like, you know. How was the film received? And all that. Three changes a week but still hard work. And all we had was slit trenches to get

into. If the Germans had known, we would have been wiped out because they were wooden huts...

Alan Lawson: And how high was the projection box over the top?

David Robson: The projection box was - we had very ancient equipment, it was Gaumont Chronos.

Alan Lawson: Blimey!

David Robson: They were originally designed for the silent days, with British Acoustic pull-through sound heads on the bottom. Lovely. That part of it was lovely. And a 25 amp - so low-intensity - arcs and the front shutter machine. It was an unusual machine because the cross-boxes were grease-packed. I'd never come across it before and the noise, it was like a machine gun when the projectors were running. We used to pack the things every day with grease and it pushed them out all over the place, but it was lovely, a rock steady a picture - beautiful. And you had to lubricate every day because it's all open. Just get the oil can, all the bearings were there, and just stand back when you ran the machine - it was sssshhhh, all over the place [laughs]. But it was - secondary lighting was an ordinary 12 volt car battery, which we had to keep fully charged so that the other lights in the exit boxes were always on. So that was it. While I was there, I mean, I was responsible I had the station bike - literally a station bike in blue and we used to get all the posters done. And I had arrangements with the Padre and other people at the station, the guard room and so forth, that they'd let me put our playbills up in there. And it was a bit funny in a way, it was an insight into how a cinema could be run by projection and managerial staff all combined together. You were looking at all aspects of it really. But I soon got rather fed up with it really, began to work well but rather too routinely. And Hednesford was such a bore of a place. While I was there, I had my call-up papers. So I went for my medical and I though to myself, "At last, now I can get into the tanks." I was dying to get into the Tank Corps! So I went through the medical and the doctor at the end, he was a Scottish doctor, he said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to go into the Tank Corps." He said, "The Tank Corps, Laddie? You wouldn't last five minutes in there!" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I had to give you grade two." I said, "You mean you're failing me?" He said, "Yes." He said, "What are you doing now?" So I told him. He said, "That's the job for you. Carry on doing that. Much more important for the war effort than being sick. With your reputation, having had pleurisy. We wouldn't take a chance on it." So I was very disappointed. I'd had a blow and I couldn't recover from it and I felt very disappointed. Anyway I wrote to the company and said that I'd failed and they were pleased [laughs], they didn't have to replace me. So I carried on there for a little bit longer. And then I wrote again and I said, "Look, everything's going fine - no problems. But I would like a posting abroad, is it possible?" Things were beginning to happen in North Africa. So they wrote back and said, "No, you can't be abroad." So, when they realised I was getting a bit uppy about the whole business they gave me another posting, they said, "We'll send you to another station." So I was posted to Bridgenorth in Shropshire, beautiful place Bridgenorth.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: And it had the first of the modern RAF stations - brick-built. It was a WAAF-ery, so we were kind of billeted outside. And - beautiful cinema, I had never seen anything like it. Tiny little cinema. They said the projection equipment had come from Buckingham Palace, I don't believe that but it was beautiful. It was a complete Kalee set, of the sort that was designed - the whole lot was together, integral, was the first start of the new equipment which came out after the war, which was all in one piece. So the actual projector head and sound head were one and the lamp was also designed to work with them, which was sort of 25 amp or something like that. But the theatre was beautiful. And of course the lovely scenty smell because it was all women, you know! And we had automatic lighting and automatic dimmers on stage and auditorium lighting. It was beautiful, absolutely lovely theatre, really great, absolutely great. Which kept me happy for a little while. But I had that feeling that I wanted to get going again. So I wrote to them and said, "It's lovely here but I'm still stuck. I'd like to go abroad." And the war effort had changed now. We didn't have this business of people being sad and we were losing the war on all fronts, that had changed. We were making big moves in North Africa, halfway through the war...

Alan Lawson: This is what...'42?

David Robson: '42.

Alan Lawson: '42 yes.

David Robson: Halfway through the war and so the business of morale boosting didn't really come into it because people were coming now into the services and there was a different view about the war for the first time. And you could feel it everywhere, you know, it's quite happy. Anyway, they wrote back and said, "No." And I thought, "What am I going to do?" And then, this funny thing happened, the same thing that happened at Yatesbury, we had a heavy storm one day, with snow. The RAF station was right on the top of a hill, you had to go down the hill to Bridgenorth. Bridgenorth is a town on two levels, there's a little funicular railway which takes you up to the town, or it's a long way round, you know. Have you been there?

Alan Lawson: No.

David Robson: Beautiful, lovely little place. The Commander said, "What are we going to do, we've run out of film." I said, "We can't keep showing the same stuff, that's it. When it's spooled off, finished." So he said, "Well we've got to keep the station open somehow. We can't get anybody out or in." There was a tank, which had been abandoned - a tank! I couldn't believe it, I wanted to get into tanks anyway. A good opportunity to have a look round! I said, "All we can do is, if you can make some wood available, with two of us, we'll build a sledge and we'll load our films onto it and take it down to Bridgenorth Station and see if there's been a delivery of film." Because telephones, everything was down. So we loaded this load on, and we sledged all the way down, two of us, you know like you see in 'Scott of the Antarctic', with a big load of stuff on the back. We got down there in one piece and went to the station. And the station master said, "No trains." I said, "Well have the films been delivered?" No films. So we thought, "Ahhh." Then I remembered seeing, in the high town, a cinema called a Danilo. There were lots of Danilos in that part of the world. It's a circuit - nice, modern theatres. So I said to this guy that

was with me, "Let's see of we can haul this lot up to the high town. I've got an idea. We'll see if we can do a swap." So we hauled this bloody lot up, and the road goes right the way round, it's a very gradual incline, because the railway wasn't working, and pulled this lot up into the high street. Everybody was looking at us in all the thick snow.[laughs] It's one of these high streets with a little island in the middle and a little building in it - lovely, beautiful little place, Shropshire. And I went to the Danilo and spoke to the manager. And I said, "I'm from the RAF station. We've run out of film." And he said, "So have we." He said, "We've got no films, so no programmes tonight." I said, "I've been down to the station, there's nothing happening. So he said, "I know, we're in a mess aren't we?" I said, "Yes. But I've got an idea." He said, "What's that?" I said, "Suppose we give you our film. Would you be prepared to do a swap?" So he thought about this for a moment. I mean, ours were ancient things [laughs]. So he said, "That's a good idea. I'll go along with that." So he gave us a double-feature programme, which they'd been running, and an up-to-date newsreel. And we unloaded all these ancient old films. And he was so happy because he could open the theatre you see. And so could we. So we did this...

[End of Tape 1, Side 2] [Tape 2, Side 3]

Alan Lawson: Dave Robson, side 3. Right Dave, you can't remember the names of the films?

David Robson: No, we were on third run at the RAF stations and the news was about three weeks old at least. And the double feature, or the feature and the second feature rather that I got from Danilo, I can't remember what they were. But they were what you might say first run, because they were lovely theatres, the Danilos. Anyway, he was quite happy about this arrangement, so we dumped the stuff in the foyer and his projectionists were rubbing their hands, you know, "We've got..." And so had we! So we loaded the double-feature onto the sledge and, as I said, we were in the upper town, which meant that we could sledge down...

Alan Lawson: Coast down [laughs].

David Robson: ...this road and we nearly lost control of the whole bleeding lot! [laughs]. One was actually sitting on the boxes and the other with the - it all worked, it all held together until we got to the bottom and then we knew we'd have to slog all the way back. And the first performance was 7 o'clock and I'd promised the camp Commander we'd have something if possible, not thinking we'd have to do this Danilo bit. I thought it was just a film stuck at the station. So we started hauling back, and it was very tough. And we passed this tank, which is still broken down, you know! You can't even move a tank, and we're moving a load of film! And they must have thought we were mad I think. Anyway, got to the station and there was about half an hour to spare, half-past six, it's dark, and reported to the camp Commander we'd got these double-feature films. He said, "Well in that case, only do one feature at a time. Don't have a double programme." So I had to spool up at enormous speed because we were due in half an hour. But it was lovely new stock, you know that film is very tactile, it's a lovely feeling. So I had the first reels doubled by 7 o'clock, we were on screen. That was the bit of excitement we had at Bridgenorth. So anyway, it seemed to me that the company weren't going to move me, and I didn't see the point. I mean, my reason for being with the company was because it was helping the war effort and I couldn't see now that it was. It was a job that most people could do, you know. So I thought, with the war half-way through, the best place I could be, would be in town.

I'd know what was going on and I could perhaps get myself a good job. And I'd been in a position for television when it started. So, I came back to town, gave my notice in, came back to town and I went to Odeon's first of all for an interview. And they welcomed me with open arms, as if I was the King or something. They said, "Love to have you. We'd like to give you a show of your own. But where you live, it's no use, you can't use your car, you've got to be living locally. And the nearest theatre we can give you is the Odeon, Penge." So I went along for an interview at the Odeon, Penge. And the Chief Projectionist there was a chap called Alf Stagg. And once again it was a lovely set-up, lovely crew, lovely staff - beautiful theatre, a lot like a miniature Odeon Leicester Square - same cove lighting and everything. And I was there as second. And did more or less, I kind of modelled myself on the first second that I'd worked with at the Ritz. I loved every minute of it. They were nicely built theatres. The only, sort of, thing I didn't like about Odeons was the equipment, it was all BT-H [British Thompson-Hudson]. The story was that when Oscar Deutsch decided to build cinemas, he said to whoever, "If you can make some equipment I'll always use that in my cinemas." And it so happened that this company came along, based at Derby, they were famous for making motors and things like that really - BT-H. And their projectors were like that - massive. Chain-driven would you believe, in oil baths. Really - adequate, but nothing special. I mean, after the beautiful American equipment I was used to [laughs]. But anyway, you got used to it.

Alan Lawson: What were you earning by this time?

David Robson: I can't remember what I was earning - I haven't a clue! [AL laughs.]

Alan Lawson: Anyway, sorry.

David Robson: So, while I was there, I decided to join the Home Guard. I thought I'd do my little bit yet. So I joined the Home Guard and we used to go on long route marches and I mean it was a bit of a joke. Had I known what was in store, I would never have joined because it wasn't until after the war that I discovered that the plan was that the Home Guard would hold the outer ring so long as they could - they'd be wiped out - to give the Army a chance to get back into London and form a route. I saw the plans and everything, it was... you know.

Alan Lawson: You were [indecipherable].

David Robson: Absolutely. The ammunition we had, we had things called sticky bombs, have you ever seen one of those?

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: Stick it on the side of a tank. And we had - we were issued with Canadian rifles, Garrard, beautiful rifle, but no ammunition. It was - Standard ammunition was 303, but these were breached for 300. And we used to have about one bullet per person, one round [laughs]. The duty was mostly at nights. You had to stand duty at the local stations like Penge East Station, railway station, stuff like that. And so on Monday morning, which was make-up morning, I used to get back to the theatre about half past six and start spooling up for the programme. I was doing about 72 hours a week, I must have done. Terrible really when you

come to think of it. But it was wartime, and you did those sort of things. I learned a lot more this time, they had a tremendous plant there, they had air washers which I've never dealt with before. You know, the air coming in was washed. And everything was absolutely spotless, they had a parquet floor, highly polished parquet floor. And it was wonderful. I learned a lot about boilers too - we used to - at the end of spring, and the boilers were shut down, we used to have to crawl in and scrape any of the soot up inside and make sure that everything was ready for the start of the autumn. Oh, projectionists had to do all sorts of dirty jobs like that, but it was all part of it. But we weren't mending seats or anything like that, which is what caused that other strike I was telling you about. But you got a much wider field. I learned about motorised valves in heating and ventilating systems, all sorts of things like that. There was a terrible lot of paperwork with Odeons, you used to have to do an inventory fairly regularly, which meant everything - every switch, every lamp and everything - loads of it! Used to go back to head office. Anyway, the sad moment came when Oscar Deutsch died. And for a week the theatre was covered in black ribbon and we had a black board on the screen and all the rest of it. And we soon knew that we were in the hands of somebody who knew nothing about the theatre business at all - J. Arthur - dreadful! Absolute rubbish we had to run, to the end, you know. And nobody came to the theatre, I think, at all. I was trying to name one of the films, typical of the time. It was on the box recently. I think it ought to have been burnt, I don't think it should ever be allowed to be on release. It was called 'The Great Mr Handel', and it was typical of his sort of thing, his kind of semi-religious thing - all good stuff - but not entertainment really.

Alan Lawson: I can tell you a nice story about that.

David Robson: What? 'The Great Mr Handel'?

Alan Lawson: Yes. When I was at Pinewood during the war, I think it was every Friday night we had one of the latest films shown in the theatre. And 'The Great Mr Handel' was one and towards the end I think somebody is saying, "And what do you think Mr Handel died of?" Now John Sherman who was in the RAF, in his usual loud voice, "Boredom, sheer boredom."

David Robson: So true [laughs]. Anyway, we were very worried about this because we could see that he wasn't a showman at all, I mean he was just a bum - lots of money but a bum. And then one day - we were still quite happy because we were completely - it was nothing to do with us, that's management stuff you know, get on with it. We had our lovely theatre and we looked after it and wonderful staff and everything was cosy. And I was just going up the iron stairs once to the projection room and I heard a voice call me down. And it was the area supervisor who would come round about once a month to look at the theatre, look at the projection room, see if everything was all right, if you wanted anything, if you wanted to know about anything. He is the boss, you know. And he said, "Here Dave, I've been looking at your papers at head office when you applied. We did promise to give you a theatre of your own but there's nothing going. How would you like to go to the Odeon in Leicester Square?" I said, "The Odeon Leicester Square!" I mean you just couldn't get any higher! That was it, that was the limit! I said, "You must be joking!" He said, "No, they want seconds-in-chiefs there. You'll get on well." I said, "I know, but the Odeon Leicester Square - are you sure about this?" He said, "I've arranged for you to have an interview with Ron Parnell." I nearly had a fit! So anyway, I said, "Yes." What else could I say? He said, "You go up by train everyday in the West End, you get a special ticket, a shift workers

ticket, it won't cost you very much money. It'll be a big upgrade in salary for you. You know the risks but you've been in the business long enough to know all about that." So I said, "Yes." This is fantastic. So I went up for the interview, and I must tell you about this. I went to Leicester Square tube station and on the way up the escalator, on both sides, were posters saying, "The Odeon makes the Square look round." And I thought, "What an opening!" [Laughs.] I couldn't go wrong. I then got out the tube station, it was all hoarding and it's a beautiful theatre with its - you know the tall tower is a well - did you know that? We had lovely soft water during the war there. Anyway, I went there and I was interviewed by 'Flicker' Joe, they used to call him - Parnell, Ron Parnell, Chief Projectionist. Not the Chief in the sense that we know Chiefs, he was really a liaison type person. He'd liase between us and the management and also when we were doing stage shows, nearly every show was a gala performance, so we had stage shows. And the staff didn't think much of him. I admired him actually. They said he was a terrible projectionist, "Don't let him get anywhere near a projector!" [laughs] But anyway, I got the job and it was the most wonderful job imaginable because we had two big shifts there. And on our shift we had a girl who was a marvellous cook and we used to let her go out to Berwick Market and get all - I mean it was rationing days - get all the lovely meat and stuff. And she'd cook all day. The system we had there was one person ran a complete performance. Once you get onto the feature, that was it, you did your own show. So it was rather nice to think that once again you were actually performing, because this is what a projectionist likes to do, likes to perform, doesn't want to press buttons and do all that sort of thing, he actually wants to be there to focus, sound. And we had very elaborate cue sheets there, we had control of sound in the theatre and Parnell used to follow the trial runs and the press shows, which went on for ages, before we actually got a copy, and so we had very elaborate, typed cue sheets. The reason was of course, as you know with optical sound, you were limited to a dynamic range, rather like tape, you're limited.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: So if you have a gunshot, you can't really have the right level. So we had all these very big cues to work - you know stick it up to about 8 dbs just for the shot and bring it down again quickly, you know. And we also there, they had a very clever arrangement, it had - in the theatre they had microphones so that if you were running a comedy, the trouble is very often, lines get lost because of laughter. We got over that because we'd listen to titter in the audience and if there was a swell of sound, we'd just increase by about 40 bs so that the next line wasn't thrown away. And we could do all the tings like that, it was a wonderful theatre.

Alan Lawson: This man, Parnell - related to Val Parnell?

David Robson: No, no, no relation. So anyway, the arrangement there was, he had a habit of looking at you to see what you were most interested in. And he put two and two together and he thought - sound, I'd be very interested in because I could pick out flutter and stuff like that very quickly. And on the equipment we had there, which was again BT-H, but a more up to date BT-H, the sound drum wasn't film-driven, it was driven by a magnetic flywheel, which was again driven by a pulley from the main gearing. And you had to arrange everything so the top and bottom loop above the drum was exactly the same size. If it wasn't it would slither round the drum and you'd get bottomed[?]. I was red hot on this as soon as I saw how it worked, I...we had three machines there. I got cracking on that and he must have noticed. And he said, "I'm going to

put you in charge of sound." And he was that kind of guy, he knew what you could do, so I had microphones, I had everything to do with sound. And the amplifiers, the BT-H amplifiers, they were brilliant. We had a thing called expansion. These were the days of 78 rpm, which we had to synchronise with the organ to get the pitch right, to play music with the organ. And with 78, rather like optical recording, you were limited again to dynamic range and you could go to expansion. With expansion it meant that quiet passages were quiet but loud passages would blow the roof off. So, you could do marvellous things with even a 78 rpm record. I've never seen expansion since. I don't know why it's not used, I think it's a marvellous idea. Not so much now because we don't need it, but in those days it was a great thing to have. And most of the crews there, most of the staff did two shifts, all specialise in things, for instance there was a guy who was mad about arcs and so he painted the inside of all arc the lamps with aluminium paint and everything was beautifully polished and everything. And others were interested in spots and we had a very advance lighting system there, which, for the time that theatre was built, you know, it was opened in 1937 I think - very, very advanced indeed. Instead of great banks of resistors and levers and things, it was all done entirely with buttons. What it was, you had large transformers which carried the AC to wherever you wanted it, the dimmers, the stage lighting, whatever. And these were controlled by a very small amount of DC on a separate winding, and the DC was supplied by just ordinary, sort of full-wave rectifiers that you find in a radio station, banks of them. And so all you had to do was control the amount of DC going through this primary winding to control the amount of AC current. And it was beautiful, you could do anything, you could mix anything with anything, beautiful lighting. I'll show you some pictures of it later on. So that was that. And we had the mercury[?] arc rectifiers again. The organ was a five manual Christie [N. B. Actually a Compton]. And to give you an example of the old Odeon style - we were talking about the early '30s where if you made a mistake you were sacked and that was it. With Odeons it was slightly different, it was slacker. I don't say it was in the West End, but maybe in Penge, if somebody had made a mistake and they were willing to agree that they had made a mistake and apologised, the chances are they would overlook it, provided it didn't happen again. There wasn't this business of having to go down to the manager and hand your notice in [laughs]. And the Odeon Leicester Square was very similar in different ways. We had a wonderful manager there called Bill Thornton, called Father...

Alan Lawson: I knew him.

David Robson: Do you know Bill?

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: He's a wonderful man. And so I expect you know some of things I'm going to tell you next. But anyway, while I was there we had...the organist in those days was a Scots called...

Alan Lawson: Was it Sandy McPherson?

David Robson: No, it was - Jimmy Bell, Jimmy Bell. And we used to do a broadcast from there once a week for the BBC. And one day, in the mornings this was - the cleaners had to be dead quiet during the half an hour transmission - and there was a cue system. They knew exactly what

the last number was and they'd give him the warning and he'd do his play-out and et cetera. So I wasn't there but I heard what had happened. He'd played all his usual pieces, he seemed to be in good form and he'd got to the last number, which was 'It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow', the last number, a popular tune at the time. And they faded him out, but he didn't stop playing. It was completely tuneless, terrible. So somebody went down to the console and he was over the keyboard, slumped over, he was dead, had a heart attack. But he'd been a showman, he'd kept it going until the end. And, typical of Odeons in those days, the whole of the Square was shut down for the funeral. The theatre was closed, we all went to Golders Green. And when anybody was lost like that at the Odeon Leicester Square, it was a big do. It was wonderful, the family feeling there was absolutely tremendous. Never been to a theatre like it. Davis hadn't arrived then, it was different altogether. As soon as John Davis came on the scene he started sacking people. But up to that time, they still had a bit of the old Odeon expertise around, the feeling of a family do, you know Oscar Deutsch type of thing. They were long hours. We used to do - when we shut down the audience about 11 o'clock at night, we'd start getting stuff in from the labs, from the next epic. And we'd do screen tests for reflectance tests and sound. And we'd run it as singles. There was no transport home, you had to find your own way home, no taxis or anything like that, it was dreadful. I lived in Beckenham then, I used to have to take an all-night tram to a place called Peter Pan's Pool[?] on the way to Bromley. Then walk the rest! Took hours! But it was such a lovely job, it didn't appear to be too much of a problem. I used to do that, no problem. Couldn't do it now but...

Alan Lawson: And date now, where are we now?

