

Peter Birch [A.F. Birch] (sound engineer)

10/10/1900 - ?

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BIOGRAPHY: Born in Lewes, Sussex, Birch served in the Royal Army Flying Corps during the first world war, and then in the Merchant Navy until 1925. He worked briefly for the J.L. Baird television company, and then for Marconi before entering the film industry as a sound engineer at British Instructional films in Welwyn, working on early sound films such as Asquith's Tell England (1931). During the 1930s he worked as a sound engineer mainly at Shepherds Bush, under directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Victor Saville and Walter Forde, and on several of Michael Powell's early films. When Shepherds Bush closed down Birch moved to Gaumont British News as a dubbing mixer. He served in the RNVR during the war. During the latter part of his career he was a dubbing mixer at GB Instructional at Elstree and later for the BBC on a freelance basis. **SUMMARY:** In this brief interview with Alan Lawson, Birch talks mainly about the early part of his career. He gives some vivid anecdotes about the working culture at Shepherd's Bush during its heyday and brief thumbnail sketches of the various directors he worked under. He also discusses various different early sound technologies.

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Interviewer: Alan Lawson, with Geoff Parry

Interviewee: Peter Birch

Tape 1, Side 1

Alan Lawson : Right well, first and foremost, when and where you born?

Peter Birch : I was born outside the Lewes Jail in a house of course, in the year 1900. I got away from the proximity of the jail as quickly as I could and my father moved and I moved with him of course, it was natural - and that is the story of my birth, yes.

Alan Lawson : And what about school?

Peter Birch : Ahhh, well, my father had an accident, riding accident and broke his back, lived for four years and due to that trouble - there was no DHSS in those days - we were in penury. And the two boys were sent to the orphanage at Farningham [?] which was arranged by the man that owned the horse from which he fell. So my education was in an orphanage and I finished at thirteen. Do you want me to go on from there?

Alan Lawson : Yes, what then?

Peter Birch : Well, they tried me first in a racing stable. After a month I cried quits and left, after which I went into a city office as an office boy. I won't tell you how many stamps I stole. During that time I used to take the Boy Scout, a little magazine, you may remember - and in it I saw an advertisement one day with a handsome young man in naval uniform with a ball of the earth, with his foot on the ball, the world at your feet, and I fell for him. I applied to the Marconi Company and they took me on as a boy to learn wireless. I got my first class certificate after three months hard study. Most people took six months. Anyhow, I went to sea then in the Merchant Navy and that was during the First War. I had two years in that capacity and I did get wounded and I've got the wound on my leg, a splinter from a shell when we were shelled. And towards the end of the war I went into the Royal Air Force. I got fed up with being shot at.

Alan Lawson : The Royal Army Flying Corps wasn't it?

Peter Birch : Yes it was the RFC. And as a cadet I was due to be a fighter pilot and I was the right age and the right physique and so on. Unfortunately the war finished before I flew. So we were thrown out and I went back to sea in the Merchant Navy until 1925, after which time I was rather tired of the sea, so I applied to the BBC. They took me on as an engineer, and I was with them for three years. Then I got involved in a squabble, nothing to do with me at all, but I put my name down, signed my name - you know, a round robin - and so I was fired.

Alan Lawson : Reith was there then, at the BBC?

Peter Birch : That's right, there was discipline in those days. After that I went to John Logie Baird Television - so I was with him for nearly two years, and I can say that I was an embryo television man. In fact I ran the demonstration studio for about six months, did all my own artistry.

Alan Lawson : Soho Square?

Peter Birch : No, Long Acre; and then I branched out. I couldn't see any future actually in the disc rotating television. It was too crude, so I got the offer of a job as sound chief in a film studio. My type of person with sound experience was the only type of person they could apply to to run their sound department at its inception, so I ran the British Instructional Films at Welwyn. And after I think about two years with them, the Sound Chief of Gaumont, George Gunn, he asked me if I would care to make a change. Well owing to travel difficulties I was rather tired of going to Welwyn Garden City and I thought, Gaumont at Shepherd's Bush would be much more to my liking.

Alan Lawson : When you were at Welwyn, that was Klang Film, wasn't it?

Peter Birch : Yes, Klang Films.

Alan Lawson : But you did make one at B.I.P.

Peter Birch : Now did I?

Alan Lawson : Yes, you did

Peter Birch : Not with Klang Films, did we?

Alan Lawson : No, it was RCA

Peter Birch : RCA; which year was that, then?

Alan Lawson : It was in 1930, I think

Peter Birch : Do you remember the name of the film?

Alan Lawson : Well it was after "Windjammer: Young Woodley"

Peter Birch : I did that did I, yes I probably did.

Alan Lawson : Tommy Bentley

Peter Birch : Yes that's right, it's a long time ago. My memory goes to hell.

Alan Lawson : Then you did "Dance Pretty Lady" with Tony Asquith.

Peter Birch : That's right, yes.

Alan Lawson : Can you remember working with Tony?

Peter Birch : Yeah I remember Tony very well, Puffin, yes I remember him very well indeed. Yes he was a very charming chap. Yes, "Dance Pretty Lady", Gosh the memory doesn't it play you tricks. Now you mention it, of course, I remember it quite well. That was at Shepherd's Bush wasn't it?

Alan Lawson : No no, that was Welwyn

Peter Birch : That was Welwyn - I did "Tell England" too at Welwyn. That was Asquith as well.

Alan Lawson : What was he like to work with? Can you remember in those very early....

Peter Birch : Very charming fellow, very nice indeed. Always played the piano on the set. A trifle precious - its the worst you could say about him, a trifle precious but terribly nice to people that worked with him. But the discipline, he was quite good, he could manage.

Alan Lawson : Was he receptive to people's ideas?

Peter Birch : Yes, in a way, but I can't recall any incidents of any of my ideas taking root.

Alan Lawson : Well it was a difficult time wasn't it? Because, how sensitive were the mikes in those days?

Peter Birch : Oh they weren't too bad at all, the trouble was noise you see. The cameras weren't properly silent, so they had to be put in a booth, and that made it awkward for them, and of course you were never allowed to get the microphone into the picture, and that made it awkward for us. Anyway, we managed after a fashion.

Alan Lawson : Did you have booms at that time?

Peter Birch : Oh yes, I had my own boom made at Welwyn by the general purpose chap there, an engineer, quite a nice boom really. Not so good as they are now of course.

Alan Lawson : You had the problem with shadow, boom shadow?.

Peter Birch : That was one of the bugbears yes, and the picture always took precedence. The sound had to take second choice.

Alan Lawson : That wasn't the case when I was at the Bush. When I first went to the Bush, sound was all important.

Peter Birch : I don't seem to remember that...

Alan Lawson : This is Stan Jolly. [showing photograph] Do you remember Stan.

Peter Birch : I remember Stan very well, he was there before I was....did he manage to get status for sound? He had more personality that I had.

Alan Lawson : He was a forbidding man.

Peter Birch : He was at B&D, wasn't he? Out at Elstree.

Alan Lawson : That I didn't know.

Peter Birch : Yes he was there, our Stan Jolly.

Alan Lawson : Now, was there much difference when you switched over to RCA, can you remember?

Peter Birch : You mean from the operating point of view?

Alan Lawson : From Klang to.... [RCA]

Peter Birch : None at all. No I mean you still had the sound to get on your microphone as in your headphones. The fact the camera was slightly different, density versus area.

Alan Lawson : Wasn't Klang Film a bastard, going there, rather like BA?

Peter Birch : It was

Alan Lawson : A bit of both, area and density

Peter Birch : Yes, No, wait a minute, I think it was density, it was density, only density.

Alan Lawson : When you moved to the Bush, was there a central recording room, you know with cameras, sound cameras?

Peter Birch : No, each mixer on his film had his own room with a sound camera and operator situated. But there was no central recording room.

Alan Lawson : Did you have floor mixers working for you in the room?