David Robson: Well date, we're '42-ish, '42/'43-ish, something round about then. So I carried on at the Square for a long time, or it seemed to be. Stage shows, everybody used to wear tuxedos if there was royalty in the place. I didn't - only if you went to the theatre did you have to. Parnell used to come in looking like a penguin, you know. We had some marvellous people there. Jimmy Bell was one of these wonderful Scottish type fellows. When you clocked in at the Odeon Leicester Square you had to come in through the stage door and clock in on the clock. And you weren't allowed to go through the theatre while the audience was on. You had to wait for the break. And all the usherettes would be queued up ready to go in on the change of shift and I would be waiting to go in to the proj. room. If I didn't want to go that way I had to go round to the main entrance and up. And he'd tell lovely jokes, naughty jokes to all the girls. He was a lovely man, was Jimmy Bell, James Bell I should say. Great guy, we missed him enormously when he died. Wonderful sense of humour. And there were a lot of lovely people there, the Chief Engineer, Jack Gregory. I'll tell you about Jack Gregory, oh God! it was typical of what was about to happen. We were doing a Royal Command Performance thing and always at the end of Royal Command the trumpeters come onto the stage apron to - on top of the closing captions - and the stage apron comes up with the organ, and it plays the national anthem. Well first of all there's the heralds, and then the national anthem. And the arrangement was you closed the screen tabs and then followed by the main tabs, then this whole process would happen. And only one main tab came across. And who should be in the audience but John Davis. He just exploded. "Fetch him here to me right away." So Jack Gregory went. "Go on, go on, get out. I don't want to see you again - go!" Fired, that was it. I mean, Jack was a super bloke and he'd been there since the beginning, he knew the theatre inside out. We were so upset about this. It was the first time we'd had any dealing with John Davis, we'd heard rumours about the guy, but, no we often talk

about it at these meetings. And I can tell you, the fact was, he was a bastard with a capital 'B' [laughs], no doubt about that! You'd better not keep that on the tape. Anyway, there were meetings with Bill Thornton, Bill Thornton was still there. And we said, "Jack's one of the boys, it's not his fault." We found out what had happened. What had happened was - you know these heavy tabs are controlled by bobbins and the leading bobbin is usually attached to webbing. So the leading bobbin comes across, followed by the others. It's practice, I believe, I hadn't come across that before, I didn't notice that, when I first started in the business, but I was told later that the safest way with heavy tabs is to lock two of the bobbins together so that if the webbing goes you're not going to lose the tab. Because it's very common, you often see it happen. And he hadn't done that, so we just had the main tabs, with the single bobbins, and the web had just gone. So everything had gone across except the one tab. Anyway, Jack didn't go, we managed to - I don't know what Bill Thornton did, but he cooled down, I don't know how. But he was a lost man afterwards, the chap was never the same. All the work he'd put into the theatre suddenly came to nothing when a bloke can come and just say, "You're fired," you know. Terrible thing to do - wasn't his fault. And he had a wonderful crew of engineers, they were all great guys. At Leicester Square you didn't have - the projectionists had nothing to do with the engineering side, that was all lamping up and all that sort of thing was done by separate - by Jack's staff. They expected you to do a perfect show, no excuses, so that's what you did, nothing else but project, make sure everything, the maintenance was perfect and everything like that. Machines were looked after and everything, it was spotless, highly polished. The floor was highly polished, I'll show you some pictures of the Square later on. Anyway, while I was there, Ron Parnell came to me one day and he said, "How would you like a sabbatical?" So I said, "Where?" So he said, "I want you to go to a theatre which Rank has just taken over. It's at Marble Arch. It's called the Regal, Marble Arch." I said, "Oh." He said, "It's closed, but Rank are thinking of reopening it. We've already put some equipment in and I want you, if you'd like to, it makes a change from routine projection, to go there with another man, check out the equipment and give us a word back on what you think about it all." So I thought, "What a lovely idea. Yes, smashing idea." I didn't really want to leave the Square but at the same time it was different. I was my own boss, virtually. So I said yes I'd go, and then a few days later a V2 came down in Hyde Park, hits the front of the theatre... [laughs] So he said to me, "There's been a terrible accident. The new Odeon in Marble Arch has been badly damaged. But still go there, we want a report now." I went there, I found the projection room, which was okay. No damage to the projection room at all. But what had been badly damaged was the battery room. The battery casings had been smashed with the blast from the rocket and all the acid was running through to the next floor and the floor underneath that.

[break in recording]

Alan Lawson: So there we were now, having got over the noise outside...

David Robson: So we had this problem. The blast from the V2 had done a hell of a lot of damage to the front of the theatre. But the inside was okay, except, and as I say, the problems we had with the batteries. We managed to get - during the war it was difficult to get anything. But we managed to replace all the batteries that were damaged, and top up and get the system working again. Our next problem was, and this was unusual for theatres of that age, it hadn't gone over to mercury arc rectifiers. It was still running on motor generators. And I'd never had

any experience of this before, but the man who was with me had, and he said, "We've got to learn how to power them up. They've got to be equalised before we can use them. Otherwise it's dangerous." So we took parts of the motors down to have a look at the commutators and they were beautiful. Absolutely burnished copper. The projection staff of ABC's had looked after them beautifully. I couldn't find anything wrong on either of them. With one set running there was enough power to run three arcs, but not enough for the spot gallery and we knew there would be stage shows going to be coming up. So we had to do some experiments. So he said, "First of all we'll run up the first pair." So, very old-fashioned you know, I mean I'm surprised that they didn't go over to mercury, I can't understand it. Down went the lever and you wait for the motor to reach its thing, and you bung up the switch, you know, the main breakers. And then, it was just like a power station, there was a great - as big as this room - there was a great, long panel of ammeters and voltmeters, just like a power station. So we set up the live volts to 100 volts and went upstairs to the projection room, struck up to see what would happen. It was fine, no problem. So he said then, "Right well now comes the sixty-four thousand dollar question." So we started up the second one because we knew we'd have to run them in parallel because there wouldn't be enough power otherwise. And we got the motor up to speed, put switch in the socket - there was a mighty bang and sparks and we fell about. [laughs] What had we done? He said, "I don't understand it. I know about these things, I've done them before. We got equaliser current right, look at the equaliser, it's blown up." So we tried it again and bits of carbon from the main switch blew out all over the place. "We're in trouble" he said [laughs]. We wondered whether the rocket had done any damage. Anyway, tell you what it turned out to be, it was silly really. The shock of the explosion had upset the calibration of the voltmeters and ammeters. And we were trying to equalise - it had got to be within about half a volt of the line volts, otherwise one motor will motor the other one. So we called in a company to re-do those and to recalibrate all the meters, including the projection room ones as well, they were all out, miles out. Got that right, great big mechanisms [indecipherable] Great big switches! So we got them done and we tried to run again. I was always afraid, after that, of starting two up together, I had to do it sometimes. But it always worked, but it was always that - remembering that first initial explosion. But you had to get equalisation absolutely right and you had to watch the equalisation for a few minutes while the load was on, to make sure that it was okay. Once it was okay, the equalisation would take care of itself. But you had to equalise the line volts between the two and get it exactly right, otherwise one would take over and run. So there we are, so the motor generator room became the place where we used take people we couldn't get rid of. If you had visitors in the projection room, and you'd been through everything and they still wouldn't go away, we then used to say, "Have you seen the generating equipment?" And the noise! They'd give up, you see, they'd go, "Oh thank you very much." So it always worked, take them to the generator room and then that's it! The generator room was a few steps down from the projection room, wasn't too bad, but it used to work. We had an organist there called Hemsley and the Christie organ had been out of service for years because the theatre had just been empty. I don't know when the Regal closed as a Regal. I can't remember, I don't know what the date was, but it had been closed I think mostly throughout the war. Lovely theatre inside, unbelievably beautiful. It had Chinese rooms and a Japanese room, ever see the dcor there?

Alan Lawson: Not sure, I'm not sure.

David Robson: Anyway, what was I saying?

Alan Lawson: Hemsley, the organ...

David Robson: Hemsley, we had this chap called Hemsley. He was a technical sort of bod and the organ was in a very bad state, hadn't been used for years. And he loved organs and used to spend all day long in the organ loft. You know, the theatre was closed and we were all getting things right for a possible opening. And he used to come out in a boiler suit, absolutely filthy, dripping with cobwebs and everything. And one day, we arrived, about ten o'clock in the morning to start a day's work, mostly the projection room wiring and stuff like that. And we heard this magnificent sound, for the very first time the carillon had been repaired, you know, great thing of bells in the organ chamber. And none of them had worked, it used to go, "Phut phut dong, phut phut dong dong," you know, that sort of thing. Now, he played a complete tune on it and we stood back amazed. It was the loveliest organ I'd ever heard, beautiful organ, don't know what happened to it. It didn't have any of the glamour of the Compton at the Square, you know, no coloured lights or anything like that. It was just a plain place which we had a cold spot on, so that when the organ came up we just put spot, didn't strike up any arcs or anything because the spot gallery was miles away. And that was it, he got it going and - he's a funny guy. I mean, about this time, the government started selling off a lot of its old radar equipment which it didn't need. So the whole of Edgeware Road was full of these ex-government shops. I was able to build my first TV set when I was there - I just took a carrier bag and got a bag of EF50s, you know, for practically nothing, 5 bob each, you know. A six-inch blue tube and scanning coils, I had a set working. Couldn't afford to buy one, and there weren't any, you couldn't buy any anyway at that time. When the service first started people were using what was left over from before the war. And anyway, he used to do the same thing, he didn't build anything but he had an enormous stock. He turned the organ room, the organ rest room into a sort of electronic workshop. Everything was listed, it had every capacitor that was ever made, any value you wanted, any resistor, every coil. So if you were making something and you wanted something - and he always went out for a walk during the feature - you'd go down to his room and he'd dish it out for you [laughs]. Incredible bloke! His hobby was buying this old government stuff, getting a soldering iron, getting all the bits off it and logging it, you know, on one of his shelves! That was Hemsley. As an organist - well, I suppose he was all right - nothing very special. But an interesting character - full of interesting characters this business is, you know.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: So that was Hemsley. So anyway, we gradually got the theatre together. We weren't at all worried about the inside, although we couldn't raise any - the company, Rank couldn't raise any money. In those days you couldn't get any work done, redecorating or re-plastering or anything because it was war. And all went to war work. We did get the front of the theatre rebuilt and ready. And eventually I was happy, so was Mcloughlin. So we contacted the company, got Ron Parnell and said, "We're ready for opening whenever you are." So he got in touch with the company and said that engineering rights had had the clearance, and we could reopen. And reopened with a film called The 'Copacabana'- Marx brothers...

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: Just for weekly run, just to settle in. We couldn't get staff, that was the great problem. I had one man with me with a wooden leg, called Jack. There were - actually, the chap who was with me, the boss, the who was chief, this Irish chap, who I was telling you about, Mick Mcloughlin his name was. He had brought with him and knew lots of people that would be good for staff. So a lot of his people came with him. I couldn't take anybody from the Square, and they were the only people I knew really. So it was staffed by his men, and of course he and I together we ran the place. And we opened, it was all quite successful.

Alan Lawson: And when was that? Do you remember when you opened?

David Robson: Oh I suppose it would be about - towards the end of '44, round about there I should think.

Alan Lawson: '44-'45?

David Robson: Somewhere round about there yes, the war was still on.

Alan Lawson: Yes. Who was the manager?

David Robson: I couldn't tell you, I don't know. I didn't know really.

Alan Lawson: Aha, you didn't know the front of house.

David Robson: We weren't in a very close situation there at all. Unlike the Square where everybody knows everybody, you knew everybody, more of a family do. They were all new at the theatre, new staff, new usherettes, new front of house staff. One thing that we kept back from the original days, and it was the first theatre to have one and it spread like mad afterwards, was a fat lady called Lil, who eventually opened and ran the canteen, which was fabulous. Even when we were shut down we had the most beautiful food. And when the people from the Square came over to have a look and see how we were getting on, we said, "Come to the canteen." "Canteen?" they said. "Yes, come to the canteen." "Oh, how long has this been going on for?" So they got one going at the Square. It was below ground unfortunately and rather like being in a prison you know, one of the dressing rooms. But our canteen was lovely because it looked right out on Marble Arch and Lil did nothing else but these lovely buns in the oven, oozing with butter, and rationing was still on [laughs] - beautiful. It really made life worth living at Marble Arch. Anyway, as I say, we used to go out daily to Edgeware Road, get all the bits and pieces. I used to mend a lot of receivers in those days as well as a hobby. So I kept well in with electronics the whole time. And a lot of the people that we had working for us were electronic people. For instance, one of the chaps - you remember after the war, and I'll be coming back to this later on, but up to the start of the war, EHT were generated by overwinds and transformers in television sets, very expensive and very lethal. It was during the war they started to experiment with flyback EHT. Thorn had a big laboratory and one of the men there was killed. There was loss of life initially, while it was being experimented with, but it became very safe and cheap to generate EHT. Anyway, he was there and we had a lot of people like that at the end of the war, quite clever in electronics. Anyway, I'll be coming back to that bit later on. What happened next? Well, the theatre ran long runs, and the first long run was 'Caesar and Cleopatra' in which my

aunt had a part in it, called Ftatateeta. It was funny hearing the family voice coming out of the speakers [AL laughs]. And we ran it for nine months. And it was Technicolor and we had a lot of trouble with the print because of bowing. The stock would tend to bow and scratch and we had a hell of a job to find out where the scratching was happening. It was happening in the firetraps because, you know, the firetraps are very narrow to prevent fire. We had to use crocus paper, get a tiny little bit on, naughty. The only way to stop scratching because it was bowing like that. And it was a great time for experimenting with lenses, we had Taylor-Hobson, the first - the bloomed lenses they were getting. And the theatre was an experimental place for lenses. And lenses and Technicolor, the two went together. And, what else did we do? Oh yes, and it was the first place where we had the actual projection ports were bloomed for the first time. Instead of having plate glass, we had bloomed projection ports. So that was something quite new. You were gradually experimenting all the way through. After we got rid of - got rid of - stopped running Caesar and Cleopatra we thought, "Ah, a break for real films again." But no! the next film that came in ran for ten months and it was Wyler's 'The Best Years of Our Lives'.

Alan Lawson: What?

David Robson: It's called 'The Best Years of Our Lives'.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: It was William Wyler's film. And this was quite an experience because it was three hours of emotion. And people used to stream out into - there were only two performances a day because it was a long film - people used to stream out into Oxford Circus, into Oxford Street rather, with mascara, terrible state, they didn't know whether they were coming or going! And they'd come back for more! And what we had to do in the end - it was such a job to clear the theatre up of handkerchiefs. There weren't tissues in those days, people still had handkerchiefs, and they would be littered like confetti, all up the aisles. And eventually we had to extend the breaks for about half an hour to give 10 minutes to the cleaners who'd be specially employed to come in with spikes and pick up all the handkerchiefs that people had dropped [AL laughs]. And then we'd let the public in and then the organ player and then we'd get on with the next performance.

Alan Lawson: [Laughing] I'm going to stop you there...

[Tape 2, Side 4]

Alan Lawson: ...side 4.

David Robson: Right, the next thing, as I say, we ran this particular picture. The only thing we changed all during the run was the leaders. We used to put one set of leaders on, we kept the same American Print. That was the thing about the West End - we would never run British prints.

[break in recording]

Alan Lawson: Right Dave. Now we're on side 4 and we've got rid of the tear-jerkers.

David Robson: Well, what happened about that is, at the end of the nine-month period, we said goodbye to it. We thought, "That's it. We really have got to say goodbye." We knew it word by word. When suddenly there was a hue and cry in the West End, "Oh you've taken it off, you mustn't take it off. There's a lot of people who still want to cry." So we had to get it back again, after nine months. But this time we got a British print back. Now I was saying earlier on that one of the great things that Ron Parnell had, he would never allow British prints in any of the theatres because there was something wrong with our labs, I don't know what the hell it was. And the print we got back was so dreadful that we lost interest in the whole lot. Terrible background noise on the sound, the noise was dreadful. The black had turned into greys, oh God, what a print! And we'd taken such great care with the American print, there was nothing wrong with it. All we did was change the leaders, you know, they'd have been laced up so many times for nine months, so they were beginning to get a bit hairy. But anyway, that was the first time we lost out, we didn't get what we wanted. There we are. So the next great epic at the Odeon Marble Arch was the King. He was very ill and couldn't walk up steps any more and it was decided by the hierarchy to do the Royal Command Performance at the Odeon Marble Arch. It was a great honour for us, I mean I was used to it at the Square. But I mean, no one had seen - that part of the world, had seen the Royal family for years, although Buck House was just down the road. It was not the same. So the reason for that was that the circle was at street level. So you could go in from the street, straight into the circle. If you wanted to go in the stalls you went downstairs. So the circle was rebuilt with a the royal box and everything. And everything was got ready for the royal family. I can't remember the film, I think it was 'Where Eagles Fly'[?], I'm not sure, might have been that. But it was a British film anyway, colour film. And the arrangement was that the stage show would be covered by the whole of the shift in the spot gallery, under Mick because he was red-hot on spots, having come from Paramount and places like that where they had big stage shows. And he said, "It means I've got to leave the projection to you, Dave." I thought, "Well that's the most important bloody thing of the lot! The film show's what it's all about." And all I had was this bloke with one leg [laughs]. What am I going to do? So they did all the rehearsals and the day got closer and I phoned up my aunt and said, "I feel sick, I don't think I can go ahead with it." She said, "You've got to. I feel sick when I go on stage. You've got to fight it." I said, "I don't know whether I can do it. There's one of us, and the royal family...everything you do. You've only got to make one mistake and you'd be out of a job for ever more. The world would know about it." [Laughs.] Anyway, the time went on, the day came and the guys disappeared up to the spot room. It was quite a difficult plot to do. You had to - the [indecipherable] cards could only run about twenty minutes on one [indecipherable], so the plot had to be shared between three people so that when you were running out of carbon, somebody else took over your plot and so on, it worked. I did do a bit of that for the rehearsals but there was a special crew lined up for that and the spot gallery was a long, long way away, you couldn't call upon anybody, there was only two of us. So I had the print, looked at it earlier on during the week. Everything was okay, it was all cued up and Ron Parnell had cued everything up so we had the cue sheets and everything. I thought to myself, "Ssshhhh." I felt so ill - I can't tell you how bad I felt. I felt really sick, sick you know, I wanted to throw up. Anyway, I said to Jack, "We've rehearsed everything. All we've got to do, is when I tell you 'house lights away', get them away slowly." So once the countdown came, the organ cues came up, gave the organ cues. And we had this complicated business - the stage lighting had to be given - they had to give us control of the stage

lighting at a given moment in the changeover because they didn't know when the picture would appear, they couldn't see backstage anyway. So we had to rely on them to give us control, otherwise there'd be a lot of trouble, curtains and everything. So anyway, it all worked. Hemsley went down on cue, and he was very bad at that sometimes, he went down on cue. So I said to Jack, "Get them away now slowly." And I'd checked and double-checked so many times, we'd struck up and everything was ready. Last cove went out and the main tabs opened, started running, the certificate came on, sound came on. It was all right, it was all right after that. It was all right, I was thrilled to bits after that. But it was that initial start that made me feel sick, absolutely sick. Anyway, I ran all the film, did all the changes, did all the things. Jack was hobbling about, his one leg, just bringing film in, you know, virtually. The end was simple enough - we gave them control at the beginning so that Hemsley would could up with the trumpters and so it worked fine. But it was hairy though, yes, that was hairy. I mean, we'd think nothing of it at the Square because it's a whole load of us and we're all together at the same. We didn't think anything of it, you'd do a machine each and it was just like an ordinary show. A royal show was nothing at the Square.

Alan Lawson: What year was this one do you think?

David Robson: I think it was 'Where No Eagles Fly'[? N. B. Possibly 'Where No Vultures Fly']. I'm not sure, I think it was, I can't be sure. I've no notes on the subject, I don't know. I was so glad to erase it from my mind. Goodness it was such a terror.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: Shortly after that royal command I had a call from the Square. Ron said, "Come back to the Square, I want you back." So I said, "Well I'm dying to get back!" [Laughs.] "It was supposed to be a sabbatical, I was only supposed to be here for a few weeks to get going and I've been here since then!" I was there for about five years I suppose. So I went back to the Square. It was I suppose 1946/'47 or even later, '48 maybe, I don't know. Things had been happening. If you looked around suburbs you would have seen - looked at some of the big theatres like Paramounts and so on. Dishes were appearing on the roof. And this was because the Rank Organisation wanted to get into television. And I thought, "What an opportunity, at last! I'm going to be there." What they'd done, they'd taken over an old cinema at Bromley - a fleapit. Ripped all the seats out and everything. And they'd installed high-tech. equipment. They'd got Cintel flying-spot scanners. And what they were going to do, we think, because it never happened, they were going to transmit commercials to the big cinemas instead of having them on a separate film. And they'd run big things like soccer matches. We think. And boxing, stuff like that, would be radiated, using first of all the BBC signals, then later on their own set-up. And at the Odeon Leicester Square when I got back, they were in the process of installing the first of the large screen television systems, a Cintel one. Beautiful device, I've got pictures of it in that. It used 50kv, highly lethal stuff. Cable went right down to the circle, and it was rather like a canon in and old-fashioned ship, that the tube, it's a standard CRT tube but working at very high levels. It was a Schmidt optical system. And you ran it out like a canon, through a porthole cut into the front circle. You'd run it and lock it into position. And it was a lovely console and you'd go down on the stage, scan lines as think as your thumb [laughs], incredible! Great picture, really was, marvellous. We did experiments with that, and eventually the company said, "Let's make use of

it." So we did the Cup Final there. You've never seen anything like it. They all came with their pipes and their - make noise you know. What a stink! The lovely West End theatre, practically ruined by these madmen, cheering on their football. So we did the whole of the Cup Final there. I can't remember what year that was. And we did one or two other shows of that sort. But we had to work very closely with the Beeb because we didn't have our own OB units or anything then. And the difficult question was of knowing exactly when we'd get a feed. We had a feed off the Beeb but we didn't know when our bit was coming, so we'd have to make up programmes of cartoons and things, knowing that we could fade out and fade over to vision when we had to. It was quite tricky to organise.

Alan Lawson: Where were you picking up the feed from then?

David Robson: Well it was a line-in. We didn't - it was an equalised line in.

Alan Lawson: Oh I see.

David Robson: So we weren't using external antennae or anything like that. So that's what we were doing. And the first - I must tell you - round about this time I was getting worked up again about television, I couldn't get in. I was into my thirties now and I didn't - wasn't to make any move. And I thought, "Now that the Rank Organisation - I am going to see if I can transfer." So I wrote to them and said I wanted to transfer. And they wrote back and said, "You can't because West End projection - it takes years to get ... we can't afford to lose you," and all that nonsense, you know. So eventually I made such a stink about it they sent me over to the Dominion Tottenham Court Road, where their TV headquarters was, their cameramen and all the rest of it, and the gear. And I was interviewed, I can't remember who the man was, but he was an ex-BBC director who was working...

Alan Lawson: Norman Collins?

David Robson: No, not Norman Collins. Anyway, they said, "Why do you want to come over to television?" So I told them. So they said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Well I don't mind. I don't mind being a vision-mixer or something like that." They said, "Have you had any experience?" I said, "No I haven't, but I know what's wanted and I'll do it. Whatever is required." And they said, "Well it's not on. If you want to be a vision-mixer sir, you really want to be a woman, because they're peaceful, they get their knitting out when things go wrong." They said, "You'll go over the top." [AL laughs]. Anyway, it went on like that for some time and I knew, really, that I was going to be pushed off, so I went back - another failure, you know, another attempt at getting into television that didn't work [laughs]. I used to spend all my time - by now, radio and television shows had started at Earl's Court. Every year there was a big radio and television show. And I used to arrange my leave at the Odeon Leicester Square so that I could spend as much time as I could at Earl's Court, just watching TV people through a plate glass window. It was ridiculous, it was childish really. But it was the closest I could get to it. I'd watch people lining up programmes doing telecine. I thought, "I want to do it!" I could almost touch the machines! I couldn't get there! Didn't know anybody. I knew one man, one producer who used to write to me every year and say, "Sorry, we still haven't got a vacancy." And it went on for year after year.

Alan Lawson: Who was that?