Peter Birch : No we were floor mixers. No, at Welwyn I was in the room, there was a room where I did the recording off the floor but

Alan Lawson : That can't have been easy.

Peter Birch : It was not, it was up and down those stairs. But I could run then.

Alan Lawson : Now there is a missing year here, you know, if you follow Rachael Low's credits - you go from 1931 "Dance Pretty Lady", to "Fire Raisers", but "Tell England" should come in between.... So Rachael Low's got some missing bits then. Because your first credit at the Bush was "Fire Raisers".

Peter Birch : Oh yes, I remember that, Michael Powell.

Alan Lawson : Now what was he like to work with?

Peter Birch : I had no complaints with any directors really; maybe they took pity on me, I don't know.

Alan Lawson : Not even Hitchcock?

Peter Birch : Hitchcock and I got along like a house-on-fire. Oh yes, we were great. Because I used to get the script the day before we started shooting and I can't say that I studied it, so on occasion I had to go to Hitch and ask him one or two questions, and he used to turn to me with a slow silly smile and say, "Its all in the book Peter, its all in the book". Birchy they called me. "Oh is it? Oh thank you very much, I haven't read it". He said "that's alright".

Alan Lawson : But was George Gunn your boss?

Peter Birch : There's another nice chap

Alan Lawson : He went to the States with Hitchcock didn't he?

Peter Birch : Yes that's right, he got in with the photographic firm what was it called? Technicolor. He got in with them - and he got a good job there too. He deserved it. He was a very very charming competent chap. He wasn't really at heart a technician. But he was very good fellow to run a department.

Alan Lawson : Now then after "Fire Raisers", I know what I was going to ask you. I can remember the rich acoustics equipment in those early days, the mikes weighed a ton didn't they.

Peter Birch : Yes

Alan Lawson : It was a hell of a sweat for the boom operator.

Peter Birch : Yes, yes

Alan Lawson : And in fact, you did a film with Victor Saville later on, you remember with Tommy Lyndon Haines?

Peter Birch : Oh I remember him very well, yes

Alan Lawson : Was that the film "Evergreen", when he hit Saville on the head with a mike, and Saville said, "you do that again you're fired" and about 10 minutes later....

Peter Birch : He did it

Alan Lawson : yes, that was him out

Peter Birch : Lyndon Haines was a nice fellow too, I met him later on in Southern Television. He was in charge of a department, then he died didn't he? Poor chap. Saville was a rather a fiery director. Yes he could say things like that. Didn't mean them of course.

Alan Lawson : He did with Lyndon.

Peter Birch : He didn't fire him though, did he fire him?.... I don't remember Lyndon being fired whilst I was there - he'd have to go to George Gunn to fire him.

Alan Lawson : It's a nice story.

Peter Birch : Yes, I don't think he fired him. Saville - I had a couple of pictures, I think, with him, but he wasn't a man that I really took to. He was a bit too bombastic.

Alan Lawson : What about Dickie Beville?

Peter Birch : Dickie Beville, he'd been in the Navy of course. He'd left the Navy as a Lieutenant and came into films. He was a charming chap, very competent.

Alan Lawson : Was he Unit Manager on "The 39 Steps"?

PB: "39 Steps" - yes I believe he was, yes.

Alan Lawson : A mercurial character.

Peter Birch : He could be, yes, quite humorous, good sense of humour. He died too, didn't he? A lot of them, so many of them die. I wish they wouldn't.

Alan Lawson : They are probably hovering around up there. Now after Mickey Powell this is your first one with Hitch, "Waltzes from Vienna".

Peter Birch : Oh no the one before that, no, wait a minute, sorry, that is the first one. I was thinking you were quoting "The 39 Steps". I only did the two pictures with him. "Waltzes from Vienna" - I could never remember that blessed name. I've often said "what was the picture I did before "39 Steps" with Hitch?". And it never came. That was it: "Waltzes from Vienna". Then we went to "39 Steps". I believe Hitch asked for me, which I thought, you know, that was a compliment.