David Robson: Oh, I can't remember, can't remember the name. Anyway, nothing happened. As I say, I used to work - for year after year I used to do this. But things were beginning to happen back at the ranch, as they say. [AL laughs] I think I've got the date of this. [looks it up]Yes, in 1952 we did a programme called 'The Importance of Being Earnest'.[NB he means the film]

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: Colour programme, colour picture. And it was the first time that all the media elements had come together. So it was really quite something, we made history. What happened was, at gala performances, what generally happens is, there's an half an hour while all the VIPs arrive, while the lesser audience are in, listening to the organ. And they arrive to go to the circle, covered in scent and everything else, Princess Margaret and all these sort of people. But this time, we had our own cameras in the foyer. So we were able to pick up anybody that arrived, feed the signal up to us in the proj. room and we'd put it on a big screen. So we had the big screen and commentary going on all the way through the interval, of the important people arriving. So that was the first change. The second thing, of course, was the picture itself - Number two. Number three was that at the end of the performance the state show started. We had gutted the newsroom under the foyer and turned it into a TV studio. I don't know whether it's still there, there was a proper mixer and everything there, you know. I loved it! I wasn't working, but I loved it. So what they did is they dressed the whole of the cast in the original costume and they put them on the stage. So then we had - we had started off with electronics, we had film and we had stage. It was the first time all the media had been brought together in one show. That was a great experience that. I've still got the original programmes and everything for that - the run-through and everything. It was really fabulous that. But the great breakthrough came about a year later when we were to do CinemaScope. It required major changes. We'd had new equipment by then. As you know it was four-track stuff.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: And so we had new... BT-H redesigned the equipment, lovely quality stuff it was. We had to have separate amplifiers and everything for all the four channels, plus the optical tracks of an ordinary programme. And we had to adapt the projectors so that underneath the top spool was the sound pull-through system, which was driven by the top sprocket - lovely, beautiful, beautiful quality stuff. And they had built, they'd assembled by hand the actual transducers, miniature transducers for the four tracks, in the factory. There was nothing around to make it because it was so new. There hadn't been any CinemaScope before, you know, starting everything from scratch, everything. And we had to learn a new form of presentation really. It was very difficult. We had three machines there but we couldn't put them all over to CinemaScope because we had black and white newsreels and perhaps a short as well. And the problem with CinemaScope was you had this huge anamorphic lens on the front, plus a backing lens and you had to get both the anamorphic and the backing lens out the way before you could go back to normal projection. And of course there's no way of focussing. So what we had to do was loosen off the lenses until they were nearly falling out, you know. And as soon as you shot the certificate, quickly got it in focus and finished off. And there was no way that you could pre-

focus anything. And of course the screen was the whole width of the proscenium at the Odeon Leicester Square. Huge thing. Photographs of it in there. And of course we had three sets of high quality, new, speakers fitted behind the screen for the three-track sound. And speakers all round the theatre for the effects. And we didn't get a print 'til quite late on. And it was already advertised, it was extremely dodgy. Anyway, it all worked. We did have problems with one of the effects tracks which was right on the edge of the film, one of the effects tracks, drifting off and us losing it. But the interesting thing about it was, apart from the completely new technique, the double checking and everything in the projection room was quite dodgy, particularly when you were opening up a show because you had to remember the masking. Had the masking been set behind the curtains? Had this been done? Had you gone over to optical? Had both machines on optical? How many machines do you have on mag? It was endless, the double checking that went on. It used to drive us barmy just doing a show. But it was well-rewarded I might tell you, in that you felt you were - we used to go down - the great thing about CinemaScope was the actual presentation. The great thing about the projectionists at the Odeon Leicester Square, they never told you what to do, you worked out your own presentation. It's lovely the freedom we had was really marvellous there. Even with that awful man, we kept him well out the way now. [laughs] Anyway, the great thing to do with CinemaScope, was to bring the audience slowly to the effect that they were going to see something quite out of the ordinary. We'd start off at the start with all the news, and the organ when the news was over, with dimming the coves at the back very slowly, very, very slowly and gradually the tittering would stop in the theatre and people realised something was about to - they didn't know quite what was going to happen. They knew something was going to happen because their focus was being gradually brought onto the stage. And the last cove to go out was the proscenium arch. And at that point, halfway through that cove, the main tabs would be opened to reveal screen tabs, which were then opened and never stopped opening and there's be gasps because the certificate stretched from one end of the proscenium to the other. People would - you could hear them gasping, "Oh my God!" They didn't know what was coming next. But then of course was the wonderful Fox opening, with all speakers on...

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: At ninety feet a minute, you know. High quality sound - never heard anything like it. It was absolutely out of this world. And people would actually applaud. At the end of the Fox opening they would stand up and clap. You'd think, "My God!" You know. And then we'd go on to the caption routine and the caption routine would fade to black and with 'The Robe', which I'm talking about, the first one, there weren't any mixes or anything like that, they were all straightforward fades to black. This was like a stage show, [indecipherable] like a stage show. You had actors walking right across the stage and you had sound right across the stage.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: So what they used to do at the end of the first scene, they were big scenes, you know where you had all the actors doing their stuff and then it would fade to black and it would go to another scene. They'd applaud. They'd actually applaud as if it was a live performance! It was wonderful to see and very emotional. And we used to go in sometimes and see nuns praying, [laughs] you know, in the theatre - incredible! And they'd come out all sad and, "I'll always go to

church now, every day of the week." A change came over people. The change was there you know. We ran it for I think six weeks, six or eight weeks. It was a pleasure every day, we tried slightly different ways of presenting it. That opening, that opening was very important, to get them in the right frame of mind to start applauding as soon as they saw anything unusual. In fact the scene, the final - did you see 'The Robe'?

Alan Lawson: No, no.

David Robson: Oh you haven't. Well the last scene is the crucifixion scene, where Christ dies and you get this - you know in the Bible you get this thunder and lightning and awful things. We'd switch over to all the other speakers for that, as you've got the terrible storm. It was so loud that people in the Square could hear it going on [laughs]. The queues around the theatre could hear. And that used to really upset people. "No, I can't bear it," [laughs] used to walk out. It was very emotional - it was great. So anyway, that was in 1953. And now we're coming to, for me, what was to become a complete change. I kept on going to watch the show at Olympia every year. I think it wasn't Olympia, it was Earl's Court by this time. Used to get quite a big show and the BBC used to have a big theatre there that they built for the musical shows and everything else was done from the control rooms at the side. I used to love watching them coming out of makeup and stuff and, "Cor blimey", [indecipherable]. So one day I was coming out of Earl's Court, ready to go home, another sad day looking at television and not being anywhere near it, you know. And somebody handed out a flyer, like they do, and I screwed it up and put it in my pocket. I got in the train, I was living at Beckenham in those days, got in the train at Victoria. And I felt in my pocket and I could feel this crinkly paper so I got it out and it was a flyer saying, "Get your sets converted for ITV. ITV will be with you in a couple of years' time and you should get ready for channel 9." And I thought to myself, "Fat lot of good that is. That doesn't help me does it?" [Laughs.] So anyway, I looked down the end of the flyer and there were two addresses. One was for ABC, which was the name that ATV had when they first started, and the other one was for Associated Rediffusion. So I thought, "I'm going to write another letter." So on the way home I sketched out a letter on the train and wrote it out properly when I got home and put it in the post the next day. And I thought, "I'll address it to Rediffusion because ABC sounds too much like a cinema - I don't want any more of that! [laughs] I've had them up to here!". So I didn't think anything of it, I didn't tell anybody. Two weeks later, I got a letter back from Stratton House[?], from Rediffusion, Associated Rediffusion. "Thank you for your inquiry. Would you come up for an interview?" I nearly fell apart. So I went up to Stratton House[?] and still wouldn't tell anybody because I thought, "This can't be true. I'm 34 nearly now." Anyway, they said, "Regarding your letter, what can you do and why do you want to do it?" And all the rest of it. And I told them. They said, "Well, you're the man for the job all right but we haven't got any equipment yet and we're still negotiating for studios. We've only got something like eighteen months to go, we're in a hell of a mess ourselves. We will write to you. You're on the short list. We will write to you in six months time and we'll tell you what the situation is." So I thought, "My God, it looks as if I might be in at last." So excited, I was walking on air! To the day, six months' time, the letter came - two letters came. One from Associated Rediffusion, and the other from this man in the Beeb who said, "We now have a vacancy for you"! [laughs] So I didn't answer the BBC letter right away and I went straight up for the interview, and I'd got the job. And I had to report for training at a place called - used to be the RAF headquarters - Adastral House...

Alan Lawson: Oh yes, yes...at Kingsway.

David Robson: That's right, yes. Adastral House in Kingsway. So when I got back I then wrote to the Beeb and said, "Thank you very much for the offer but in the meantime I have been offered a position with Rediffusion and I'd prefer to do that. I've waited for years and you keep making promises." But I now know why they offered because it was such an out-flowing of staff to ITV that they were now desperate and they were looking down their lists of possibles and I happened to be one of them and they wrote to me. So I didn't go, I proudly bowed out and started training at...

Alan Lawson: What was your pay going to be?

David Robson: I can't remember that but it wasn't very good. It was certainly less than I was getting at the Square. And I'll be talking about that later on.

Alan Lawson: Yes, okay, right.

David Robson: But for the time being, they said, "What department do you want to go in?" I said, "It ought to be telecine because I'm a film person. And I've got the electronics, the other side of it." So they said, "Well you'll have to train, we'll have to give you the electronics - flying spot scanners are very complex machines. The EMI ones are, we're on a EMI not Cintels, but they're both very complicated. And you'll do as much work as you can on theory." It was theory classes, "We'll tell you what books to get. But as long as we can keep you here because we're running out of time. We're busy doing an installation at Wembley, Wembley Studios. Can you get to Wembley all right?" I said, "Yes. I'd go to anywhere to get my hands on the equipment!" [Laughs] So we had another theatre called the Granville, which was used for training cameramen and for trying out audience programmes and stuff like that. And we were sent to the Granville to watch a programme on the floor, being rehearsed.

Alan Lawson: Granville - where was that?

David Robson: Granville is on the line which goes through Earl's Court. I can't think of the name of the station now. Perhaps I'll think of it later on. Anyway, it's on the Circle Line. And it was a private theatre which had been taken over by Rediffusion because they needed a rehearsal room. And they converted the theatre by bringing the stage right - getting rid of the original stage and making a huge stage apron. So there were no seats left at all. The stage apron came right up to the control rooms and they had cameras in there and also tele-recording was there for while. And we were supposed to go there once a week to get the feel of it all and to watch camera control. Seeing video, rather than reading about it, seeing it for the first time, you know, and having a tweak. Then we'd go back and spend the rest of the week at Adastral House, which was now called Television House. And studios were being built there, Studios 7 and 8 and 9 were built there eventually and it became the first VTR place. But anyway, that's a long way ahead. Eventually we were told, "Right, report to Wembley. Your moment has come." [laughs] Off we went. We were - when we were taken on we didn't bother about money. We were people who had been waiting, like myself, to get into television for years and because there was only one employer, the Beeb, there was no way you could do it. And so we took any salary we could get.

We didn't argue about salary, they said, "Your salary will be..." whatever, and that was it. We didn't argue, we said, "That's fine, okay." But we got the job. And we did the training and we went to Wembley. After a little while in Wembley, we discovered that there were a lot bums there. There were a lot of people that said they'd been in the film business and they'd done this and done that and they hadn't done it at all. And they were earning more than we were. So I wanted ACT to take over everything - everything at the studios. I knew how strong they were in the other studios and I wanted them to be the same in television. So I said to the - it was Paddy Leach[?] I think, I can't remember...

Alan Lawson: That's right, yes.

David Robson: I said to Paddy, "We want to be organised by ACT." So he said, "Well, that's going to be difficult." I said, "Well why?" He said, "Because there are three unions here. Apart from a few people in ACT and people like yourself who want to join, there's NATKE and there's also the BBC Union. And there's more BBC people than there is anybody else." So I said, "Well we must do something." So he said, "Well, the only thing I can do, I'll contact the organiser at NATKE. And if you people don't object, one of us will be here for a week to see what you do. There'll be somebody from ACT - somebody from ACTT. But you'll have to promise me that whoever decides to take over, to be the organiser, you'll have to go along with it." So I said - well I was organising it then, you know, I wanted more... I was drumming it up for ACT! "Well I don't really like that idea too much but if that's the only way you're going to do it, otherwise we'd have nothing at all." He said, "I'm afraid so." So they put in somebody from NATKE, who stayed with us for a week, and somebody from ACT stayed with us a week. And then there was a long pause while the management, while he went to the management - anyway the outcome was ACT - we'd won, we'd got it. And then, it enabled me to go to ACT and say, "We've got to sort out these buns. So he said, "What's the problem?" So I said, "We've got a different salaries. We've got people already in - and I'm one - who'd be quite happy to work for nothing practically, because we've spent all our lives wanting to get into television. We've got in, but we've got mixed up with a hell of a lot of people who shouldn't be there. And they're getting more than we're getting. Besides, I want you to go back to the management and tell them about this." So he did. The management wouldn't wear it, they said, "Well we engaged them and we engaged them in good faith. We can't do anything about salaries now." So we pressed again. I pressed him again. He went back to the management, and this time the management said, "Look, tell you what we'll do, if it's causing so much trouble, and you'll have to agree to it, and you'll have to get the staff to agree to it, we will have to organise tests to find out if people are really up to standard or not, television-wise." He said, "They'll be proper exams. They must submit, otherwise - no joy." So he came back to us, we had a bit of meeting. And it was very difficult to get everybody to think along those lines because we had some people who wouldn't get through anyway, you know, if they applied. So he went back to management and said, "They've agreed. They've agreed to do that." Only those people who wanted promotion and are prepared to take the risk would go for the exam." So one day the management - when it was all jacked up. On Sunday morning we had Chief Engineer, Head of Department, somebody from personnel and a third person - fourth person rather, and they'd converted the Telecine into two areas. There was to be a transmission area, where they would sit and watch us, and we would have to perform certain things for them, one at a time. I was first in at 10 o'clock Sunday morning - never happened

again, that was the only time they did it. And we went in, and Bill Chevers[?] who was Chief Engineer...

Alan Lawson: Oh yes, I know Bill.

David Robson: And he said, "Right, we're going to give you some tests to do, want to find out how much you know about television and whether you're entitled. What we're going to do is start the grading system." This was the very first grading system that ITV had. "And the people who don't succeed will be Assistant Engineers. Those people that pass the test today will become Engineers on a new pay structure, and so on it will go." He said, "But before you get any promotion from this company, it means that you must submit to a... " you know, thing. So, we didn't know what we were going to get to do. Anyway, the first thing they did, they tweaked everything on M/E 1 so that nothing worked at all. So they said, "Here's a test tape, line it up to the transmitter. We are the transmitter, talk to us." Switched on - nothing worked, "Bloody Hell!" And I had to line up all the monitors first, you know, the picture one and all the M/E's, because you can't set up anything until you can see the picture - you can't set the dimmers, you can't do anything. I got those all working, got the test tape on, they all seemed to work, so I called out "on offer for line up." "That's okay, we'll accept that. Take the tape off." Took the film off. They next gave me a reel of film to line up, place up and line up - it was 35mm. "Want you to run this as if you were going on the air." So I lined it up. They said, "we'll cue you." So they said, "Roll," you know, the usual business. So I rolled and up came the film, just an ordinary bit of newsreel or something, I thought, "there was nothing to it really." Suddenly it changed negative. They had edited in some negative material [AL laughs]. And of course when that happens, everything is reversed - lifts[?] become the opposite way round, everything - black stretches - it drives you barmy, you don't know what to do. So I tricked everything up, after about 20 seconds I got a reasonable picture out of it again. I thought, "What a dirty trick!" Then suddenly it went back to positive again! [laughs] They were roaring with laughter at the other end. Anyway, that was okay. I knew what to do. So I took the film off. Right, next test was a number of components which had been taped up and all the test equipment that we had was lined up at the back. And they said, "We want you to tell us what these components are, and what their value is. And you can use anything you want, bridges or anything you want." First one was a resistor, did it on the bridge in no time, no problem. Next one was a capacitor, did that one on the bridge - no problem. Third one was a coil, which took a little bit of balancing, but that was fine. Presumably it was but they didn't say it wasn't anyway. So I thought, "Through all the hurdles so far - must be it." No. Right, back on the machine again - "There's a fault on it, and we want you to mend it and give us a running commentary and you can use any equipment you want to find the fault." So, switched on the machine, and sure enough there was no output at all, nothing. All indications of EHD and everything was there, sounds was there but no video at all, it was dead as a doornail. So I said, "I'll have to go inside and have a look." They said, "Well, do what you like." So I opened the doors and - you know we had great doors at the back and you could get on the back of all the valves and everything there, it was marvellous for maintenance. So I got the probes on and I said, "I'm looking at the grill of B6[?] now, I would expect to see a video signal at this stage, and it is there. I've looked at the anode, it's they're okay." This was on the main video amplifiers, so I knew it was coming in, but it wasn't going anywhere! [laughs] So I worked my way through, and suddenly I came to an anode where there was nothing there at all. So I said to Bill Chevers, "It looks to me as if the fault is probably a valve." "Oh" he said, "is it?" I said, "Well..." I went

through it again, I said, "There's no signal on the grid, and there's nothing on the anode. Nothing there, nothing there. [indecipherable] valves. No emission." "Oh well, what do you want to do?" he said. So I said, "I want a valve and I want a so and so." They already had it in his pocket, ready. "Here's a valve." Took the other one out, then I noticed that they'd snipped off the pins [laughs]. And I put the valve in, signal was there, well done, all working. "Very well" he said, "off you go for a walk. Don't tell any of the others what you've been through." In those days at Wembley there was a lovely garden, and they hadn't built that awful place they have now. He said, "Go for a walk, and come back here about midday." And the others had known I'd been in there, saw me come out, they wondered what was going to happen next. So anyway, I came back about 12 and the last bloke was in, there were four of us elected to take the exam. So at the end of it Bill Chevers said, "I'm not going to tell you the results, I've got to talk to management anyway. Anyway you deserve a drink, so let's go up to the pub and I'll push the boat out." So we went up to The Torch, which is the pub next door to the studios. This is Bill Chevers, a very decent bloke, you know. And we all went up there. We all felt fairly confident I think. I think people realised - Oh the other test I didn't tell you about - at the end was an interview, after all those tests. And there were three questions. One of them I got wrong, and I've always kicked myself for getting it wrong. The question was, "If it's cheaper to run negative - why don't we do it for everything? What is the point of making a positive print?" "Ah" I said, "well, because of gamma [?] problems - it's difficult to set up." That's not the answer - it's because of scratching. I could have kicked myself! Anyway, it didn't go against me apparently because they wanted a long discussion, he said, "Would it be possible to turn a flying-spot scanner - to design it to do telerecordings." Bill Chevers was a telecine man. He lived for film really. So I said, "No." What they really wanted was a long discussion, you know. Where would you start? What problems would you come up against? What sort of effect would it have? How long would it take - all that kind of stuff. And they got all that out of you and it's, "Okay, off you go for a walk." So I came back about 12 and we went off to the Torch and we had this beer. And then he announced the results. He said, "I'm happy to tell you gentlemen that you are now all Engineers ... you're through." He said, "But we may have to call upon you to do all maintenance and also to train others. And you might have to do some shift leading, etc. but your through." Now, that was the start of the grading system in ITV. Lots of people have cursed it because it was our fault for starting it [laughs]. But we had to do something. And it's the fairest way in the end. Instead of people getting promotion automatically, you have to go for an interview. They didn't do any more things like that, there just wasn't time. All the interviews after that were done by an Assistant Engineer who would suddenly appear and sit down by the side of an Engineer in a quiet portion and he'd ask a lot of theory questions. He knew he could do the job, that's why he was doing it, so he was only interested to know about the theory.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: Black stretch, circuits and various stuff like that, you know. And that's how it was done. But we, we started it, so we're to blame for it [laughs].

Alan Lawson: I'm going to stop you there.

[End of Tape 2, Side 4] [Tape 3, Side 5]

Alan Lawson: Dave Robson, side 5.

David Robson: So the rush to join ACT was on. Everybody realised now that only way to get on was to submit themselves to a test of some sort. It wasn't a test in fact, it was an interview. And to get marked up on the grading system. So you could go from the lowest Assistant Engineer to Engineer, then Senior Engineer, then Supervision Engineer and later on, when the Labour government had the freeze in 1975, the wage freeze - was it '75? Round about then.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: They invented - what was it they called them? They invented a new one called the Senior Supervisory Engineer, in order to give a bit of money because you weren't allowed to pay any more money. So that was the grading system right the way through the whole of ITV.

Alan Lawson: Can you remember what the salary was at the time?

David Robson: No I can't because - no I can't remember that. But I was quids in, I know.

Alan Lawson: Yes, oh sure.

David Robson: I was very pleased because before I started work my father opened a bank account for me in Upper Norwood at Lloyd's Bank, with a shilling [AL laughs]. And for years I never had any occasion to use it because when I was with Shell Mex, the salaries were paid to the senior Post - the major Post Office. The main Post Office of whatever town you were in and you simply went to a Post Office Box and collected your salary. So I had no - although I was making more money than I needed, I was also spending it. I had enough to buy a car at the end of the Shell Mex thing. And as I say, the excess was being sent home in the way of chocolates and God knows what else [laughs]. But I had no occasion to use a bank account until I joined Rediffusion and one day to our horror, they said, "There'll be no more weekly pay. In future you will be paid monthly. You must have a bank account." And suddenly I thought, "I've got a bank account, haven't I?" So I went to the local bank at the High Street and I said, "I've got a bank account going back years and years and years, with Lloyd's at Upper Norwood. Transfer it." So they transferred it. And that was lucky, I was paid, straight in. But for four weeks I was stony broke. It was terrible, I had no pay for a month! And you know, we were all in the same boat. People running up bills in the canteen and God knows what else! [laughs] But I don't think there are any weekly paid jobs now, I think it's a marvellous idea, paying straight into the bank, no problems.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: Nobody around to steal any money or anything like that, you know. You don't see it, this piece of paper that it's been paid in.

Alan Lawson: You must remember, I mean, there must have been an entirely different atmosphere working in television than working in the box.

David Robson: Absolutely. It was a wonderful feeling. We were still then, all of us, with the exception of one or two people who caused this problem, people who'd been striving for years to get in. I mean, you weren't allowed to do overtime at Rediffusion, never could you do overtime, they wouldn't allow it. We would have been quite happy to stay behind at night and do things. Work on equipment without pay. We didn't worry about things like that then.

Alan Lawson: No, no, no.

David Robson: We were lucky, we felt. We were in television, we really loved every minute of it. We lived it, we used to go home and live it, you know.

Alan Lawson: But, what I was meaning was, I'm sure that, if you like, very strict rules were in force in the box, but it wasn't quite like that when you...

David Robson: That's true. We were in the area of safety film by then anyway. But before we went on the air, we were given a lecture by Lloyd Williams, who was in charge of Rediffusion. And he said, "I've got to tell you about this company. How it works is this: if you want to do well with Rediffusion, we would expect you to make the moves, to never stay still. If you go into a backwater, you won't get any help from us at all. We expect you to be entrepreneurial and go forward for everything." Which suited us because it's what we wanted to do. So it was a lecture about what to do. He said, "The other thing you must learn, you must never have a blank screen. Blank screen is the end. There'll be none of this - water wheels and stuff rotating because they've run early or something," he said, "your boss is the second hand on the clock, and it's the thing that governs your life. Watch the second hand. Don't be a second out - early or late. And never have a blank screen, whatever happens, something must be on the screen, even if it's standby slides. Always be covered." And then he said - he was talking about the opening, there would be two shifts and the two shifts had been selected. I was going to be there for the opening. And - what else was there? Yes, he said, "I want you to learn a lot of new terms. We don't use the word 'OB' in this company. It's 'remote'. We use the word 'remotes'. Anything outside, at Granville or any of the other places, are 'remotes'." He went on in great detail about how you were going to get on with the company and how you must keep out of the - if you wanted to get in the slack water, you'd never get out of it. They weren't interested in people who just came to work and went home again. They wanted people who were striving on, trying to improve things all the time, which suited us because we loved it. Anyway, the first terrible shock came to us when, after a year of running in telecine, the company said, "We're broke. We've lost a million pounds and we can't carry on." We thought, "Oh God, we've worked for this all our lives, this is the end." And they got the time and motion study people in. And they came in through all the departments and they said to the company, "It's a possibility, you could keep going if you cut the staff by half. Only a possibility." And Rediffusion was a company, or one of the companies belonging to British Traction[?]. And the way British Traction worked was that if any of its subsidiaries went down, they would cut it off, so that the main company would always be safe. And we were only a subsidiary, Associated Rediffusion was just a small arm of British Traction. So we were in dire, dire trouble. So Frank James called us all together and said, "Look lads, I've got some sad news. I've got to sack half of you." That means each shift has got to be halved. I don't know how we're going to do the work, we can hardly do it as it is." Because Telecine was

the most important area in the studio. It did effects, it did the weather, it did film transmission, it did inserts, it did everything.

Alan Lawson: All the commercials too.

David Robson: Yes, the commercials. So anyway, he said, "I'm going to put a list on the wall. It will be very difficult for me to choose who's to stay and who - but I've got to do it." So he put the list up and I - we were there, the original people that had got - which rather surprised us because the of the stir we'd had with [indecipherable] but we were there, which saved our lives. And the company then said, "What we're going to do, if we can pull through, everybody that was here will be taken on again. Like that, automatically." So by all means go and get yourselves jobs or something in the meantime, but you come back to us when we're ready for you." So, we started in on this dreadful - it took nine months, I think it took for us to get things right. We were asked to do everything. I went on cameras, I went on camera control, I went on OB's - remotes, sorry! [AL laughs] I learned a hell of a lot more about television than I would have done otherwise. I worked every day without getting any extra pay. And those that were left were of that frame of mind. It was the bums that had gone, and they must have known that there were these two lots of people and the other lot were made redundant. But they came back, but they came back. But anyway, we carried on as best we could. It was hell, in a way. There weren't any days off, I mean the shift system had gone out the window. There was no way we could run, we had to work everyday to keep things going.

Alan Lawson: Was it a seven day a week franchise? No, it wasn't.

David Robson: No, It was only five days.

Alan Lawson: Five-day, yes.

David Robson: Saturdays and Sundays off. That was ATV's great moment.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: We were very jealous of ATV, we thought their presentation and everything was superior to ours. We thought their telecine, everything. Although they were using [?indecipherable - Wittkens?] . But their presentation was very much better. 'Sunday Night at the Palladium', we couldn't match any of the shows.

Alan Lawson: What do you mean by presentation? Do you mean the content?

David Robson: No, not the content, the presentation was slick. Very slick, very American standard. And they had very good presenters, which were smart and clean. Whereas we tended to be a little BBC-ish, still. There were a lot of BBC people with us.

Alan Lawson: I know, yes.

David Robson: So we weren't quite as smart I don't think, in some respects, as ATV. We caught up in the end but, I mean, at that stage, the early stage, the first few months of television. So, after about nine months the company made an announcement. "We've got over it. We've made a profit. Not only broken even but we've mad a profit." And they said, "What's happened is that people who watch television at the weekends, they see all the adverts and they go out, and the shops are closed. It's the weekend, they can't buy. Whereas people who've been watching at the week end, see all these commercials, various things like that, they can go straight to the shop the next day and buy it.[?] And it's turned around the commercial bookings. The commercial bookings have turned around - that's our lifeblood, no question." So, that's what had happened, that's what happened. There was a complete change in culture so far as the commercials were concerned. So we started to do a lot of research in telecine. As soon as we got the full staff back again, they were all glad to be back and we were glad to see them back [laughs]. We started to do some research. The first problem we had in telecine was that the first of the CinemaScope films were being released. 'The Robe', which I'd been all the way through years previously, suddenly reared its ugly - or pretty - head, depending, you know. And none of the people there were film people - they were all television people there. They didn't understand about the aspect ratios or anything. And we were bound by ITV regulations, you had to use the full width of the 4 by 3. We couldn't blank off the top and bottom, you had to use the full picture area or else you were breaking the rules. So we got together and we thought, "What can we do about this?" And then we discovered the renters had stopped any of the television companies from running CinemaScope. They said, "We've seen what it looks like, it's just a thin slot with black top and bottom. You can't have any more films." So we thought, "That's going to cut off our whole business, telecine." I was in telecine then - still thinking as a film man, you know. And so we thought, "We've got to do something about this. What can we do?" So eventually we thought the only way we could do it, would be try to do it with electronics, that is to say to expand the picture, but expand the picture not only that way, but that way as well. And to be able to pan, so we could take the section of interest, like a two-shot, and we could stay on the two-shot until the two-shot changed to something else. Then we'd pan to there. It was very crude, but it was the only way. So we did. We set the graphic - it was rather like, I don't know, a big trolley, full of equipment and we were using - how did we do it? Do you remember in your early electronics, did you ever do tests with sliding - what do they call it? You have a slide and certain kinds of wire, there's a name for it, you can't use a pot[?]. Anyway the problem with the tube - scan tube - was that if you just momentarily, for a fraction of a second, lose any video, you'd say goodbye to the tube because you were working at 50 KVs and it burns the phosphor instantly - very expensive, takes a long time to change the tube. And we got through quite a few trying experiments on it, I tell you! So what we had to do was design a device which would allow us to fill the whole screen without these things at the top and bottom. Actually I did an article about this in the journal, only a few years ago strangely enough if you look it up. Anyway, this peculiar set-up was mounted on a trolley and there was a long umbilical cord which we hooked up to the machine and it required about three or four people to operate it. And we invited the management to look and see, "Look this is what we've done." So they said, "Oh it works?" I said, "Fine, yes, no problem." So we invited film renters, and that special morning the film renters came and we'd got a CinemaScope film down and we said, "This is what it will look like now." And we put the CinemaScope on, they couldn't tell the difference! We'd carefully rehearsed it mind you, we knew exactly where the movements were. But we did it, and it worked. And from that moment on, once we'd got the contract for the whole of the country, the whole of ITV, Wembley was the

only place allowed to run CinemaScope [AL laughs]. A hell of a thing it was. In order to do a transmission it would take you practically a full day of staff to do it because...

Alan Lawson: ...of lining up...

David Robson: ...because it needed people to log all the way through to get the scenes and also to know what was in the director's mind. Is that what he would have wanted to do? You know, so you could pan at the right moment and do everything like that.

Alan Lawson: Did they provide you with the script?

David Robson: No, we had to do all that ourselves.

Alan Lawson: [simultaneously with the above] You had to do it all yourselves.

David Robson: So you had one man logging, another man panning, another man looking after lift and stretch and all the other usual adjustments. And that's the way we did the very early CinemaScope films. What sparked it off, we were doing reviews of films in cinemas, and now and again we'd get a CinemaScope picture and that showed up the problem you see. And you couldn't change over. To change over to CinemaScope was a major operation. Once we'd thought up the trolley with all the equipment and the umbilical cord, and got it all working, that was like it, for the rest of the day - the commercials were pushed off... But we did it and we won, we won the contract! So that was that. So we designed the first scope system for television. What else did we do at about that time? Yes, at the beginning, with commercials, we had great trouble with sound. We were using ppm[?] meters, which was a leftover from the Beeb. Everything was ppm. The trouble with ppm is you know, there's a long delay, it'll peak instantly, take a long time to - very nice for your bands and music and stuff like that - marvellous. But with a commercial, particularly if you have a time spot which goes out every hour, right on the second, like electric kettles or something whatever it happened be, just a few words. You had to be at the right level for the first word, otherwise you've lost the commercial. So, we were beginning to have a lot of trouble with other commercial levels too, because sometimes the commercials were as short as 15 seconds and sometimes they'd be 5 seconds, in the case of time spots. And you had to have the sound at the correct level, you couldn't feel for it, it had to be at the right level all the time. So during rehearsals in the morning, you had to log, which we did normally, you had to log - because you couldn't keep going, you couldn't rewind on a telecine, you had to get it right first time during rehearsal. And we found ppu was useless. So in conjunction - we kept the ppms there, but we also wired in VU meters. And VU meters are much better at commercials because you can average the level accurately and log it, like we have there. You could actually get the information down on a log sheet quickly so that when you did the commercial, you might have, say ten or fifteen commercials in a break, you knew all the settings for each commercial, and they were all at the exactly the same level. Instant. You couldn't do it with a PPM. So that was one of the first things we learned. The other thing we learned with the equipment was that at the end of a commercial break you'd have to stop the machine electronically, you injected DC, reverse DC into the windings of the motor to make it stop quickly. It was like changing gear on the car, you use the engine as a break. And it stripped gears and all sorts of terrible problems we

had with it. Because it was never designed for that. The Emis [N. B. Emitron cameras] were designed before the war, and BBC designed - every design was BBC.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: And it's designed to run films, you know, without any nonsense like commercials or anything like that![laughs] This is something we were doing. So we tried all sorts of things, we fitted brakes to the flywheels and the flywheel would strip one side [indecipherable - laughing]. And in the end we got it right, so there were a lot of alterations to make to existing equipment to make them fit.

Alan Lawson: Because the BBC's telecine was Mechau wasn't it for a long time?

David Robson: That's right. I think they used Mechau for a short while after the war, but there was something about Mechau - it was instant - that was why. It was instant television because you had - you could get a still frame and you could run off[?] that still frame.

Alan Lawson: That's right.

David Robson: That was why they used it. But it was extremely low-resolution stuff. All right for captions but nothing much further. Just before we opened, RCA came down and installed the first - the only two machines we had were the two flying spot scanners, and RCA came down and installed the first of the videcam[?] camera systems. Nobody had any experience of videcams. The BBC books which we'd learned from, there was an interesting bit in there about the videcam camera, a new camera, don't know much about it yet, sort of thing. We had to learn all about it I tell you [laughs]. It was a lovely little camera, about that size, using a tiny little one-inch tube. And the slides, the two projectors, 16 and 35 mil. projectors and everything went straight into the videcam target. And you selected by means of - I'll show you about this in there, they talk about them in there [presumably indicating a book] they're lenses which will transmit and reflect at the same time.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: So there's a whole series of these lenses. And with this system two men could handle two 16's, two 35's, slides and telops[?]. Telops are large captions which are opaque. So we had to learn all about that, it was - very awkward. Camera control on telecine is difficult because in this country, with our prints, we don't grade them for television. So you get tremendous changes in level, and videcam can't handle it, the videcam will burn out whites, [DR makes noise with tongue] like that, will just burn out. So you were continually absolutely driven mad, doing an English picture on 35, that's why we tried to keep them on Emi as long as we could. But if you got an American print once again, for television, it was beautifully graded 16 millimetre prints, absolutely out of this world! And you could set it up and you wouldn't have to touch the gains at all. It was all nicely compressed, beautiful television pictures. Absolutely perfect. The Americans really knew about print grading, no doubt about it. But then they had a lot more experience from camera, camera usage in Telecine than we had. We were flying-spot

people. And the flying-spot is the better system in the end, better system, had better resolution. Everything about it.

Alan Lawson: Sharper, much sharper.

David Robson: Yes. But this was a cheap and cheerful way and it did produce some quite nice pictures.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: Reliable, and it wasn't so heavy on staff because as I say, instead of having one person 16, one person 35, you could do it all with two people. It was a hell of a handful, but you could, you could do it, and we did. And during the redundancy, you had one man working both of those channels, so he had four 16's, four 35's, God, how we did it! And we also did the weather from there. That was murder, there was no rehearsal, we used to get the weather down from Jack, I forget who the weatherman was, and he would say, "As soon as I say 'in for some heavy winds in the southeast', when I say 'east', that's the change, you change telops to the next one." Sometimes he'd say it, it wouldn't work and... We used to hate it, we used to have a lottery to find out who was going to be the unlucky man to do the weather [laughs]. There weren't very many of us then I tell you. So what with one thing and another we did a lot of research in Telecine. And it all started running quite smoothly and one day the head of Telerecording came to see me. And he said, "Dave, have you ever thought about going into Telerecording?" I said, "Not really, I don't know anything about Telerecording." He said, "There's certain books you can get, all about sensitometry which you must learn, and various things like that. If I offered you the job of Senior Engineer, would you take it in there?" So I said, "I would if I knew something about the subject." Then he said, "I'll arrange for that. I'll tell you what books to get. And when you go for the interview, the questions will be based on those books." So I said to my boss in Telecine, "What do you think, what should I do?" So he said, "Well you know what the company said - go for it." So I got in touch with them, I said, "Okay, I'm your man." So I went to the library, he gave me all the books to read up on sensitometry and what have you. And I studied up and then went in there. I met with the board, there were about five or six other people going for the interview. And I had to do - I forget what I had to do - I had to draw a family of [multibibs?] and various things out of theory. I looked at the piece of paper like this when I sat down at the board, you know a big table like this and Chief Engineer was there and the chap who was head of Telerecording was - we had his brother actually on our committee a while back...

Alan Lawson: It'll come back.

David Robson: Can't think of his name. Anyway, I saw on this piece of paper where somebody had been drawing and I thought to myself, "My God, I've got a circuit drawing to do here [laughs]." They said, "We want you to draw a family of [multibibs???], any one you like, and tell us how it works." [Laughs.] And I had to do a black stretch and one or two things like that. And then came - Runkle, Len Runkle!

Alan Lawson: Oh yes!

David Robson: Then came Len Runkle and I thought to myself, "I'm going to get the questions he promised on the book, and I've read that thoroughly." And I did. I got the questions on film processing and all the rest of it. Which is very important to Telerecording. And I went out the room, and about an hour later they came out and said, "You've got the job." So I started then as a Senior Engineer in Telerecording because I could then liase with Telecine. The two departments were very close together because if you didn't set up telerecording properly, you'd get terrible problems in telecine, due to lines causing awful patterning and Christ knows what else. It was a great problem. I had to learn all over again, it was a new business. And I loved it. So I had two and half years of telecine before I moved into Telerecording. Then I started in there. We were hated in the studio because we had tremendous power. We could stop any recording, any programme we were due to record. We had to look at rehearsals on all cameras and if we felt that a camera was slightly not as it should be, we could stop it and we could say to the Camera Chief, "Can't do the programme, I'm afraid, until you do something about that camera." They hated our guts! We had - we used to have to wear a magnifying glass round here for looking at the scan really close to. And we had this tremendous power. We didn't abuse it but because the losses in Telerecording are so huge, you've got to start with a picture which is so perfect that there's no way of getting it any better. It's got to be perfection. And in order to get perfection you've got to go through cameras like a dose of salts. You've got to get them to change tubes. If you've got a tiny little speck or its slightly lossy on one side of the picture or whatever. And we were using Mark 3, Marconi image Autocons[?] on nearly all our programmes. The standard camera in ITV, although we did have some Pye, we had some RCA, but that was the major stuff for doing 'Double Your Money' and 'Take Your Pick' and the big programmes which, over Christmas you know, the big musical programmes and stuff like that. Joan Kemp-Welch and that business. So there we were, we used to sit with the lights out and watch, carefully watch, on our very high quality monitors, the rehearsals going on. And if we appeared in a camera control room at the end of it, they knew they were in trouble. "Camera 3, I'm afraid it's not good enough." "What's wrong with it? We had it all tricked up, it was a perfect picture." "It wasn't, you know. There's a problem there and there's a problem there, you'll have to do something about that!" So maintenance and camera control used to hate their guts [laughs]. But we had to do it, the question was either that or getting a...

Alan Lawson: Was this still on 35?

David Robson: On 35.

Alan Lawson: And where was it processed?

David Robson: It was processed at - where did we send that to...?

Alan Lawson: Humphries was it?

David Robson: Eh?

Alan Lawson: Was it Humphries?

David Robson: Humphries, yes it was at Humphries. And what we used to have to do with films, it was Kodak film, we used to have to buy it in batches, because we'd hand test. We'd get a batch and then we'd hand test some to process even, there, just run it through, very crude.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: And then we'd do a wedge, and then - senistometry - you'd actually measure the density and tell the labs, "We'll send you a test strip and this how we want it to be printed." And this was going on the whole time. It was an interesting department, nothing was ever stationary there, you were busy. The equipment we had was French, was the French RI equipment, 'Radio Industry'. And we used to suppress - we did didn't have the suppressed field system. We used to record both fields and what we used to do, because it takes a finite time to scan from top to bottom, when you photograph that, you would find, if you printed it straight out, the top of the picture would be over-exposed and there'd be nothing at the bottom. Because you see, it takes time, and exposure is... So - and we used to do this with both fields - so what we did we used to tip the picture up so that at the start of the picture there was hardly anything there, and then it'd gradually tail off so that the major part of the exposure was at the bottom, just before the frame. So, if you got it right, you got an overall picture which was dead right. It's clever, very clever, French system. And both fields were recorded that way so you had field 1 and field 2 and you had this funny waveform. People used to come in and say, "You complain about picture quality - look at your wave form!" And we used to say, "Go away!" [Laughs.]

Alan Lawson: When you say 1 and 2, I mean it's really the odds and the evens?

David Robson: Yes the odds and evens. The odd frames, different layout altogether.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: So that was it. And I don't know how we got away with it but um...because you're very dependent on EHT levels, brightness levels and the Camiflex cameras which we had, we could only load 400 feet at a time. So you were changing over every few minutes.

Alan Lawson: 400 feet?

David Robson: And it meant that you had to be very careful when you changed over from one to the other that the brightness level was exactly the same. And the only way you could do that was to feed them both through the same EHT source. So we had this very dangerous, lethal EHT cable - you wouldn't get away with it now - which coupled up both very high quality picture monitors and the rectifiers were in an oil bath underneath [laughs]. It was...! Because we knew of the dangers, nothing happened, but nowadays the EPU would say, "Oh that's dangerous." And I think that makes people careless because they think they can't be electrocuted but they can. But in our case, we had this great cable, with lethal - 25000volts I think it was, the tubes going over our heads. We wouldn't allow anybody in when we were recording because it was dark! [AL laughs] Anyway, you had this changeover every few minutes and it meant that as soon as you loaded, as soon as you had taken the magazine off - that was one of the jobs that I didn't like doing. I found that loading cameras completely in the dark, which you have to do, I found there

was something wrong with me. I couldn't get used to it, it made me feel quite ill. I used to have to do it, and I did it and I didn't like it. From time to time, when our loader was on holiday or something, it would fall to me or one of the others to do. And we worked in complete darkness and you had to take the sealing off the can - sticky stuff - would cause a little flash [laughs]. You had to take the ring out, lay it carefully - make sure [you didn't] drop - lay it into the magazine, and then pull the loop out and make sure you got it the right way round and not emulsion out or shiny side out or whatever. And then put the can on and then just lid on, make sure it was double locked and then just make sure that it would run. And then you'd stack those up, you took about - until you had about six, then you could say, "OK," bang on the door like that [D.R. bangs on table] and they'd open the door and he'd let you out and you'd think "My God!" It was like a dungeon. And you'd come with the six, rush into Telerecording, take the others out, unload those, do the camera report sheets and... I didn't like that bit of it at all. I didn't have that job to do very often because it was a camera-loader's job and it wasn't mine. But I could do it because it was part of the department. So that was Telerecording. Didn't have any problems, we didn't ever do a programme and find we had nothing on the tape or something like that. There was always a risk. We used to go to Humphries in the morning and see rushes. I didn't do it but Runkle did, it was his department. And that's the way we worked. How many - there were Runkle, and there was two of us as Senior Engineers and two Assistant Engineers and two on sound. Used Westrex to record everything on 35mag. And we had a cueing system for that, they would run first and say, "Speed," and then we'd run up and we'd lock up. And that was the way of it. And editing was always done by a chap called Jack - oh dear, I forget his name now - but we carried on a long time after VTR came along. They carried on, not me, but they carried on telerecording because of the ease of editing for 'Double Your Money' and 'Take Your Pick'. Those were the two programmes which carried on right to the end. With 'Double Your Money' and 'Take Your Pick', you'd get an audience in, say from Derby or somewhere, for the day, you know, a lot of elderly people. And you'd put on a show, the warm-up period was the funniest of the lot, really was funny. I never got fed up with watching it! And then the show, in 'Double Your Money' or 'Take Your Pick', it wasn't the cleverness of people you were looking for. It was their awkwardness and the fact that they said silly things, or made fools of themselves. That's what they were after. All the bright people never saw themselves, whereas all the people who got the questions wrong and various things like that made it interesting. For instance, one of the warm up periods, the funniest thing in 'Double Your Money' was things like, you know the difficulty it is of getting your pants on in the morning? Well they'd get people on the stage and they'd say, "Right, okay - you, you, you, you, come up on stage and show us how to put your pants on." And [laughs] they'd be struggling like this and falling over and trying to get two legs in one hole And the audience would be in fits, absolutely in fits! [laughs] So by the time the show started, they were in the right mood.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: If you had a camera go down or something like that, there was hell to pay. So that was - we had the same director, Audrey Starrett, all the way through for years and years and years and we had a routine - she knew us, we knew her, we knew exactly when she was going to do the prizes. It became a very boring routine, those two shows. But we did other shows as well.

Alan Lawson: Yes, sure, sure.