Alan Lawson : You're racing ahead. Can you remember anything about "Waltzes from Vienna"?

Peter Birch : Not a thing. I remember the fellow that played the lead, the actor.

Alan Lawson : Esmond Knight.

Peter Birch : That's right. He was always being chivvied around by Hitchcock, who didn't like him very much, although he used him. And I do remember one incident which amused me beyond endurance. One of the electricians was very good at shooting peas, and on the side of the set he used to wait till Esmond was crossing the set and in action, you see, and he'd shoot a pea at him and it would catch him by the ear. Course he'd go like that [gesture]. And Hitchcock used to go mad, "Don't do that with your hand, for God's sake, its not in the script, is it?" And this fellow with, you know, a real poker face, he'd get him again.

Alan Lawson : He didn't have a pea shooter?

Peter Birch : No, he could do it with his mouth.

Alan Lawson : And that was Jessie Matthews too wasn't it.

PB: "Waltzes from Vienna". Yes I suppose it was. Yes it was. My memory, I can't....

Alan Lawson : Anyway, then we come to another Mickey Powell, "Red Ensign" - you're bound to remember that.

Peter Birch : Yes, "Red Ensign" and then "Phantom Light".

Alan Lawson : Well that's much later. Then "Evergreen" with Victor Saville. Anything to say about "Evergreen" at all?

Peter Birch : My favourite memory about "Evergreen" was one big set we had, and the floor was newly polished. And the first assistant director came charging across that floor, footsteps every inch of the way and Saville went mad. What was his name, it'll come, but I can't remember just at the moment. These memories remain because they're so.... I have a sense of humour and it was so funny... otherwise no. Oh, I remember the song she sang, oh yes, we used to have a funny sort of way of recording the songs in those days; we used to do it on the set, and have the orchestra on one side, you know.

Alan Lawson : Louis Levy [was musical director on "Evergreen"]

Peter Birch : Louis Levy, yes, and Bretton Byrd. And it was quite a job, you know, on a set, trying to get a decent recording with the voice and the orchestra. You know, you couldn't segregate them very easily. But we managed after a fashion.

Alan Lawson : How many mikes would you use on an orchestra then? Just the one?

Peter Birch : As a rule, one.

Alan Lawson : One, and one for the singer.

Peter Birch : Unless there was a solo section in the orchestra that you had to portray, and then you'd have an extra mike of course, and you'd have to read your music. I used to read it upside-down. I wasn't a musician, you see, but they always provided me with a sheet of music, and, well, it was a habit of mine to have it upside-down. I had to rely on my memory.

Alan Lawson : Then you worked on "Little Friend".

Peter Birch : Oh yes, Viertel.

Alan Lawson : Yes, what about him?

Peter Birch : Charming man, charming. Couldn't speak English very well.

Alan Lawson : That didn't make life easy.

Peter Birch : It wasn't too easy but he managed. He had a very good girl at his side, who could speak both English and German. That was his secretary so we managed. "Little Friend" yes, oh gosh, yes.

Alan Lawson : Lets see who was in it. Nova Pilbeam. Matheson Lang.

Peter Birch : He was the drama, heavy drama type.

Alan Lawson : Pen Tennyson's wife, Nova Pilbeam.

Peter Birch : Oh he married her, that's right. I vaguely recall that again.

Alan Lawson : Now then, after "Little Friend", "Dirty Work". .

Peter Birch : Oh yes, "Dirty Work". Tom Walls. Oh, and the Crazy Gang too.

Alan Lawson : They were in it were they? That was chaotic, I bet.

Peter Birch : It was lovely. The Crazy Gang were the same on the stage and off the stage. They were humorous the whole time. Particularly the chief. Who was the chief. The fellow with the straw hat turned up. Bud Flanagan. He was humorous the whole time. I hung around as often as I could in his vicinity because he'd always play some humorous joke on somebody. And he had his favourites. You know his stooges, he'd like to pull their legs, and the more serious they were, the more he'd pull their legs. He loved to get a serious type and put something in front of him that he'd fall over. No, he was very good, Flanagan. He died too unfortunately, he was older than me.