David Robson: Dramas and things like that. Anyway, while I was in Telerecording we began to hear rumours that there were some clever Japanese-type gentlemen who had been experimenting with magnetic tape, they'd succeeded in recording video on a helical scan system. And of course we were very interested in anything like that in Telerecording, it was our lifeblood as it were. And then the BBC did Vera[?], and we watched that and we were very, very impressed. But they only did one show on it, it was completely impractical you know, high-speed tape running. But it worked perfectly. And there were lots of other systems beginning to be developed. We were looking for a way of making instant television. Nobody could come up with it, it was still telerecording, wherever you went it was always telerecording. Until one day, our Chief, our Manager, the Studio Manager - name was Captain Brownrigg, famous...

Alan Lawson: Oh yes, yes, Brownrigg yes.

David Robson: Brownrigg, ex-naval chap. He used to go to America once a year to see what was happening in television, see if there were any ideas he could pick up. And he was over in California one day, watching a show and as he came out of the studio he noticed there was a large console with large, slow-moving spools on it. And he said to the people there, "What's that?" And they said, "We're recording videotape, Ampex, Ampex videotape." So he said, "Well what's on it?" So they said, "Well we've just been recording a programme because we're going to transmit this perhaps in another five or six hours, because we've got this long delay problem in the States." So he said, "What do the pictures look like then?" So they stopped the machine and they played back a few minutes, he said, "Have you played it back yet?" They said, "You're looking at it. This is the playback." He said, "I haven't seen anything like this before, there's no difference." They said, "No, there isn't, it's transparent - marvellous!" "Where do you get these machine from?" he said. "Well, they're made by Ampex Corporation in California. Redwood City to be exact." "Order me two." This was unusual because he wasn't an engineer, he just spotted at the right moment, something. So these two machines were ordered and delivered to Television House in 196 - sorry - 1958. '58/'59, round about then. They arrived by air and nobody knew what to do with them, they were all in cartons, nobody knew anything about videotape, you went to the library, "Never heard of it before." "How do high-speed servos work?" "Don't know anything about it." "How do FM...[tails off]" "Don't know anything about it." So anyway, the company said, "We can't have them hanging about. We've seen it working and we can't get anybody from Ampex to come over and show us. So we'll put it on the board, we'll ask for volunteers who are engineers to work on the system, get it up and running and tell us, will it all work?" So they did that and the two people that got the job were Harry Baker out of Racks, which we used to call Camera Control, Racks you know, and John W. Southgate who was originally a Maintenance Engineer in Telecine. And John W. Southgate really, was really the father of videotape in this country - he was the one. Anyway, they were given a room, which actually overlooked Kingsway, in fact there ought to be a plaque there really because that's where it all started. And they installed these two machines, had two VI1000's, very early version, couldn't erase or anything like that on them. And they assembled them and they learned all about them. You couldn't go to the library - I remember going to the library and saying, "You've got servo systems here, running at 250 revs per second..." that's really something, they scream at you... "How do I find out how high speed servos work?" The only thing you could get was servos used on battleships to move a gun turret about this big [laughs]. Nobody knew anything about them. And the whole thing, the whole thing depended, the recording system depended on

the use of FM for video. If video was FM'd you could get the full range of black and white on it, the full range from black in DC, to pink white. It was the only way you could do it and you could do it in a very small area. It's possible by using FM to do it. That was the secret of it. And I think if the team at Ampex had been British and have worked over here they'd have all had OBEs or something by now. I mean it was incredible. They'd used a whole lot of techniques and brought them all together to produce the first machine, first videotape machine. Brilliant, brilliant engineering, absolutely brilliant! nothing like it had ever been seen! In fact it made - a lot of people thought that when colour came, it was the biggest thing since sliced bread you know, since television. We were using the same techniques, colour, but just put them together in a slightly different way. But videotape was completely new and it changed the whole face of television as we knew it, completely changed it. For the first time it was possible to run the studio like an office. Come in, in the morning and go home at 6 o'clock at night, you'd got it all on tape. So anyway, nothing happened to begin with. For twelve months these machines languished at Tele House. And all the engineers from Europe came over, Germany, France, Spain, Italy. All came over to see this wonderful thing. When you went to Television House there was a label and an arrow, and it said 'AMPEX' and you followed it. And it was about the time that they were advertising special things for your breath, called Amplex, do you remember?

Alan Lawson: [Laughs] yes!

David Robson: People used to make jokes about Amplex and. Anyway, you followed the arrow and it led you up to the VT room. It wasn't called VT then, it was called just 'AMPEX'. And John Southgate and Harry Baker were the kings. And it was a black science, nobody knew anything outside the room at all. They had it tied up, nobody knew anything at all. You couldn't get hold of any information, books were locked up, you couldn't see any circuit drawings, it was dreadful. And we in TeleRecording knew that it existed, we'd gone and had a look at it, we'd been invited up. Harry Baker showed us how to put a tape on. We looked at it in amazement. We felt exactly the same as the General Manager felt when he saw it! It was incredible, "You can't tell the difference. Is that a recording?" "Yes it is," he said, "yes - they've spun it back!" It was incredible! Nobody knew how to use it. For a year it was just used for experimental purposes, people coming from abroad just to see it. And then the company said, "Look, we can't - you've learned enough about it now. We daren't - it's probably not reliable. We don't know whether we dare go on the air with it..." But in the afternoons in those days we did schools' programmes. Some of them were film and some of them were live. The live programmes had to be transmitted twice because the schools didn't have the same transmission times. If you transmitted at 2 o'clock you'd have to do it again at 4, you know, depending on how their lessons worked out. So it meant that the people that did the live programme at 2 o'clock had to go out and have a cup of tea somewhere and come back and go through it all again - do it twice. So the company said, "Let us record on videotape, using this new Ampex system, this programme. And then, at 4 o'clock, we'll put it out on tape, but what we'll do, we won't put it out on tape, the studio will still put it out but we'll use videotape as a standby. If anything goes wrong we'll cut to videotape. Because we dare not use it for transmission... too dodgy!"

[End of Tape 3, Side 5] [Tape 3, Side 6]

Alan Lawson: Dave Robson, Side 6. Yes...

David Robson: So...

Alan Lawson: You're on schools, yes.

David Robson: Yes, the company decided to use VT as a back-up for the live studio, in case anybody forgot their lines or didn't turn up. It worked. And then somebody said, "Why don't we do it the other way round? Why don't we do the first programme live, record it, and then put the second one out with the tape? With the studio standing by this time in case anything goes wrong." So one day, we were in Telerecording one afternoon and Master Control phones up and says, "Hey, want to hear something good? Ampex is going on air for the first time, 4o'clock." So we said, "Really?" So we turned all the lights out, we watched the clock tick round, "5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Go!" Up came the school programmes logo and the programme started. Nothing different, so we phoned up to say, "What's happened? Have you broken down?" "You're looking at it," they said, "it's on VT!" We were as amazed as anybody else, it was transparent - perfect. That did it. Immediately the company saw this, they put VT into operation just to do that one programme every day, I think, for several weeks. Didn't break down, worked perfectly every time. And they were double-banking of course in those days, you did it on two machines in case. So all the work and money that was spent, and all the problems associated with it that Harry Baker and John W. Southgate had been vindicated. We had the first machines working in Europe. They were so successful that now all the schools programmes, even some of the film was beginning to go onto videotape. And a new library build-up was already happening. Next thing we heard was the company said, "How about if we put two machines in at Wembley and recorded the Wembley output? We could get Television House to transmit it at night, we could send everybody home." Fantastic! So the Chief Engineer got us together and said, "We want two volunteers to start a new department, videotape department at Wembley." I was first there [laughs]. Myself and a chap called Jack Valencia, who was in Telecine, we applied and we got the job.

Alan Lawson: Jack who?

David Robson: Jack Valencia. Jewish chap. He's had rather a chequered career but he was a very bright lad, was Jack Valencia. We then thought, "We've got the job." And I sweated about the board because I couldn't get the information and I knew they were going to ask me questions about VTR and I couldn't get the information. So one day, I was up at Television House, chatting to John Southgate, and I said, "There's going to be a board. I wouldn't mind having a go at this." And he was very non-committal. He had his cronies he wanted to do it, he wasn't going to give anything away. And I noticed on the bench, there was a fold-out thing from Ampex. It wasn't a circuit drawing, but it was a description of a whole machine, how it worked. And I purloined it! [laughs] I put it back, but I took it. There was no photocopying in those days, so you had to protect the real thing. And they didn't miss it, they didn't know where it had gone, it had just disappeared. Dave Robson had been there, perhaps he's got it! Anyway, I took it home and I learnt it, word for word, page after page, so I could talk about every circuit, every thing. And I went to the library, I still couldn't get anything on servos, I couldn't get anything on FM, but I found enough information in this Ampex handout. It wasn't really - it was an Ampex handout, really.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: So, on the night before the board, I took a load of tablets to brighten myself up a bit because I was getting in a state, you know. And I thought to myself, "I've got to get questions on this. I'm determined to have this job, whatever happens." I could see the end of Telerecording as plain as... [laughs] Having seen it - the other people in Telerecording were lukewarm about it, "Oh it's just another system." But I knew it wasn't, really. So anyway, there were about seven or eight of us that applied for this job, there were a lot of people after it. And it came to my turn, I was towards the end and I was in a nervous state by the time I went in. There was the usual highly-polished board, the Chief Engineer was there. And I thought, "I hope John Southgate's not there. If he's there I'll just faint." But he wasn't, they'd purposely kept Southgate and Baker up at Television House because they thought that there would be a problem if they were on the board, because they'd do the questions in such a way that some of us who weren't lined up for the job couldn't get it anyway. So they started with all the usual separate circuits, "How does this work?" and "How does that work?". And at the end, the Chief Engineer said, "Right, the job you're going for is to run videotape. How does it work?" I was laughing! I started with it, and I'd been talking for about five minutes, like a lecture, when suddenly the Chief Engineer said, "That's enough, thank you very much. Next one!" [Laughs.] Couldn't bare the board listening to it, you know, I'd got it. And two of us, Jack and myself, we got together, the department at Wembley. There were only two machine to begin with.

Alan Lawson: New machines were they?

David Robson: Yes, brand new, the same model as we had at Television House, except that now we could erase on them and one or two things like that. Now, the interesting thing, I don't know if I should go on - do you want to - still game for more?

Alan Lawson: Oh, yes, yes. Most certainly.

David Robson: Well, the problem with VTR, with any kind of magnetic recording, is compatibility, as you know.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: Our problem was very serious at Rediffusion because we had two machines at Television House, and two machines, now, at Wembley. How do you make these machines compatible? Because they were going to record at Wembley, and transmit at Television House. And it could be the other way round, they might record some school programmes there, and we would have to transmit them. So John Southgate was really brilliant, and he said, "The problem with compatibility is the head line-up. The four transducers have got to be exactly 90 degree spaced." And he said, "When we line up the machine, our record phasing's got to be spot on. I'm going to produce a test tape." Ampex hadn't, at that stage, made any test tapes and we had to make our own. He said, "And head-life is very short." It was about 30 or 40 hours. And you spent about 10 hours lining up the head to make it compatible. So you got very little life out of the heads. Anyway, we did all this, and we got our machines 100 percent compatible. We would do test recording and send it up by courier to John Southgate and Co. And they'd run it on their machine and get us on the phone and say, "Yes, head two is a little bit early, can you do something about it. Apart from that it's lovely." So we'd tweak again, on head two - Trouble is,

when you did the adjustments, you would sometimes find that the - I don't know if you've ever tweaked a two-inch head drum, but you've got four transducers, each one at 90 degrees...

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: And what you have to do is adjust them all so that when you play a tape back - not on the same machine because it looks perfect - on another machine, which is also perfect, that's the problem they can look perfect - you'll get notching, you get one head earlier or later than the next. You've got to make - you've got to bring back all the heads, you've got to delay all the heads by the same amount, or by a different amount, in order to get a level run. Otherwise you get this all the way down the tape. So if you - perhaps you'd do one, you'd do two and you'd get to the third one, fourth one you didn't touch because it was right. But the third one, you'd find it was like a row of beads, it would knock the other two out and you'd have to start again. It would take hours sometimes tweaking away like this [indecipherable] and patience, you've got to keep doing it and keep doing it, takes hours to get it right. But we got it right in the end and it meant that we could exchange tapes. And this really didn't come to light until the other companies started getting videotape. A year or two later we started getting tapes from Granada, and it was a joke. We couldn't play them because they didn't have this compatibility problem. All their VTRs were in the same place.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: So they just made a recording, looked at it, lovely, send that one off to Associated Rediffusion. Well we played it but we couldn't play it back. It would take a whole day. We'd have to fuck about with the heads, you know, and get it all right, it'd take ages to do. But in the end we'd get it right and then we'd get a call from the engineer at Granada saying, "It'll look beautiful. Lovely tape wasn't it? Lovely recording." And we'd say, "Yes it was in the end." [Laughs.] But the only reason we could do this was because we had the compatibility problem at the beginning and that's where we had to get round it. But they didn't understand it. And the other problem with Granada was that they decided - their management decided that they would only have one grade, so that Telecine, Sound, Cameras, would all be same grade, and they would all do three months, six months in the appropriate department and get a general knowledge of television - very good idea. But the trouble was, they were all masters, but masters of nothing.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: They didn't have enough knowledge to do anything properly. And in VT you needed a wealth of experience to get the best out of the machines. And consequently we had this terrible problem with Granada all the time because as soon as they'd get three or four engineers trained up, then they'd move into perhaps Telecine or somewhere. And you'd have another load come in and they'd start over again. You never could win with Granada.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: So anyway, we pressed on. And we got that right and we started to record. We used to double bank things like Ad mags small things. Didn't do any drama at that stage. But

what we wanted to do - we didn't really want to be a department like Telerecording or Telecine, which simply recorded or transmitted. It was great fun, we enjoyed it, you know, like any kind of transmission you know that a million people are on you. Press a button and they're going to see it. But the first problem we had to contend with was that VTR machines were designed to work on 60 Hertz, not 50. And...

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: ...in America, they weren't using the mains, they were using separate pulse generators. Now, over here, going right back to the earliest days of television. EMI engineers said, "Everything must be referred to 50 Hertz. That's where the oscillators start and then multiply up." And the idea was that because you're using EHT and transformers, massive great capacitors, electricity capacitors which would dry out, you couldn't produce a TV set for the home which was reliable enough to not be without hum after a while. And the only way you can get rid of hum is to lock everything out to 50 Hertz. So although there's hum there, you don't get any hum bars because it's locked.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: And so, when it came to the end of the war, and we got away with this system, didn't need it any more because we had fly-back EHT now, which is non-lethal and you can make a cheap set for about 35 quid, no transformers anywhere, just simply use the fly-back. We didn't need that any more, you didn't need to be locked to 50 Hertz any more. So we said to the company, "Look, this is so old fashioned. We're using equipment here which is far in advance of anything that we had way back then. We don't want to be locked at 50 hertz." "Sorry, ITA regulations. We'd lose our licence. It says you know, in the small print - everything's got to be locked to 50 Hertz." So what used to happen - in the early 60s there was a lot more money about, people were beginning to be able to afford cars.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: They were able to afford refrigerators, central heating. All these things were taking lots and lots of juice. And round about dusk time, in the autumn and right the way through to beyond Christmas, you'd be load-shedding. It was dreadful, as soon as the local authorities were putting new street lamps in, they were taking power. And the power stations couldn't cope. So what they used to do is reduce frequency. The frequency used to go down from 50 Hertz to perhaps 49 3/4, just a quarter of a cycle out, would take a VTR machine off the air, just like that. Well we couldn't afford to go off the air, we didn't really want that to happen. And so the only way you could keep on the air during this period, it was a dreaded period, we hated it. Once you'd got over the dinner, you know, all the electric cookers are switched off - when you got down to about eight o'clock in the evening, it was stable again and everything was lovely. But that period between about half past four to eight was hell. So what you had to do, you had one man on a VTR machine, who would roll it on cue, having rehearsed it and done all the adjustments etc., the second man who would take out the switcher transience, because the pulses would have shifted. Then the same man would have to look after the drum and capstan servos and keep those on, because they'd wander off. And also it meant because we stripped the syncs

off and added them again at the end, the pulses were wrong as well. The line blanking and field blanking pulses were wrong and again you could lose your licence for that, because it meant that everybody's television set was going to start rolling [laughs], because the wrong pulses were going out. So once you went on the air, you had to tweak the whole, all the way through. You didn't know what the programme was about, you'd simply tweak solidly to try and pray that you had enough to play with on the controls to keep capstan drum running and the switcher transience out of the picture. It was hell.

Alan Lawson: That's between four and eight?

David Robson: Yes.

Alan Lawson: Good lord.

David Robson: In the winter. Summer was better.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: But due to this heavy load, and the power stations hadn't caught up with it yet. So we went to the management again and we said, "Look, we can't go on like this. It's going to happen, it's going to fall out at any moment. It's taking us three men to run one machine." "Well that's too bad, it's all part of the job. We're not changing just because of you. It's laid down it should be 50 Hertz and it will be 50 Hertz. So we had done some experiments. This is the start of the great experimenting era in VT - it goes on for years! Anyway, we took an audio oscillator, which we used for doing sound, checking sound response and so on. And we set it at 50 Hertz and we switched the machine to external lock, which is what the Americans use it on all the time because they're on pulse generators. And remember there were no separate pulse generators in those days. You had a station pulse generator and everything was locked off it, 50 Hertz, and everything was running off it. So we quietly did some experiments when no one was around, late at night with this oscillator. And we discovered that you could set the machine and go away and have supper and come back and it was still on - like the Americans used it! Automatic! You didn't have to touch it. So if the company knew we were doing this we'd be in trouble. And we dare not use it all the time because somebody might - the transmitter might suddenly notice, the pictures might be a little bit 'hummy' or something, you never know. So we put this oscillator in a cardboard box and hid it behind the racks. And we took feeds from it and we fed it to the jack fields. So all we had to do, round about four o'clock, was to patch in the machine on external lock, on the oscillator. And you could sit there and start the machine running and we could have had anything, it was beautiful! Absolutely out of this world! And they didn't know! They didn't know what was going on, but we dare not do it. I mean, when they came round they would come into VTR regularly, that's why we hid it in the cardboard at the back. We'd have only needed somebody to say, "What's this feed here? Where does that come from?" [AL laughs.] So it had to be done very quietly so that the management wouldn't know anything about it. So we were able to - and I suspect other companies probably found out the same thing. Everybody was breaking the rules probably in the end, but we weren't running on 50 Hertz. But that period soon went because they started to - in the early '60s they started to talk about a thing called genlock. Genlock was the start of transistorised pulse generators, which, instead of having to be phased to

outside broadcasts, or anything else for that matter, would phase automatically. We thought this was the answer, because what we wanted to do, we wanted to turn VTR into a production tool, we didn't like the idea of just recording and transmitting, anybody could do that. As long as they knew how the machines worked and did the maintenance properly, you were okay. So we thought, "What is needed is to be able to play VTR into a studio, with inserts, like Telecine does. Once we're there, we've got our foot in the door." So we suggested this to the management of production. They said, "Yes, go ahead." So we started to record inserts, which meant we didn't need film camera[men] any more. It meant a lot of people were gonna be out of work, and all sorts of things. We didn't like doing it. As film people, I felt it guilty. But we wanted - you know it was progress. So we started doing this and then we said to the company, "Well we ought to have an outside broadcast VT. So that you don't have to bring the signal in and re-phase and record it. We can do it in the studio." So eventually we got, bought a second hand VT machine and put it in a van. And we started doing programmes outside that way. Then came the big problem, the very big problem which took a lot of solving. The company said, "We now want you to record the programmes." You know, complete feature programmes, with the inserts in. Can't do it. Because as soon as you cut the VTR with a mixer, when you try to record that, the pulse change is so great it upsets the servos. The servos just go pththth [D.R. blows a raspberry]. And for about five or ten seconds the machine falls about, you can't - it won't lock. So we'd hoped that genlock would clear this but genlock was so quick, it didn't. Still the machines - you couldn't use the machines. So we remembered our experiments with the oscillator, and we thought, "If we could produce a phase-shifter, a very cheap one and use that on an external, locked to 50 Hertz, or the oscillator. And if we very slowly change the phase and then chase the servos for about twenty seconds or so, until it was phased up, it might work." So we used to get up very early in the morning, before the studios were working, and do these experiments through the mixer. And we discovered it worked. It had to be refined, so we worked away on it for months. And how it worked was, you - the thing you had to so was to - the things you had to do with the insert that was being run in, you had to phase it up with the studio and the way you did this was to use an external pulse and then you put the output of the studio onto the A scope amplifier, so that you could see all the pulses, right the way through on the field-wise. And on the B side you put the output of the VTR machine. You then - with this device it still took about four or five people to do it, took about twenty seconds. And you need to get down to it, you know. By God, you used to sweat doing it! And you used to - as soon as you knew the insert was coming up, you'd start the VT machine and you slowly pull the servos, bit by bit, drum, capstan, drum capstan, and switch, and drum and capstan and switch and drum and capstan and switch, through until you got both pulse coincident. At that moment, you'd bounce it to the vision mixer and say, "You've got it. Put it on now." And then they could take it, they could take the whole lot, they could take the inserts or whatever they wanted, and the recording machine didn't know it was happening. It just made a perfect recording. So we did some experiments with this, we got it down to twenty seconds, first of all it used to take us about thirty seconds. The secret was, how good was the vision mixer and PA because it required very accurate countdown from zero to thirty seconds. So we showed management what we'd achieved. It was called 'roll back and mix' - RB&M. In fact, on the cutting sheets it was marked 'RB&M'. And we showed them and they didn't really quite understand [laughs].

Alan Lawson: I'm sure they didn't!