Alan Lawson : What about working with Tom Walls?

Peter Birch : Oh I had no trouble at all working with Tom Walls. I did several pictures, three or four with him. There weren't winners, they weren't successes, but he was very nice to work with. I was his favourite you see, because of him knowing my father. And I supposed I was fairly competent; I mean, I gave him no trouble. I gave nobody trouble if I could help it .

Alan Lawson : Now you're back again with Mickey Powell, but shooting at Gainsborough on "Phantom Light". What was Gainsborough like to work at in those days? There was an upstairs and a downstairs, wasn't there, or have I got it wrong.

Peter Birch : Shepherd's Bush was upstairs and downstairs. Gainsborough was one floor. Yes, I suppose that's gone overboard, that studio, now.

Alan Lawson : Was that British Acoustic?

Peter Birch : Oh yes.

Alan Lawson : Where was it they had the fire? Someone got killed, didn't they?

Peter Birch : I think it was Gainsborough that had the fire. But I wasn't there, luckily. We were sometimes at Gainsborough, and sometimes we were working at the Bush. I only went over to Gainsborough, Islington for one picture, I think. Was that "Phantom Light"?

Alan Lawson : "Phantom Light", yes.

Peter Birch : Except of course when we were on location in Wales - a very nice location.

Alan Lawson : Yes I was going to ask about location shooting; did you enjoy location shooting?

Peter Birch : Very much, yes. It was full of difficulties. You needed all your wits about you.

Alan Lawson : Was it a heavy truck?

Peter Birch : Yes we used to have a heavy truck with the recording gear. And, well, location shooting is full of pitfalls. Often you couldn't get the real stuff, you had to take what they call a guide track which was reproduced in the dubbing theatre, with the artist concerned, of course, there and wearing headphones. They'd hear the original poor recording, but it was enough for them to synchronise to, and then they had the picture as well. So that's the way you got out of that.

Alan Lawson : This was before loops, wasn't it?

Peter Birch : It did have loops, oh yes. But they were a little bit embryo. Didn't always work.

Alan Lawson : And of course there was no rock and roll.

Peter Birch : It was all feeling your way with sound films in those early days. We did feel our way, and we managed.

Alan Lawson : By that time had they lighted [lightened?] the mike, about 1935, it wasn't that great square box.

Peter Birch : At Shepherd's Bush, I don't think there was any alteration, not whilst I was there, and then of course they closed down in 1937, and then I went onto Newsreel for a couple of years. I was very flattered, because there were four mixers, and, when it came to closing down, the newsreel section had to be kept on, with a soundman, you see, a mixer and his crew. And I was chosen, which flattered me enormously. Although I came down a bit in money, but it was sufficient. I could live quite easily on Newsreel money. But then the war came, and I went in the Navy.

Alan Lawson : Peter, what was the reason for the close-down? Can you remember?

Peter Birch : I'm not so sure. I think they ran out of money, and they weren't selling the pictures. The pictures weren't bringing the money in immediately, there was always a dickens of a delay before they got their money back. And the Ostrer Brothers, they were a bit fussy about that, you know.

Alan Lawson : Now "39 Steps", that's a picture to be remembered.

Peter Birch : Yes, I remember parts of it.

Alan Lawson : Only parts?

Peter Birch : I can't remember all of it. I remember the theatre part of it slightly, not too well. I remember Donat awfully well, I remember Hitchcock terribly well, I remember the crew terribly well, but if you ask me to name any of the scenes apart from the theatre scene, I have a job. The memory is failing, you know.

Alan Lawson : Do you remember the political scene where he was aping a politician, Donat was, he was pretending to be a politician. He was giving a spontaneous speech from the platform.

Peter Birch : Yes, I remember it, but only vaguely. So many sets, so many different scenes to remember, you know that, with the years and the other things. It'll come back if somebody mentions something that rings the bell.