David Robson: It was difficult even to explain, but that's what we did. So anyway, they said, "See what the producers have to say about it." So we set up a session. And we did some mock recordings in the mornings, showing them what could be done. We brought them down and showed them and they went mad. "This is what we've wanted!" The thing I haven't told you about is that Rediffusion wouldn't allow us to edit. You were not allowed to edit programmes. You had to treat it as television. This is something the Americans couldn't understand at first, we weren't even allowed to have a splicer in the place. And it took us a long time to get them to pay the money out to buy a splicer. And the only reason we got it was because we said we were wasting tapes, and we ought to be able to join bits together. "Good idea. Saves money." So we got our first editor! Anyway, we weren't allowed to edit, which meant that directors and producers had to be the old time TV type directors who knew all about television. But they still couldn't get the pace, they wanted pace, they wanted to have quick car chases so they wanted the man to go out of the door, jump on the horse, gallop off - and the insert, you see? And to record the whole lot so it could go out in the evening. So we showed them the experiments and they went over the top, "It's what we've been wanting for all this - we can cut and do all sorts of things." All the things that it can do on the edit bench, only better. So the first shows were scheduled and we gradually built up, we started off just with one machine, in the end we had three machines. Because each machine was virtually a camera as far as the director was concerned.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: He could call it up and use the insert, play the insert in, and the other machine was recording the combined output. It was the recording which was the problem you see. It was easier to run inserts in and phase up, but the recording machine wouldn't stand it, the servos were too slow, they wouldn't do it. The system worked like mad and we suddenly found we'd made a stick for our own backs! Nearly every production was RB&M'd. Whether other companies had learnt the secret or what they did, I think we were the only ones who were doing RB&M because most of them could still now farm their work for editing if something went wrong. And it was the kind of editing, it was only done when something went wrong.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: Which now leads me to the biggest scam of the lot. Round about this time we started to do co-productions with the Americans.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: People like Bing Crosby and that ilk would come over and do a very expensive Christmas show. So they'd put half the money in, Rediffusion put the other in. But the problem was, the Americans insisted on directing it. A producer is a director, or the other way round, they're different names - a producer is the director. So the producer, when he was told by the company that it has to be television, can't go edit. "Can't edit? You mean to say we've go to get it right?" "Do as many takes as you like, you can't edit. Keep rehearsing until you get it right." He said, "But we can't do that. A lot of our film studios have closed down in Hollywood, and all our directors are now ex film directors and they want to go five, six, seven, eight takes. And it takes

three or four weeks to edit a programme." The company said, "We're not having that. The cost of making a television programme goes sky-high." As it has done in the States. It was costing so much to produce a simple television programme because they didn't know how to do it, they had to edit it afterwards [laughs]. To get the pace, of course, and everything. So that was the contract. So the Americans came over and they had to do it for real. They couldn't manage it completely right, and you'd get Bing Crosby would do a pirouette and then hit the door or something like that. "What are we going to do? We can't put the show out like that!" So in the end, this what used to happen, the producer and his hangers-on would find out where VTR was and they'd come knocking at the door, "Say you guys, can you help us out? We've got a funny on that last recording - we can't put it out." So we'd say, "We're terribly sorry but company regulations, we're not allowed to cut." "Oh...I can make it worth while if you can do it." We said, "It wouldn't be worth our jobs to take the money. Sorry about that." "We've got to do something. What are we going to do?" "Tell you what, come back in about an hour's time and we'll have a look at the problem that you mentioned and see what we can do." So they'd go away and have something to eat somewhere. Meanwhile, we'd made a dub already. We'd dubbed a copy so we had the complete programme, a copy tape, a protection copy. We'd then find where the problem was, mark it up - you had to everything on the fly with chinograph.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: [Laughs.] That was the only way to do it, you know. And we'd say - and we'd do the edit but on the other copy they didn't even know about. [Laughs.] Nobody knew about it, only us! Then they'd come back after their meal and we'd say, "Well we've looked at the parts you mentioned - what do you think of this?" "Oh fantastic, you guys, you've saved my bacon. Oh that's lovely, that's perfect. How did you do it? Well you've save my bacon anyway..." - couple of greenbacks, "No sorry, can't. Not allowed to take that." [AL laughs] "Well we've got to pay you back somehow. How are we going to do this? I know...we're taking the whole crew to London, to the Savoy restaurant and a cabaret afterwards. You're our guests - would you like to come?" "Love to." We weren't supposed to be there in the evenings [laughs]. So off we went, we'd be wined and dined at these lovely restaurants in London. This was going on all the time with these co-productions. We got so big with food and we saw all the best shows in London. It was incredible! The company didn't know what was going on. Well if they did - they needn't know, the shows were being done, it wasn't costing them anything. But it came to a grinding halt eventually. It couldn't go on forever, that was the end of co-productions, they gradually faded away. But while they were there we had a really lovely time. VTR was really - you know. Nothing ever happened in the studio without VT recording. We now were the tail wagging the dog, at long last we'd got what we wanted. We'd got - we were a production tool, which they needed every day. It's like somebody on drugs, you had to have this all the time [AL and DR laugh]. So we couldn't go wrong. Great. Wonderful life. Anyway, we were still...are we still all right?

Alan Lawson: Yes, let's finish this side.

David Robson: So we were still looking for research and one day a story goes that RCA were doing some installations in Sweden, putting new transmitters in. And a man came to them and said, "I can build a VT machine, solid state. No valves at all except for the tube, there'll no valves

at all, solid state. Everything's going transistor now." So they listened to what this man had to say and they were fairly impressed. So they said, "Would you like to come to - We'll take you over to States. Would you like to come to work for us at Camden, New Jersey? Would you like to build one of these machines you're talking about?" So the chap said, "Yes. I'll build you one." So they took him over to New Jersey and he built the first transistorised VT machine. Everything was transistorised, no valves at all. It worked - the servos were absolutely out of this world. So they then went into production. They built two experimental machines. What was wrong was they were built rather like a film projector, with the - not magazines, but - the spools, 2000 foot spools at the top. One at the top, one at the bottom. So if you had to loose wind you were in trouble with the capstan. There was another problem too, it was too rushed, the mechanical side of it was rushed too far. Anyway, they built these two machines and they then approached Rediffusion because they knew we were 'gen kiddies' with VT, you know. And they said, "We'll give you two of these experimental machines for a year. If you like them you can buy them, but we want a report." So the management said, "We're going to give you two extra machines, two RCA machines." So we said, "Ooh, thank you." So we took the machines apart and we discovered the servos were out of this world and for the first time we said to the company, "You can now do electronic editing through the studio. And you can take a low-budget programme, a school programme or a kiddies programme, Sherlock Holmes, anything you like, and make it as complicated as you like. With these servos we can guarantee perfect edits all the way through." And they said, "How are you going to do it?" And I said, "All you've got to do is extend production time for thirty minutes in the studio. And when the director comes to the end of the shot he stops VT, he then moves the artists and scenery and everything and gets it ready for the next shot. We restart and edit and you edit all the way through like that." So we did it and we did a whole number of children's programmes. But the secret of it was you had to use the same personnel, you had the same VTR engineer, the same director and the same floor manager because of the time it takes to pass the cues on. I mean, as soon as the director was ready, you came to the end of a scene, he said, "Stop VT" so you'd stop. He'd then move everything round and get the artists ready for the next shot and everything ready, which you couldn't do as a full TV thing because there were so many changes required, you see? So then, when he was ready, he'd say, "Roll VT." So you'd roll back so that you could make the cut on the previous scene. But it depended on how quickly the floor manager could get the cue to the artists. So you got to know each other's speed of reaction, you have to know the reaction speed. And we did a whole series like this and... they still use the system, they still edit through the studio on low-budget programmes where the editing is fairly simple, you know. Where there is an edit on a cut or an edit on a fade or something like that. And it was all electronic, and we were able to do it with these very, very fast servos - incredible! It only takes seconds. Anyway, the problem with the RCA machines was they were all separate transistors, thousands of them and we started to get poor [indecipherable ?adaf?] response on one machine, the blacks were going grey and all sorts of things like that - smearing. To find the fault was hell, you know, thousands of blooming transistors, terrible job! There were other problems, for instance, they had a very elaborate head setup system. You know the system I told you about where you have to mechanically adjust the [?sounds like?'cottager'?] Didn't have to do that with the RCA, it was clever. You had electronic delay lines built in on the play and record mode, it didn't care where the head was, you could make it right, you know.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: And anybody with RCA could make it right. But we had to contend with Television House still, so we still had to make it - you had to be running on sync compatible, so it didn't help us but it was a clever idea. And the other problem, the other two problems were that when the head guide solenoid went in, bang like that to contact the tape when you press the start button, it moved the head physically, so that you had errors built in, it was terrible. And you had trouble with sound tracking. Sound quality was superb, but occasionally you'd get tape-weave. So anyway, at the end of the two years - at the end of the twelve months we said to the company, "Lovely machines, good ideas. Not good enough. Not yet." So we wrote a long report, the machines went back to the States to New Jersey. And they must have read the reports because when the new machines came out in colour, years later, they had ironed out all the problems we'd mentioned. They made the most perfect - better than Ampex. They turned out some wonderful machines. So that was the short thing we had with those. Then they were replaced by the best VTR machine that ever came out - the Ampex 2000, VR 2000. And we converted two of those for colour in the end.

Alan Lawson: The Ampex was a flatbed wasn't it?

David Robson: Yes that's right, yes. The other one was the only one ever produced was vertical like a projector. So that's what we did. And of course now with roll back and mix, we now had two VTR machines mobile. We had dispensed completely with film and poor old Telecine were out of a job. [AL laughs] They did all the leftovers, a bit of weather and a bit of this and - we felt very bad about it. And also there were no cameramen now left in the company, they'd all gone. No film processing at all, except for Telerecording, which still kept churning away because of 'Double Your Money' and 'Take Your Pick'. And we couldn't do our clever stunts particularly on 'Take Your Pick', because it was too involved. Couldn't do that. Impossible. I mean I think in time we could have done, but we didn't get around to doing that somehow. So that was the way we built up VTR and we did all this research work and we got this wonderful production tool on the go, which is now very much - couldn't go anywhere without VT.

Alan Lawson: Was the RCA tape-width the same?

David Robson: Two inch - standard.

Alan Lawson: Two inch, yes. Two-inch tapes, yes.

David Robson: There were beginning now to come in other grades. Ampex had always produced a one-inch machine for schools, the helical scan machine. And that became the basis for the new machines which came along in the late 70s, called the one-inch...VPR-1s. We laughed at Ampex and said, "No, we're not in for this 16mm stuff. We're two-inch men, we want quality." "Don't be worried about that," they said, "this is the new production machine!" "Helical Scan? You call it a production machine?" "Yes it is, it is." They were very hurt and upset by our attitude. They gave us demonstrations and we just said, "Stick it up your backsides! It's not professional - we don't want to know about that." "But," they said, "the people who do want to know about it, are not you people, not you engineers, but the producers and directors. Because they can still on their table, and they can edit and they can do anything with it. You can't do that with two inch." They were right of course, we couldn't. We could edit but it was a long process.

Alan Lawson: Yes, sure.

David Robson: And an expensive one. They were right, we were wrong. And one inch eventually took over. We weren't sorry to see it go I suppose but when our expertise had gone with it, you know, that we'd worked on through the years [laughs]. But it was interesting, an interesting period. Right well, I don't think there's much more to say because I don't really want to go into the London Weekend period. I'll tell you the beginning of it, because it was very nasty, very ugly. But, because I know the people, I don't really want to get involved too much in detail there. And besides it's probably boring stuff because the excitement of really achieving something which was growing rapidly was gone. It was there then.

Alan Lawson: But you were there at the end of Rediffusion?

David Robson: Yes. Now what happened was, one afternoon, we noticed some people walking about in the car park with sharp suits on. Well you know nobody in television wears sharp suits! We thought, "Who are these people? What are they looking through the windows for? It's very embarrassing." Anyway, it turned out they were the Pilkington Committee. And the management had fallen out with the Pilkington Committee, MacMillan and all these people thought they were a load of bums and didn't know anything about television and had the damn cheek to tell them their television wasn't good enough and they were going to make some changes. Instead of going along with it and trying to humour them, they didn't. And Frost and all these people made good play about it and said, "You're dealing with a lot of old grannies there. You want new television, new people. I'm the man you want - Frost." Lost the contract. It took a year and we were so upset. It was incredible, to see all our life's work ruined, absolutely ruined. People were having fits and going away and having to be treated. The year went on, slowly dragging towards the time when we'd have to close the studios. And the last night that they said, "Goodnight everybody" at the end, we shut down, pulled the switches. [D. R. bangs the table] Finished.

Alan Lawson: Did you get redundancy...

David Robson: [interrupts] All that work!

Alan Lawson: redundancy money?

David Robson: Well at the last minute they - the very last minute, the company took on some of us. I was okay - VTR. They said, "We don't want vast quantities, we're a small company, we only want a handful of people." It was a terrible company to begin with. We had a lot of ex-BBC people who had no idea of how to run commercial television. Absolutely no idea. People like Peacock and [???], absolutely dreadful [AL laughs]. Anyway, it caused a strike, a general strike, as you know.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: Every company came out on strike. We were all affected by it. It wasn't just London, I mean companies in the provinces. They'd all been hit by the Pilkington Committee and they couldn't see why. They were all turning out good television, nothing was wrong. But

Pilkington wanted changes. So a lot of people, good people lost their jobs. Southgate, the great father of VT went. Oh it was terrible, all the greats that had brought TV...er ITV, from 1955 up to its present state, had gone. So we - I don't know - one afternoon things got a bad state. We'd shut down and the Union had a meeting in the car park. And people wanted to go in and burn the place down, smash everybody's face off. And I suddenly realised, going right back to my first job, when those two people came into my cinema and stamped in their - and ruined everything and made a smell in there and shut the place down - I know how they felt now. They were frustrated as well, that's why they were shooting at us and trying to shut us down and burn the theatre. They were fierce, and we were, we wanted to go in and do the same thing, we were dreadful. The time comes when you can't stand something any longer and you explode. Anyway, the Union did the right thing. It knew that there was going to be very serious trouble, although everything was now shut down. They said, "When you do your picket duties, you will not picket your own place." So we had to picket Foley Street, and Foley Street had to picket us because they'd have wrecked the place. Now, I'm going to tell you an interesting story that's never been told before. So listen carefully [laughs]. On the picket line there was a man who came along and we said, "Who are you, are you a member?" And he said, "No." He said - what did he call himself? Not an activist - something else. And he said, "I know what you want to do. You want to get into Foley Street and you want to take over and run it, and make a show against Pilkington and get on the air and stop these terrible films going out, like 'Old Mother Riley' and stuff." [laughs] And the staff were going like that to us in the basement. They were saying, "Get stuffed, we're here. You're out in the street." It was driving us mad, we'd let all the tyres down in management's cars. We hadn't got around to breaking windows yet but we weren't far off it. And he was an anarchist, that's right, he said he was an anarchist. So we said, "How do you know all about this?" He said, "I know what goes on in union matters." So we said, "Well what do you suggest?" So he said, "If you'll agree to it, I'll go home...I've got some bombs. You know that aperture out there with the louvers on, that's the main air intake for Foley Street. Once I've finished work with that they'll come rushing out, ears and eyes running. It's stuff we use at riots and things. I've got a load up at home. I'll use it - if you want me to." So we thought, "This is getting a bit near it. ACT will never agree," - well ACTT as it was then - "They'll never agree to that." But we were in the mood, we were all ready to do it. So we said, "Okay, we'll do it." And we got together a team of VT, Telecine, Presentation. Presentation offices were there, everybody was there. We had enough people to run it, if we could get in. So this bloke disappeared. He said, "I'll be...

[End of Tape 3, Side 6] [Tape 4, Side 7]

Alan Lawson: David Robson, interview continued on 15th April, Side 7. Well you ran out on Foley Street so really you want to go back a bit just to about somebody who suggested you put smoke bombs in the air vents..

David Robson: That's right, yes, yes. Right well, what happened then of course is as I mentioned, along comes a policeman and we decided that what we were doing was highly illegal, and we came to our senses in fact and decided that we would just do our ordinary picket duties as required by the Union. And a lot of the lads went off and let down people's tyres which they thought belonged to the management in there. And we queried everything that went in and out, the usual picket duties. The chap never came back, and that was the end of that episode. So

then, at the end of that the other shift came one, we went home and so we started out next picket duty outside our own studios at Wembley. And every day the door used to open and a chap called Roy van Gelder[?] who was in charge of personnel, he was head of personnel, used to open the door and say, "Does anybody wish to return to work today?" The answer of course was, "No!" This went on day after day, it was boring. But it was required you know.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: He turned out to be a really super man. He was one of the what we might call - what we mustn't call nowadays - a 'white' man. And later on, after he'd been doing it for about a week or so - this is September, and the temperature was already beginning to drop, a cold September for some reason or other, and very windy, and one day he opened the door and stood outside, "Does anybody wish to return to work today?" The answer was, "No!" "Very well" he said, "I'll take five people at a time who would like to come into the canteen and have coffee or tea." [AL laughs]. And we thought, "This a human being in this lot [laughs]. This is fantastic." You realise how - what that is when they get back to... So we said, "Yes." So he really broke the ice this man. So all day long there was a tour of five people at a time going into the canteen. The canteen's at street level so you look out and you could see our - the rest of us - you know. So we carried on like that until the end of the strike. But I must go back to the cause of the strike.

Alan Lawson: That's what I was going to ask you there.

David Robson: Right, well, there were two causes, but first and foremost you need to go back to the close-down of Rediffusion. There was no party, nothing at all. After the National Anthem on the last day, there was simply an announcement, you know, "We're closing down for good." Bang. Or something of that sort. We were very, very depressed. We were just getting our coats on when suddenly the contractors arrived, started painting the walls a different colour. It was one insult after another, you know, they just wanted to get rid of us. They didn't really want to know anything about Rediffusion staff. They had to take us on because ACTT insisted on that. And they couldn't run a show anywhere without trained people. So we started to go home, we noticed there was somebody on the roof. They'd hauled down our wonderful flag, which had flown over Wembley all those years, Rediffusion flag, they'd hauled down. With one thing and another we really felt depressed that night - absolutely. Next day, we turned up for work and working parties were formed and I was attached to a group maintaining the cameras. I don't know anything about - I know very little about the innards of cameras - operated them but nothing more. So we started work on the Marconi cameras. And we were just looking for dry joins and making this that and the other.

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: Now, before, about a year or so before we lost the contract, Rediffusion now, we had said to the company, "We can't carry on where we are, we want to expand. We've got no more room for more machines, which we need." And they said, "Okay, we'll build a new VT area, completely. You tell us what you want and we'll do it." So we drew up the plans and then suddenly, bang, the contract, the franchise was lost. And they said, "We're not going to carry on with it, we're not going to waste any more money. We're finished here. That's it. The new

company will be taking over. We don't know who that company is yet but we're finished." So all the plans we had came to nothing and all the equipment which we'd ordered from Ampex to colourise the machines, because we were going into colour, came to nothing. So the stuff was just put away, all the equipment was put away in a warehouse and that was the end of it. So after we'd done this maintenance job on the cameras they realised that they would have to go on the air sometime [laughs]. So...[?indecipherable?] VTR, you know. They said, "Move into the new area, and since we're going to be going into colour, we need to time everything very carefully, we don't need any camera control any more, so close to you will be Presentation, Master Control and Lines. So all the technical areas except Telecine will be together." We thought it was a nice idea. So we got cracking. We started to colourise the machines - we got the 2000s...Ampex 2000s in there. And we started work. Now, what they had done, they had engaged a number of people who knew very little about television, to run anything. And there was a man in charge in all technical areas, I won't mention his name, but he had been in charge of films at Foley Street. An extremely good man at that job, Telecine, they had camera telecine there. And they obviously had a meeting to deal with us, us staff which they didn't really want there. And if you passed anybody in the corridor they would look the other way as if you were a bad smell. They just didn't want to know about Rediffusion staff. And this man came into the room one day when we were doing the work, and he said, "Where's the library?" So I said, "It's in that room over there. The shelves havn't gone in yet, but that's where it's planned to be." He said, "How do you prevent a tape being taken out of the library and brought into VTR and recorded on by mistake?" In other words you're looking to lose a programme. So I said, "Very good question. There'll only be VT people here, nobody else. We know what we're doing. We've got everything labelled up, as master tapes or dubs or whatever and there's also paperwork inside the boxes. That's just the way it works." "That's not good enough" he said, "I want you to go to the ironmongers shop and get an anchor chain. And I want you to run the anchor chain through all the boxes, with a padlock." So I said, "But we couldn't run that way. People are in and out taking tapes out all the time, it's a busy area, as you'll find out." "We're the masters now. You'll do it or else." And out he went and he nearly got a punch-up, very nearly. This was, we discovered, the expression they'd all been taught to say, "We're the masters now." So if there was any query about anything, or you tried to point out something, "We're the masters now." So we carried on, we were upset about it, the atmosphere was terrible. You could cut it with a knife you know. There were other people apart from Rediffusion there, there was a sprinkling of BBC people and some people from ATV and other companies which are joined. But we were the ones they were at daggers drawn for some reason or other. Anyway, we noticed a notice on the notice board one day and it said, "The Chief Engineer is going to give a lecture on cameras." Well we had the highest respect for BBC engineering, and we thought, "It's the Chief Engineer so it should be very interesting." So we decided to go and they all the seats laid out, and there was a blackboard and he was up on the rostrum. I can't remember the Chief Engineer's name - strange. I've looked it up and I can't find it. Anyway, he said, "I'm going to talk to you this afternoon...

Alan Lawson: Not Greenhead?

David Robson: ...No, no. "I'm going to talk to you this afternoon about reparation of cameras. You are used to running them on the linear part of the slope," That's the input/output slope of the camera, which is how you're supposed to run them. So he then did the drawing on the board and said, "This part of the slope is where you'll be operating it in future." And one of the chaps at the

front said, "But that's going to affect the greyscale, you're going to have black crashing[?] and so forth." So he moved, he didn't answer that, he said, "It will make a difference" and he moved on. And then he went on to explain it in more detail and somebody in the front, a Rediffusion person, rather rudely interrupted him and said, "But what do you want to do this for? We've got the best reputation in the whole network, including the BBC. Our pictures are better than anyone else's - what do you want to change them for?" "We're the masters now." We all got out and left him, just talking to himself and walked out. This was what was happening. "We are the master now." They weren't prepared to listen. But it was sparked off by this chap who, very rudely said that. Normally most people would have made a joke about it, and said, "Well, you know, we've got to make changes..." But he didn't - "We're the masters now." Everybody got up and walked out. Now we're coming down to the reasons for the strike. There were two reasons - first of all, we were in the middle of the wage negotiations which are in August, which come every year. And normally ACTT wouldn't have pushed anything, they would have gone on with the negotiations in the normal way. But there was so much trouble now from all the companies that were having to deal with people the new franchisees had taken over, and didn't really know much about television. And they wouldn't come to them for advice or anything. But the atmosphere on all the stations was very, very bad indeed. You had a sort of dual-pronged problem. They were sacking people left and right, there were redundancies and you had this terrible atmosphere of those people who stayed on. A lot of people were already leaving. Most of the staff in Telecine had hopped it, they'd gone to Thames. I lost track of everybody in Telecine. This is after they'd been taken on, you know.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: [Laughs] Terrible place to work, it really was. So you had this dual problem - the new franchisees wouldn't talk to ACTT about any wage structures at all. Everything would remain exactly as it was and they would carry on making changes to staff as required. "We have the licence, we have the franchise. You can go one way. We're the bosses, you do as we say." [Laughs.] "We're the bosses now." Oh, that expression! I think they must have had a meeting and told all their managerial people that that's the way Rediffusion people had to be treated. "Don't get involved with them. Just tell them you're the boss now and that's it." So, we came to the opening day and this terrible atmosphere, and we'd got everything working, just about. And the night before, I was in the second day, the big day, the Saturday where we had 'World of Sport' and everything else to do. But on the Friday night we just had a few hours because we had the weekend franchise now, so we'd have a few hours transmission Friday, then all day Saturday, all day Sunday - as it is now in fact. And we noticed in our horror at home as we were watching, all those people who were off-duty were watching us, you know, our new company. And it was breaking down continually. And we thought, "Whatever's going on there?" And the sign's coming up, 'We'll be back in a moment.' Anyway, they struggled on, they kept a picture of some sort on that Friday night. It was so amateurish, unbelievable that a company could behave like that. They only had to come to us and say, "We're going open up and we want this and that, let's get at it." But they didn't. So anyway, the next day we arrived at 8 o'clock in the morning to get ready for transmissions. And we had a very heavy day in VT because we'd never done 'World of Sport' before and we'd taken on the staff and all the tapes of ABC Television, who had the 'World of Sport' franchise. So we had to take that on, we'd never done it before, with no rehearsals, nothing at all. We had a great stack of tapes in VT. So anyway, we got on the air, up

came the logo, everything was fine. And suddenly we noticed that pictures were disappearing off the network. We though, "The network's closing down for God's sake. Whatever's happening?" And then we heard a cafuffle going on at the back. Apparently the Lines engineer had taken us off the air. Our output - we were actually running then - disappeared as well, off the monitors, which meant that the transmission feed just went blank. We thought, "My God, we're at it again. Another day. Whatever's going to happen next?" What had happened was, the Lines chap, on instructions had killed the output. And because the whole place was loaded with management, they'd had enough of it the day before so they were everywhere. Every department had management in it, watching you. And they went straight into Lines, pressed a switch to get it back on the air again - that did it. I don't know who was the organiser then but he just said, "Right, okay." He quietly came in to us and he said, "Gentlemen, into the car park." We said, "We can't, we're on the air, we're running." He said, "Don't touch anything, just go straight into the car park. We're finished." But we said, "These things will go off track." "Forget about it" he said. "Forget it, just go into the car park." Normally when something like that happens you feel terribly sad and dejected. We walked with joy because we knew now that everybody would know the situation and perhaps even at this late stage they'd lose the contract. But we know that they didn't. So we went into the car park and it was really dangerous in there. People were losing tempers and were going in to punch-up people they found on technical areas. The shop steward was deposed immediately and a new one was voted in. It was a chap called Gavin Mordell [?Wardell?] who is still there. He calmed the situation down considerably. And he said, "There's nothing we can do here today. The only thing is - go home. There'll be no wrecking, no breaking windows, no smashing people's faces. Just go home." It was really ugly, absolutely ugly. So we went home and so this is where we catch up on the first thing at Foley Street. That ugly mood was already there. So...

Alan Lawson: How long did the strike go on for?

David Robson: Um...I think about three weeks, three or four weeks. Something like that.

Alan Lawson: And that was the whole of the networks went?

David Robson: Yes. Whole of the network was out.

Alan Lawson: And what was the result in the end?

David Robson: The result was that the companies were actually brought to order. They said, "You'll get no television until you talk to us." And they did and a new wage structure was sorted out then and it's began to settle down. But now I'll talk about the culture because the culture was the most interesting thing of all. First of all, you know the culture before we went on air, which was dreadful.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: When we went back there was a complete change. They didn't talk to us again but this time nobody came and said, "You will do this, you will do that." We just got on with it and we did it. And we kept on the air, had no great problems. When you came in, it was eyes

down, it was jolly hard work because they were wanting to do all these programmes. They said right at the beginning, "We're only a small company you know. We don't want all these people and equipment." And this was - this dogged the company all its life. They never had enough machines or people. And the overtime rates were so tremendous. People were buying mansions in Devon and driving to work in BMWs. You started work really after closedown. That's when you started work. But anyway, coming back to the early days, what was happening was, those original managers were being fired and replaced by Rediffusion staff which had all gone all over the country. Some had gone to Tyne Tees, some to Anglia, and they were gradually coming back. Not necessarily in the positions they'd had before but they were coming back and they had the original Rediffusion culture. So at last we were able to talk to people who would talk to us. One of the things was happening, never seemed to happen before, but when people went on leave, when they back their office was closed - taken over by somebody else. And they'd immediately go to Roy van Gelder and say, "Who's in my office? What's going on?" "Sorry - you're sacked." And they'd go. And so the story got around - "Never take leave because when you come back you'll be sacked." [laughs] So a lot of them were fired and got rid off. The man who made the rude gestures at Foley Street, he was the man who was generally in charge of technical areas. And he was given a golden handshake - he went [laughs]. The 'Chain Gang Man' we called him. All these people were gradually getting fired and getting rid of. And we were gradually getting back to a more normal use. But the company was completely different to Rediffusion. It was younger, and more sort of entrepreneurial. It would take risks with programmes which we thought were dreadful at the time. But we were wrong and they were right. They had the right ideas. And because we didn't have enough machines to go to colour completely, we started doing pilots in black and white, of some of the new programmes. And one of them was called 'Upstairs Downstairs'...

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: ...and we looked at it and thought "Can't have anything about Edwardian London - rubbish isn't it?" Anyway we did the pilot and as I say we weren't very impressed with it. It was just another television programme. And our ratings in those days - we didn't get anything in the top twenty at all. Nothing, for about a year, nothing at all appeared, whereas at Rediffusion we were always about third or fourth, you know. Couldn't go wrong! Anyway, we then did one version of it, in colour, and I think they probably signed everybody up for perhaps six or thirteen episodes, I don't know. They spent quite a lot of money on the sets and things, so we did this one programme and we put it out. And to our amazement it got into the ratings at number eighteen. We'd never seen any of our programmes in the ratings before. We couldn't understand it. We might really like sort of thing, you know. So we went on making it and it got right up until it was top, top of the twenty! You know we just couldn't believe it. And this was about the time when a lot of new programmes, very successful programmes were coming along. Light programmes as well like 'On the Buses', which were made - they made films of it. There was one on the box recently. 'Doctor in the House', all these things. And a lot of people like Pauline Collins were made stars of, out of these programmes. They had a habit of - when they were going to do a series, the contract for artists would say that you would appear in anything else we want you to do. So this is the way they got artists very cheaply because they put them into, say, 'Upstairs Downstairs' and they'd do a bit in 'On the Buses' and they'd do all sorts of things, different roles of course, under the same contract. That's very interesting. We were appalled at some of the

people they took on. I mean, we thought that Janet Street Porter was the end! I mean, she couldn't even speak English! We thought, "What's the matter with the company, taking on people..." But she was a brilliant producer, she really was. We were wrong again. The younger ones were actually pushing everything to the limit and getting some very good shows. [AL laughs]. Which you wouldn't have done under Rediffusion. Rediffusion was a little bit like the Beeb, it was stuck in its mode, it's ninety-minute plays and very little light programming and no sit-coms or anything. Whereas the new company was a complete change.

Alan Lawson: The thing that it seemed to me that when you were at Rediffusion the management rather kind of left your department alone.

David Robson: Yes, yes, it did.

Alan Lawson: ...and to use your initiative, which you did.

David Robson: Yes.

Alan Lawson: Did that happen when you got to LWT?

David Robson: Um, no, because there was no time. We were hard pressed. Whereas in the Rediffusion days, you had to have what was called a 'hot' machine, that was a machine on standby, which was never used except in an emergency, and no emergencies ever arrived, so it never got used - except for something I'll tell you about later on. But with the new company the machines were hard pressed into use all the time and even then we couldn't cope with the load. And one of the problems we had to deal with was this - something new had happened in the business. Whereas commercials used to be all on film, now under the new company, all these little back-street companies were coming along and making commercials, colour commercials. And they would arrive on a 'G' spool which take about five minutes worth of two-inch tape. And each one would obviously have to be lined up before it could be transmitted. We were in such a terrible state now that we were having to hold up rehearsals, we'd have to get onto the producer who was in the middle of a rehearsal of whatever programme. And we'd say, "Sorry, stop everything, we've got a commercial." And we couldn't go on like it, it was dreadful. And we were getting more and more, so I did a paper and sent it up to management and said, "Look, we can't go on like this, it's impossible. It's holding up programmes, it's causing troubles in the studio and we can't cope with it in VT either. Surely you can ask the agencies, the agencies must be told to carry on but in film." So they said, "We can't do that. The agencies want to be able to - if for instance there's an F1 race on Goodyear Tyres for instance, they would expect to see a commercial for Goodyear in the afternoon. Can't do that with film." I appreciated they couldn't do that. And so they were all jumping on the bandwagon, all making commercials on tape. And Telecine's output was going down and down and down. Telecine might have a film commercial at the beginning and the end and the rest would be VT.

Alan Lawson: Well that brings me to the other point. When you first started with VT you said the life of the head was 30 hours and you'd probably used up 10 lining it up.

David Robson: Yes.

Alan Lawson: Did it improve?

David Robson: Yes indeed. Yes it didn't take long before we were going to 50 hours and then 100 hours and so forth. They were making the heads of much tougher material. And the awkward thing about it in those days was that if you - Just before a head dies you get the really, really nice quality out of them, really superb. And if you were in the middle of say, perhaps a ninety-minute play and you knew that head was really sparkling and you thought, "I wonder if it's going to last out?" Usually it did, but the signs were, when you went to the caption routine, if you had white on black captions, which were quite common in those days, the whites would start to overload and you knew the head was finished. You prayed that it would last 'til you got off the air. And normally it did. So out with the old head and change it. And gradually the hours went further, higher and higher and higher. So 500 hours was nothing.

Alan Lawson: Were they eventually plug-in heads?

David Robson: No, well the whole head assembly...

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: ...which you had all the vacuum device and everything on it. That unplugged and you sent that back to the States. And they then put a new head wheel in and it got sent off to some other company, you know, it was just like a thing. We kept two or three spares, so as soon as one was gone we took them out of stock - stores - put it in, and then booked time - we didn't have to book time in those days at Rediffusion, you could take time. We used to, although there was no overtime we used to sometimes work at night, when it was fairly clear. That didn't worry us, we were very keen in those days [laughs]. And we'd spend a few hours getting the head just right. Then we'd make a test tape and send it up to TV House. And they would play it on their machine and say, "Yes it's okay. But we're a bit worried about head 1, it's a little bit late." So we'd say, "Okay." So we'd have another tweak and get head 1 right, do another test and send it off to them and they'd say, "Yes that's fine, perfect." And that's how we worked, and that's why it was - we were lucky in the company that we had this arrangement because it meant that all our tapes, everywhere were 100 percent. And it wasn't until we got up tapes from other companies that we were in trouble.

Alan Lawson: Then you had trouble, yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: [Laughs.] We weren't in trouble but it used to take a long time to line up. It wasn't until we got a device called a Head Equaliser. How we used to do it in those days, the early days, because you're interested in the technical business, was that each transducer on the four heads had its own amplifier, processor. And if the head was late, you couldn't do anything about it, but if it was early, you could delay that head. So we made up dozens and dozens of cables, with an F and E at each end, all different lengths. And we used to play back from perhaps the Granada tape, and we used to look at it, we used to say, "Head 2 is so early we can't cope with it." We used to take the earliest heads first, make a note of them. Because the firing order is 1,3,4, 2 on the heads, so we knew exactly what to do, what amplifier to go to. We used to actually disconnect the cable and put in a long cable [AL laughs], which would then actually

delay the video by that much. And you kept on doing it until you got it right. So you then had one head that was right. You'd then look at the other heads, decide whether they needed doing or not, or if one head was noisier than the other, so you'd change tracks. You could change tracks, you could move it either way about two sets of tracks, the phasing. So we'd look at that - it used to take hours to line up. But in the end you ended up with perfect. They used to ring up afterwards and say, "Wasn't that a lovely recording." We used to say, "Yes, it was beautiful but it took hours to line up." [Laughs.] They didn't realise you see, this problem. Because in Granada particularly, what they were doing - Did I mention this before? I didn't, or did I? What they were doing was, they wanted to train everybody in all departments...

Alan Lawson: Yes you've told me.

David Robson: ...I did mention it. So you had a throughput in VT, they were never there long enough to learn all the tricks of the trade unfortunately. But that was that. Anyway, so the problem with commercials, which were the thing which was causing the problem. So the company bought a cart machine, the RCA cart machine, which was very Heath Robinson, terrible thing it was, always breaking down and so forth. Now what we used to have to do, as the workload got greater and greater, we brought a shift on at night, which used to start about midnight, as soon as we could let them have the machines. We used to come on, we used to take it in turns. And you got all the G spools together and you had a running order, this was on a Friday night for Sat - this was on a Thursday night for Friday rather, then there'd be a Friday night session for Saturday, and a Saturday night for Sunday. So you'd bring the big shift on and all they would do would be to correct the colour and dub onto the cartridge, little cartridges which take about three or four minutes of tape. And you'd give it a number, so that when the programme order came down, all you did was load up the carousel - it was a carousel, took about twenty cartridges - you'd load it up in the correct order for the commercial break. Well unfortunately the machine was so dreadful, breakdowns were terrible, absolutely. The amount of money the company paid out in insurance claims for lost commercials, it must have been terrible. Terribly embarrassing for us because we couldn't work on it during the day because it was in use. And at nights they wanted to use the machine for dubbing, so you had this terrible catch 22 situation.

Alan Lawson: The night shift - was that on overtime?

David Robson: Oh yes, yes. Three and a half t. As I say, people were buying places out in the sticks and driving to work in the early hours, driving back home in the early hours of the morning in their BMCs, really!

Alan Lawson: So that's why a lot of people have got places in Spain! [laughs]

David Robson: Well I don't know about Spain - not in those days, but they could easily do! It ruined their private lives. A lot of wives packed it in, there were a lot of divorces. It was just absolutely dreadful the way the company was behaving. But it had no - it started off on the wrong foot, with a small company. It never got beyond that. We couldn't expand from VT, we couldn't do anything. So they got a second cart machine and we carried on with that as well as we could. We got RCA to come down from Camden, Camden Town New Jersey, and we said,

"Look, this machine's a real 'bunce'. You know, a Heath Robinson. How can you expect it...?" And they said, "Well it should do 95 percent." And that'd spent overnight tweaking. And the first night would be good, but then it would - because it was mechanical, every time a carousel stopped, it would load the tape in with tremendous force. The doors would open, the tape would shoot in and it was mechanical loading which was the problem. And this is the trouble with all cartridge systems - mechanical loading is a problem. So I then said to the company, "Look, we're no better off." We'd moved to South Bank by this time, and we didn't have enough room there either.[laughs] So I said, "Why don't we do like we used to do in Telecine years ago, let's dub them all onto one reel." And they said, "Can't do it." So I said, "Why not? Why can't you do it?" And they said, "Well because if the commercial break changes during the day, what can you do about it?" They had a point! [laughs]

Alan Lawson: Yes, quite, yes.

David Robson: It was so we could take it out and put another one. But you couldn't do that once you'd - once it had been edited together in a string. Although you'd got now 100 percent transmission, never any breakdowns, you couldn't change the system. And that's no good for commercials.

Alan Lawson: Was there any reasonable method then of joining tapes?

David Robson: Oh yes, yes indeed, yes, yes.

Alan Lawson: What was it - a weld?

David Robson: Well in the early days, the very early days, we were using the Smiths of course, as I explained to you last time. But then, by the time the new company had come along and we'd got now brand new RCA machines - must tell you about that. Right at the beginning we only had a chance to convert two machines to colour, took us a long time. And it used to take about an hour and a half to line up the colour - terrible business, getting it just right. And the Chief Engineer, before he left, before he got fired [laughs], he said, "We'd better start from scratch with a complete new equipment designed for colour." We thought, "That's the best things he's said!" [laughs] But he went to RCA, which worried us enormously because we were Ampex people. But bearing in mind that we'd had two machines experimentally as I told you, and we'd written a report to RCA that said, "You're on the right track - beautiful, stay with it but alter this and alter that..." The new machines came with all these modifications in, and flat bed machines - they were TR70s - best machine ever produced, recording machine ever produced. Lovely machine, easy to maintain, you'd just pull a module out and you'd get scope in both sides if you were mending it. Beautiful machine to work on. So anyway, there was an editor that went with that - very crude but it was electronic. We did all the things like 'Upstairs Downstairs', all those programmes that I mentioned were done using the system. But that had to be done very late at night because the machines were being used at the weekend for transmission. You couldn't edit because we still only had four machines. No more room, and they wouldn't take any more staff on anyway! [laughs] So that was the problem. So the next thing was I had seen the Ampex cart machine. And being an old Ampex person, I was very partial to it. I went up to the management one day and said, "The answer really is to get rid of those cart machines, they're bloody useless,

they're not even worth junking, you wouldn't get any money for them. Nobody wants them." They said, "What's your idea?" I said, "Well you could go to Ampex and use the Ampex cart machines." They said, "What, buy new machines?" I said, "Yes, it's the only answer. Afraid it is, can't go around like this." So they said, "How would the staff go along with that?" So I said, "They won't go along with it at all well, I'll have to work on them." So they said, "Well okay, do what you can and come back and talk to us," you see. So gradually I worked up a scheme whereby when we were talking about anything, we talked about Ampex cart machines and how wonderful they were. And gradually, because they were afraid of losing all this wonderful extra money that was funding their mansions and their BMWs. [laughs] If I could work out a system where there was no overtime required, they'd be out of business. They were getting overtime, not me, I was in charge of VT. They were getting salaries four times as high as me, I was having to the overtime - work out the overtime - so I know! Anyway, I gradually talked most people round and I got up two loads of people and I said, "We'll go over to Euston" where my old friend Harry Baker was, "and we'll let you have a look at their system, how it works." So I took a group of people over there and spoke to Harry and he said, "Yes come in." And Harry was running just there at Euston, they had just commercials, they just had a whole department doing nothing else but commercials. They had it down to a tee with a complete new library system and the Ampex cart machines. And we said - I mean while we there they were rattling out commercials just like a machine gun, you know [laughs], so different from us. It was very rarely that we'd get through a break without a breakdown. So I said, "Now you've seen. Now you know what I mean. Ampex will do it." So Harry said - they put a machine up for maintenance once a week to make adjustments. But the reliability was really excellent. So that was one lot. So I took another party down to Southern, to Portsmouth, to another company that had had Ampex in. And this was amazing, it was really rural. They had one machine in a corridor [laughs] doing nothing else but commercials. And it was run by one chap from Telecine! Incredible! While we there suddenly all the lights went on and it started churning commercials out, you see. There was nobody there [laughs]. So I went in to the chap and said, "What do you do about this?" He said, "After each break we go in and reload the carousel if it needs reloading. We don't touch anything. It's all remoted to Pres. When Pres. want to run it, they run it, that's it." So I thought, "Well the reliability is absolutely out of this world. I mean to leave a machine in the corridor with nobody there, running commercials, which is the lifeblood of the company, just like that. Really amazing. I said, "What do you do about maintenance then?" They said they had a man who used to come in at the weekends and he would take the machine apart and do any adjustments and so forth. So I went back with this information and managed to get the rest of VTR interested enough to say, "Okay. What's it going to mean for us?" And I said, "We don't know yet. Get the machines and find out." So I went up to the company and said, "I've talked most people round. I don't think there'll be any problem. We'll have to do it whether there was a problem or not, we can't carry on like this." [laughs] So they then - Ampex had stopped making the machine strangely enough, but there had been such a demand because of all these breakdowns with RCA that they'd had to start up the actual production line again. So they were actually turning out this particular machine again. And so we were to get an order in for two. We then sent the staff away on courses, sort of two-week courses on the machine. And we got them in, installed them - lovely, no more problem. That was it.

Alan Lawson: Where did they go for the courses?

David Robson: They went to - we had a studio in those days just off the north circular road at - what was it called? Anyway there was a room in that studio for the Americans to come down with a machine and all the gear and the equipment and so forth and we did the courses there. So we didn't have to go to the States or anything like that - unfortunately. [laughs] So that's it. We managed to do that. But that was the problem, that was the main problem - commercials were the great problems.

Alan Lawson: Now I'm going to stop you there...[cut]

[End of Tape 4, Side 7] [Tape 4, Side 8]

Alan Lawson: Now where do we go Dave? I thought - have you finished with London Weekend now, do you think?

David Robson: I'm just trying to think. I don't think there's anything else. We've talked about the culture, which was totally different and very young producers and directors.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: Oh, we had several moves. Once we'd moved to South Bank, which we thought all the - we'd be back in clover, you know, although it was a nuisance for us because we now had to travel - a load of people had bought houses by now in Wembley. And so we now had a travel problem on our hands. But it wasn't any better. The company still had this funny idea of, "We're still small," you know. The people at the very top still had this idea. So we had two moves there and eventually we took over a whole floor, because by we had by this time editing suites. It got bigger and bigger and bigger and I also managed to get a maintenance department for the first time. Instead of having to say to people, "You and you, work on so and so." We now had a proper maintenance department and we could take machine out at regular times. Because...

Alan Lawson: And not on overtime with the whole staff. [laughs]

David Robson: Still had lots of overtime but for different reasons. Still brought a late shift in at the weekend because now we had to transfer all these - still on G spools - the trouble was the industry had never got around to standardising commercials. They all came in on G spools and then you either put them on RCA or you put them on Ampex. Or you ran them on the machine, you could do that either.

Alan Lawson: Explain a G spool.

David Robson: G spool was about that size, about 6 inch diameter and it would take about 5 minutes playing time of tape.

Alan Lawson: Aha, I see.

David Robson: They weren't necessarily designed for commercials because they were around before then. They were used for short inserts into programmes, promos and things like that. But

that was it. And if we had any spare tape, didn't have any physical editing, we couldn't allow that. We'd chop it up. In fact we got the - we managed to get - because the old company wouldn't allow editing under any form, so we had to disguise it as best we could and we got them to get a Smith's editor on the understanding that we'd spool up a lot of G spools on the gash[?] tape - "Good idea, very economical." We'd got it. But we used it for editing as well. But anyway that's a little story. I think we covered it anyway. Yes, so I can't remember where we got. Yes you were saying, we still needed to bring in a late shift because the G spools had to dubbed now, again, onto cartridges. But it was a quick process, there were never any breakdowns, nothing like that. All we needed was two VT machines, one would be playing into one cart, the other one would be lined up, getting ready to play. It was like a factory once we got going - as soon as everybody was out and we could get cracking - just like a factory. We'd get clear by about two or three o'clock in the morning. People would go home. We'd try to get it down - you see you had to be really careful because if it went on after five or something like that, they'd claim breakfast as well. And you'd be into twenty-four hour sort of ACTT, you'd be into five t. I mean [laughs], it was a terrible problem trying to work out how you could look after the company without upsetting the staff as well. It was a - it was a difficult line to take. But you did all right, but we managed it. Towards the end it was... Now there's very little overtime because that system's all been dumped, there's no more two-inch, no more one-inch. They're using servers and disk, putting it on disk - marvellous. It's all done, perfect.