Alan Lawson : I'm sorry you haven't got the video. Have you got a video player.

Peter Birch : No

Alan Lawson : I'm surprised. I was going to send you down the video [of The 39 Steps?] for you to keep. I think you'd like it.

Peter Birch : But you see I couldn't play it on that thing. I'll have to get another set. I could play it on my stepdaughter's. Oh, thank you.

Alan Lawson : No, I haven't got a video machine either.

Peter Birch : We're old fashioned, aren't we, Alan?

Alan Lawson : Yes we are, I mean there's enough rubbish on television....

Peter Birch : I know, I know. As a pioneer of television it worries me the rubbish that they spill.

Alan Lawson : There was a film on just this week, Jassy it was called, it was directed by Bernie Knowles.

Peter Birch : Bernie Knowles, the cameraman on "39 Steps". Oh yes, he directed later. But he was lighting man on "39 Steps".

Alan Lawson : Were there any particular problems on "39 Steps"?

Peter Birch : Well there were problems, but it was so long ago and I grappled with them at the time - but nothing that I couldn't grapple with.

Alan Lawson : Now Mickey Balcon has appeared on the scene several times since 33; did you have much to do with Mickey Balcon?

Peter Birch : He was the big-shot you know, we kowtowed to him and gave him all the respect he was entitled to. No, we had more dealing with Chan [Chandos] Balcon on the set. Then they had another Balcon who ran a camera. Another Balcon brother. He was a cameraman but I never worked with him.

Alan Lawson : So you didn't often come across him?

Peter Birch : No, very rarely. Boxall was his go-between.

Alan Lawson : What about Harold Boxall, then?

Peter Birch : Very nice chap. I tried to leave Gaumont's at one time and go to Denham... and Boxall dissuaded me.

Alan Lawson : Well its a good thing; you wouldn't have got any credits. Watkins got the credit.

Peter Birch : Possibly, yes, I think the mixer usually got credit. Well I was going as Watkins's second, his assistant.... It was more money, but then when Boxall raised my money at Shepherd's Bush, what could I do! Had to be loyal.

Alan Lawson : Now after "Thirty Nine Steps", "King of the Damned". Walter Forde directed it

Peter Birch : Walter Forde directed, and his wife

Alan Lawson : He was a comedy man

Peter Birch : That's right, yes, "King of the Damned", I remember that.

Alan Lawson : Noah Beery and Helen Vinson. That was a strange mixture.

Peter Birch : Mrs Forde ran the joint of course. All Walter Forde did was play the piano on the set.

Alan Lawson : I'm trying to think - what was her name, Blanche? - or was that Kellino?

Peter Birch : Blanche. We use to call her all sorts of names.

Alan Lawson : No that was Bill Kellino's wife, I think.

Peter Birch : That's another name I couldn't have remembered in a thousand years.

Alan Lawson : Did you ever work with Bill Kellino?

Peter Birch : He was in charge of lighting...

Alan Lawson : No, that was Roy

Peter Birch : Roy Kellino, ahh that was the son. Oh no, then - Bill Kellino I didn't work with.

Alan Lawson : Roy married Pamela Ostrer.

Peter Birch : Oh did he, good for him, I hope he went out to the ranch.

Alan Lawson : Now again, a very English subject directed by Viertel - "Rhodes of Africa".

Peter Birch : Yes, "Rhodes of Africa".

Alan Lawson : Walter Huston and Oscar Homolka and Peggy Ashcroft.

Peter Birch : Oh yes, I remember Peggy Ashcroft from a girl.

Alan Lawson : Then after that, "Seven Sinners".

Peter Birch : "Seven Sinners", I did that did I?

Alan Lawson : Albert De Courville, there's a marvellous story about him, he claimed that he was the only film director who had a certificate to say he was sane.

Peter Birch : Yes that's right, I'm not so sure that it was correct, I think he cheated, he was as barmy as they come. He always had to have a daily bet. He and the cameraman.