Alan Lawson: [Laughs.] Now I'm going to go right back...

David Robson: ...yes...

Alan Lawson: ...Dave. Can you remember when you were aware that you had an aunt but she had a special position?

David Robson: Yes. Well - interesting question. In families you don't really - you're not aware of anything like that because you live with people and by now I was at Welwyn Garden City, was brought up for some years there. And Flora was living there then. And she was working at the Shredded Wheat factory, which was the other side of the lines, the Cambridge line. And the film studios were on that side, in fact that is the commercial side of Welwyn. And she was - she had a kind of PR job, she used to take visitors round and show them how they did the shredding of the wheat. And she also ran a lot of outings for the staff and, sort of personnel job she had.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes, yes.

David Robson: We thought she was a very strange lady because she played golf, ladies didn't seem to play golf in those days. And she smoked, which we didn't like very much, in fact she set fire to the bed on one occasion [laughs]. My grandfather was furious. He loved her, it was the women in the family that were a bit shaken with her you know. And she rode a bicycle. All these things were rather unladylike and not quite the sort of thing that you would expect. Anyway, she used to play the piano quite a lot and I was learning the violin, so she used accompany, you know.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: But the thing that really impressed me greatly in those days was, she used to read to me when I went to bed. I never liked to go to bed early in the summer, used to go to bed about 8 o'clock, it was still daylight. And she used to come in, used to read a bedtime story. And the thing I remember most was the reading of 'Treasure Island'. That was taken one chapter at a time and we had this wonderful bound volume at Welwyn with all the lovely illustrations in colour. It was absolutely - I wish I could get hold of it now! Anyway, my grandmother got very worried because she said one morning, early hours of the morning, I'd got out of bed and I was asleep really, sleepwalking and calling out, "Blood, blood, blood!" [AL laughs.] And she told Flora, "Your going too far. He's getting - he's living it!" [laughs] I don't know whether you know the story but there's a bit of it where Hans, Israel Hans climbs up the mast in order to get to Jack Hawkins. He's running away from him, he's only got this gun so he discharges the gun at Israel Hans, but at the same time Israel Hans throws a knife and it goes into his shoulder and pins him to the mast. Well there's blood everywhere on the deck, and a dead body in the bay [AL laughs]. The ship was the Hispaniola. I remember it, it must have had a great affect. I've seen all the versions of 'Treasure Island' since then and they don't come up to anything like the wonderful stories that Flora used to tell. Anyway, so that was the thing. Later on, when all the nephews and nieces grew up a bit and she had by this time made her name, or was making her name. She was in Cambridge rep. at that time and the odd West End appearance was yet to come. And she had a flat at a place called Mecklenburg Square in London. And we all used to go there once a year for a sort of party. She loved children, she didn't have any of her own, she wasn't married. And we used to play murder and stuff like that and we were taken also always, every year to a pantomime. And the great treat was to be taken to a Lyons corner house [laughs]. Things that children love, you know! So that used to go on every year and of course I remember seeing 'Where the Rainbow Ends' and crying my eyes out! [laughs] But later on, if she was in a West End play, she would say, "Would you like to come and see a rehearsal." And because I was a Londoner then, South London, I used to come up to town and sit in the stalls and hear the producer say, "No, Flora I don't want you to do that. I want you to do this." So I'd sit all through the rehearsals. [laughs] I got a feeling for it; I was beginning to understand what it was all about.

Alan Lawson: Can you remember any of the producers?

David Robson: Not really. I can remember some very strange things that happened. When I was very young, at Welwyn, Flora used to bring back some very strange people who were producers and things. And I remember being taken aside one day by my grandmother, she said, "Now, Aunt Flora is bringing back a black man. You must not look and stare, it's very, very rude." I'd never seen a black man before. I mean they weren't around in those days were they? [Laughs.] So she said, "Now, when you're at the dinner table just act normally and if he talks to you speak back. But no staring, nothing like that." I said, "Okay." So she came for dinner and it was Paul Robeson.

Alan Lawson: How wonderful.

David Robson: Great tall man, great, deep voice - lovely man really. And he sat down at the table and I couldn't keep my eyes off him! He was a wonderful man, he spoke to me and everything. But they were sort of odd people I used to find those very odd, theatre people obviously. And slightly affected in a funny sort of way.

Alan Lawson: When you were at school, was your aunt a topic of conversation at school with you?

David Robson: Not until I went to Denham. And then of course I was much sought after - "What was it really like there?" and all the rest of it. "Can we have autographs?" and all that stuff. But because Flora was primarily a stage actress, she didn't really like films at all. And that particular film 'Fire over England' was the first one which was really successful. Although she'd done I think, I thought it was 'Dance Pretty Lady' at Welwyn, but somebody's put me right and said no it wasn't, that wasn't the first film. But she did do a film there apparently, and it was awful. She hated herself and everybody had said, "Don't touch film." It wasn't her business and it put her off film for a long, long time.

Alan Lawson: You remembered the name of the station, when you went to Denham?

David Robson: Yes indeed, it was Chorleywood, Chorelywood. And we had - Flora took the house over so that we could get a quick journey back to Denham and back very early in the morning.

Alan Lawson: Was it a big house?

David Robson: Yes, well, about two or three bedrooms up and two down, the whole house. But I was the only one staying there, the only nephew. I don't know whether the others came after I left but I don't think so. A special thing laid on.

Alan Lawson: You were the favoured nephew [laughs].

David Robson: Well I don't know whether I was the favourite nephew. There weren't such things as favourite nephews, she loved all the nephews and nieces. There was none of that business. But she knew I was interested in what went on behind a camera, rather than in front. She knew that acting and stuff like that was something I wasn't interested in. And she would always try and promote you if you were interested in something. "Is that going to be your career?" Things like that. I remember they talked about all sorts of things when I was at Welwyn. Egg farm, talked about going into an egg farm, all sorts of things like that - always trying to promote things like that. But that was it.

Alan Lawson: After we'd finished recording, you showed me some photographs and you said, "And that was the occasion when I got the freedom of the City of London."

David Robson: Yes, yes, that was very strange that. For years I'd been working with a chap called Brian Slater he's the brother of John Slater the actor.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes.

David Robson: And he was well in with Lord Mayor and all these sort of people in the city. He used to play the organ and stuff like that. And he was in Master Control at the studios...

Alan Lawson: ...London Weekend was that?

David Robson: London Weekend, yes, at South Bank. And his particular job with the company was making dubs of programmes so that producers could take them home and look at them and decide whether they wanted to make any alterations, or pilot programmes which were being looked at and so forth. So if we ran a tape for any reason we used to give him a feed and he used to do it on VHS. By that time VHS had come along. And we were sitting together in Master Control one day talking about picture quality and so forth, and he said, "Have you ever thought about becoming a freeman?" I said, "Don't think so, no. Never occurred to me. Why?" He said, "Well I'll tell you why. We're very worried that the city, the guilds are very worried that there's been nothing new coming along. They've still got wire-pullers and gunners going back for donkeys' years. We want to update it and they want to have a television guild in the city because a lot of these back street companies are coming along to commercials (I told you about them) terrible standards. And we want to get rid of them and we want to be able to say, "Unless we approve, unless the City of London approve of what you're doing, you won't get any work."" So I said, "How does that apply to me?" So he said, "Well we want to get this guild on the go and we want some officers of the guild and we want you for instance perhaps to look after the regalia and all that sort of stuff." They had big things they'd march with, they had all sorts of stuff. So I said, "Okay, I'll go along with that." So he said, "It's not as easy as that. I'll have to introduce you to some people in the City. And they'll give you a big slap-up lunch. And they'll be looking at you and talking to you. What they say at the end of it, it might well be, "Yes he's a candidate but he'll have to apply"." So I went and had this big slap-up lunch [laughs] could hardly eat it, it was enormous, it was a lovely restaurant in the City somewhere.

Alan Lawson: Not 'Rules' was it?

David Robson: Pardon?

Alan Lawson: Was it 'Rules'?

David Robson: I can't remember, might have been. I can't remember. And so anyway, these are called supporters these people, they're supporters. So they must have said to him, "Yes he's okay for a candidate." So they gave him a form, you do it in several stages. First of all they need to know that you want to be a freeman of the City of London. And so because Brian was pushing all the time and saying, "We've got to get you in and we'll need some other people." We need a head of engineering and so forth, So I signed the form and got it off. The next thing I got back from the City Fathers a form. First of all you have to be squeaky clean to do it. You mustn't owe money to anybody or you mustn't have been in prison or in a court case or anything. You've got to be absolutely on the level. And they said, "We need to know a lot more about your father and your mother." So the only thing I could do was do a search. I couldn't afford to pay somebody to do that, I had to do it myself. You had to go to - not Somerset House, now is it - it's where we started television in fact, Kingsway.

Alan Lawson: That's right, yes.

David Robson: And I went there and spent an afternoon. It's full of Americans, you know, looking up their family history [laughs]. So I did the search and then you have to give it to the flunky chap there. All you do is give the entry into the huge, great books, this thick you know. Takes ages to find out. You find all about your family, you go back as far as they want you to do. They then give you a new birth certificate, a long one this one, this size, with everything on it. So I got that done. Got one at home and one for the City Fathers, and sent it off. And I think I gave it to Brian and he did it, he went to the Guild Hall with it or something. And I then had a letter back from them saying yes they would accept me into the 'brethren' if you like, but I would have to come on a certain day with my supporters and you have to learn a long piece, a long document by heart. You stand up and there's a man with a mortar board and Christ's knows what else there. It's a bit of a ceremony, you know [laughs]. So I went home and I learnt all this stuff and that was it. And you get an illuminated thing and... But it didn't happen because first of all, Jack died. But that didn't affect this anyway because he wasn't in the business, he was an actor. And then Brian died, and Brian was the moving force behind the whole thing. I knew all the people that were coming into it as freeman but so we didn't then make any move. We got as far as designing the escutcheon and the coat of arms and stuff like that, used to get down to it if we had any spare time. Takes ages to get through, you can't start a guild up like that, you've got to be approved by so many - stuffy, really quite stuffy business it is. [laughs] And we got quite a long way along the road but then he died and it all came to a grinding halt. We didn't pursue it any further - that was that. There were quite a lot of responsibilities, for instance, we - we as I'm still a member - were responsible for Hampstead. You know the "appy 'ampstead' you know...

Alan Lawson: Yes.

David Robson: ...that's private land, that's land which belongs to the City. And it must never be built on. So if you go on the Committee you go round regularly to make sure that no one's encroached an inch, you know, decided to push their garden out or that sort of thing goes on all the time, and you've got to fight for that. A lot of schools and things are funded by the City of London. How this is going to affect it when we have the Lord Mayor of London I don't know, I don't know what's going to happen about the City, whether it will still be separate because it's got its own police force and everything. I don't know quite what's going to happen about that. But anyway, that was what we did.

Alan Lawson: Now, looking back now, because you've had a very varied career really, although it's if you like, it's been on the projection of some kind...

David Robson: Yes, yes.

Alan Lawson: ...in some medium or other...What was the high spot for you?

David Robson: The high spot was joining Rediffusion. I mean I'd worked all my life for that, to get there and that was the high spot. I never looked back, I loved every minute of it. The only low spot was when we lost the franchise in '68. We had all this problem with London Weekend and their funny people, you know. It was a disgusting business.

Alan Lawson: Would you like to comment on that? I mean - on that whole business of the franchising and...

David Robson: Well we did - we thought... It had been proved now that we were quite wrong. But we thought we were in jobs for life. We were doing well, the money was coming in, our ratings were high, we thought we'd never lose the franchise. We knew that discussions used to have to go on every few years, but there was no feeling of, "I wonder if we're going to be in business," you know. It never occurred to us. And one day we were busy in VT doing something or other and looked out of the window, and there were a group of people peering in, with sharp suits...

Alan Lawson: [Laughs.] Yes you've told us that one, yes, yes.

David Robson: And we thought, "What are they doing? Who are these people?"

Alan Lawson: That was it.

David Robson: This was the Pilkington Committee. But even then we thought, "Nothing to worry about." And then the news filtered through that we'd lost it. It was very, very sad. For a whole year all we did in that year, apart from our programme commitments which were normal, we had to dub everything - we had to play back - everything that we had on tape, to Tele Recording. Tele Recording were worked off their feet! I'm glad I wasn't there by that time! I'd like to know what happened to those programmes - did they go into some kind of library? Because they'd be very valuable. All our big ninety-minute plays, all our programmes were dubbed. The company said, "We want everything on film, everything taken off VTR, put on film."

Alan Lawson: Did they wipe the videos?

David Robson: I don't know because we weren't there. We just shut down, put our coats on, went home and that was it.

Alan Lawson: I see, I see, I see.

David Robson: I don't know what happened.

Alan Lawson: If you could start again, would you rather have done something different do you think?

David Robson: Well I would have preferred to have gone into television right away I think, rather than...

Alan Lawson: Well it wasn't even in existence then was it?

David Robson: Well it was wasn't it? In 1936 the service started.

Alan Lawson: Yes, that's right.

David Robson: I was sixteen then and I did try for my first job then in fact. But then I got caught up with what I was doing and became very interested in it. I couldn't see it as a career but I just loved doing it. [laughs] And my father, he said, "I don't want you to get interested in it. [laughs] You are getting interested. I'll have to move you out of it."

Alan Lawson: Again, you know, to me, your experiences in cinema is absolutely fascinating.

David Robson: Yes, yes it was. I loved it. And I can tell you some good stories about that. You remember the very first job, the Second said to me, "You've got the three rules, you know what you must do...." So I'd never seen a film fire, I didn't want to, frightening thing, until - and I didn't see it but I saw the results. We were doing a film called 'Oliver Twist' at the Odeon Marble Arch. There were only two of us on duty, it was quite late at night, about nine, half past nine, we were getting on towards the end of the run. It was the last few reels - reels seven and eight I think. And the projection room there was cut into two, there was a big panel of ammeters and voltmeters, these huge great knife switches and then at the back of that was a maintenance room which we used to use as a staff room. So when you weren't running the machine, in between the changeovers, you usually sat down, read the paper or have a cup of coffee. And I was in this room, just listening in a funny sort of way to the sound, because you could hear the sound coming through the slots you see. And suddenly it stopped and the last words were something about - I made a note of it here somewhere, "Don't take the light away" or something like that. This was Fagin saying to - it was the candle, they were walking away with the candle. "Don't leave me in the dark," that's right! That was the line, "Don't leave me in the dark." After that nothing except nothing. Except the machine was running. I thought, "Something's gone wrong." So I rushed in and the chap on the machine, who was on machine three, had frozen, he'd gone white and he just couldn't say or do anything. And I rushed in, I looked through the porthole, there was just a smell of smoke and stuff and burning film and I thought, "Urgh. This is it. I've been waiting for this all my life. It's happened." The fire shutters were still up and I thought, "What a funny thing, he hasn't even shut off." He hadn't shut off, we had a white sheet. But then I thought, "Well how can you have a film fire with the machine running?" We were running first line stock, there were no bad joins or perfs, torn perfs or anything like that. Perfect, never could happen in theory. Anyway, there was no time to theorise, I shut down quickly, closed the shutters and said, "Don't touch anything on this machine, don't open the spool box, nothing." And I rushed into the rewind room, and we always had standby prints in the West End, and I'd got parts seven and eight already made up. Banged it on the spare machine, got it about halfway to where I thought the dialogue was, we got the show going again. There wasn't a word, nor telephone - nobody. I thought, "This is amazing. We must have been off for about two minutes at least!" Anyway, the chap was sick now, he was having a breakdown. We couldn't do anything with him. So I finished more or less the programme off and I said, "Well we can't just leave things like this. We've got to get those magazines open to see what's happened." Because you know it generates its own oxygen - film fires are dreadful.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: So I said, "Get the fire blanket out ready. What I'm going to do is I'm going to open the top box and I want you to, if anything goes wrong, throw it at the film and get out quick." So I opened the box, there was a puff of smoke and I thought, "Oh" but no, nothing. It was out. So - had to do the bottom magazine, and this is where the trouble will be if there's any trouble. So we did the same thing again, just a puff as the door opened - nothing, it was dead. So anyway, went home, the machine was wrecked, the heat had cracked the lenses and the sound heads and we couldn't use it. Also the main projection lens was badly bloomed up and we couldn't use it. But we had three machines fortunately, so when Mick came in the next day, I said, "We've had a [whispers] film fire." "Oh God" he said, "Who was on the machine?" So I said, "He's sick, on sick leave. I had to send him home in a cab. He's in a terrible state." He said, "Well what happened?" I said, "Well he can't talk but I gather he was on the machine and it just took alight." He said, "That's impossible." I said, "I know it's impossible but it happened." So he said, "We've got to get to the bottom of it. For his sake, and the company will want to know and everything." So for weeks and weeks [laughs] I couldn't find this fault. We got the machine back in working order, lenses changed and everything. And the first thing we looked at was oil levels. We thought, "I wonder if the machine temporarily seized." It's only got to happen just a fraction of a second and the frame's gone. But we couldn't find anything wrong. So we started running the machine all day long with arc on but shut down, to get the heat up. And one day we were running there, we were talking about - nothing to do with the machine but the machine suddenly stopped and started again, just like that! "Oh! That's it! It's seized up and cleared." These were wartime machines and when we investigated this machine more thoroughly we discovered that the oil filler level pipe was about a quarter of an inch too short. [AL laughs]. So that when we topped up the oil it was just about right, but during the course of the next few weeks, when the oil level had dropped, whereas it hadn't affected any machine, it was still okay, it was enough just to - what the pump was doing was pumping round bubbles in the air occasionally, would sometimes pump oil and sometimes it would pump round - it depended how much oil came down for the pump to pick up you see. That was it. So anyway, we got the bloke back and said, "You're okay, you're safe [laughs]. You haven't lost your job." Because the trouble was, if you got labelled with a fire - nowhere, nobody would ever touch you.

Alan Lawson: That's it, yes.

David Robson: But it was tricky and it just shows you how that business is like that. You don't know, can happen any time and you're out. Quite dodgy. It didn't worry us in those days you know.

Alan Lawson: No, no, no.

David Robson: At Dulwich there was a particularly - are you recording now?

Alan Lawson: Yes I'm recording.

David Robson: Oh you are - ah. Well certainly nowadays you wouldn't get away with it as far as the European Union is concerned, but the discipline at Dulwich was very, very strict indeed.

Alan Lawson: That's the college.

David Robson: Yes - Dulwich Prep., not the college.

Alan Lawson: Yes, yes.

David Robson: And first thing, when you were taken round a tour of the school, they took you into a room called the Tolly Room. Ever heard of that?

Alan Lawson: No.

David Robson: I hadn't either. It's a room, lined with canes, just nothing else but canes all the way round. All shapes and sizes, all with curly handles like Charlie Chaplin canes, you know, but different lengths and in racks. [AL laughs.] And they said, "This is Tolly. If you break any of the rules, this is the most serious thing that can happen to you. You'll go in the room and be thrashed." And it's virtually the last stage before they'll chuck you out of the school. It's got to be something really serious. Do you know I never met anybody who'd ever received Tolly, so I'm convinced it was simply a sword of Damocles hanging over your head. They showed you the terror of it but they never did it. Anyway, there were other horrible forms of discipline there too. When you joined the school you were put into a house and they were all named after North American Indians, like Americans, Chippaways, Ottawas and so forth. And if you did something which they thought wasn't very good academically, in other words, if you'd been given some prep. And you hadn't done it, or something of that sort, when you came to the form the next day and the master discovered you hadn't done it, you were given what was known as a bad slip. It was just a piece of paper, that's all, with your name on it, and your house - minus 1. And you had to post this, you were on your honour to post it in a post box in the main entrance. Now unfortunately, all the other boys in that house saw you get the bad slip, and you had a hell of a thing. You were really bullied and kicked around something rotten because you'd lost a point off the house, this was psychological type of thing. But on the other hand if you did something very well - I remember we had a French master there who wasn't allowed to speak English. He could, he was very popular with the boys. They used to clean his motorbike up for him. [laughs] But anyway, if you did some prep. really well, if you had to learn some French poetry for instance or something like that, and he'd point and you'd stand up and do it. If he thought you did it extremely well, really excellent, he'd never heard anything like this, "As good as we speak in France," you know - you'd get a good slip. A good slip was once again name and your house and a plus 1. And that would cancel the bad slip [laughs]. And that's how it worked. But the other terrible form of punishment was punishment drill. And this was absolutely the end. Only about twelve boys or so at the end of the school day, half past three you usually had to go home, school was finished at half past three...you'd assemble outside on the playground and it'd be taken by the gym bloke...

Alan Lawson: ...Yes, PT man...

David Robson: And you'd have to pick up a boulder - terribly crude and very heavy - hold it above your head and you'd do everything at the double. You had to keep running round and running round. After five minutes you can't take it any more, he'd go like, "Higher, higher, higher. Faster, faster. Come on faster that boy, keep going." You'd do this for about twenty minutes and in summer it was a killer. You never did it again, it was so effective - punishment

drill! [laughs] And you would get that for doing something which was wasn't so - like talking in the class or something like that. But as far as discipline is concerned, Dulwich was very, very strict. I think that affects your life later on. I think it - I mean one of the things I learnt at Dulwich was they said, "You can be whatever you want to be if you know the right people and you do - always be better than the bloke next to you. Always try a bit better and you won't go far wrong." And it's perfectly true. So many people would look say at a Prime Minister or something and say, "I could never be him even if I wanted to." Not right! You could do if you wanted to. You can do anything if you really want to. And that's what always guided me. That's why, even through the film business, although I loved it, I knew it really wasn't what I wanted to do. I just knew that if I kept on and on and on, hopefully, that theory would work and it did. But [laughs] I had to wait a long time!

Alan Lawson: It certainly did.

David Robson: And once you got started in the job there was no holding back because you just made sure you were better than anybody else so you got promoted right the way through. You made sure that the people were there...I was very lucky because that first year, when we lost a million pounds and Rediffusion was on its way out, BT [British Traction] had this arrangement whereby if one of its subsidiaries went down, they were finished. Most companies still work this system. And how they chose the people to stay on I don't know, but I imagine they were chosen because they were people who were prepared and were very keen to work all hours in order to get the company round the bend given the chance. So it works, it works.

Alan Lawson: Oh yes it works. I think that's good. Well thanks Dave - very enjoyable.

David Robson: My pleasure.

[End of Interview]