Alan Lawson : Albert De Courville was a stage director, he came from the stage, he did, let me think what did he do, "Seven Sinners" and then after that he did "Strangers on a Honeymoon". Can you remember about them?

Peter Birch : I suppose dozens and dozens of films I recorded, and individually it's very difficult to, your mind can't absorb....

Alan Lawson : Did you ever keep any of your old scripts?

Peter Birch : No, I'm afraid not. My trouble's been that I've travelled. Travelling around as I have done both during the war and after the war, living in the Canary Islands. My stuff's got dissipated. I mean I left my bungalow in La Palma in the Canaries, came away with two suitcases. I was so fed up and I took any money that was offered to me for the place, fully furnished. And a lot of my antiques were there, but I couldn't in two suitcases, I just came away, I was slightly mental after my wife died so I had to take the path of least resistance and came back here to start again.

Alan Lawson : Now then, then after "Strangers on a Honeymoon", "Take my Tip". This was Herbert Mason. It had the Hulberts.

Peter Birch : Oh yes, that's right, I remember yes, when they were dancing on tin-tacks. Well I mean, electricians, they had a sense of humour. He always had a place [indistinct] on the set

where he could practise his tap-dance routine. Well somebody got the idea of sprinkling a lot of tin-tacks just before his rehearsal and it was a sight worth seeing. He took off. It was cruel. I didn't take part in it, but I was a bystander. You're coming to "Non-stop New York", the last picture.

Alan Lawson : Oh that; again, it [i.e. your credit] is not in the Rachael Low [book].

Peter Birch : I'm trying to remember the name of the director of that. [n.b. Robert Stevenson]. That was a nice little film.

Alan Lawson : That was in '37.

Peter Birch : Yes, that was just before they closed down.

Alan Lawson : So when the closedown came, you went to GB News.

Peter Birch : I went over to GB News.

Alan Lawson : Can you remember who the editor was of GB News then.

Peter Birch : Well there was E.V.H.Emmett of course, he was the commentator. Roy somebody; he was lame, a bit lame. Roy.... not Hattersley! It doesn't come.

Alan Lawson : Did you work with Sid Bonnett on the GB News.

Peter Birch : Yes, he was a cameraman, wasn't he? I didn't work with him, but I knew him.

Alan Lawson : Who did you have? Was it Peter Cannon?

Peter Birch : I didn't go out on the news, I did the dubbing. I was the dubbing mixer. You know, finalising. No, I never went out with a news man.

Alan Lawson : And then you came back into the business in '39.

Peter Birch : What, after the war, do you mean?

Alan Lawson : No, before the war, because you've got a credit: "I Met a Murderer".

Peter Birch : Oh yes. But I went straight from the news into the Navy. There was nothing in between.

Alan Lawson : Oh, well, where did that come from, I wonder?

Peter Birch : "I Met a Murderer". Yes, I remember the picture. But if you ask me which year it was, I'm afraid I'm at a loss.

Alan Lawson : Ah I see, so it might well have been.... But it was a location film. Made by Gamma Films.

Peter Birch : I'm trying hard to remember, but you know the old grey matter's gone rusty.

Alan Lawson : Now we're into the war years. Were you on RNVR?

Peter Birch : I was RNVR yes, oh yes, always a volunteer.

Alan Lawson : So back into the Navy, where?

Peter Birch : Well I started at Portland of course. Osprey [? check], that's where I did my initial training. It was only, it was a joke really, we had all the knowledge they needed. It was just getting into the swing of being naval again. Then they sent me around on trials with a regular Commander, and after about six months I was turned loose on my own, sent to Newcastle in charge of [??] there with a staff, office, under an Admiral. It was all very nice, very charming. And then they caught up with me after four years of that. Raised me to two and a half [?] and sent me out to Trincomalee to Lord Louis [Mountbatten]. He was preparing to have a go at the Japs, you see. So I was out in Trincomalee, Ceylon, for about a year, and then the Japs didn't seem to like the atom bomb, and they curled up, so that meant I could come home and resume filming - but it was quite an amusing time.

Alan Lawson : Did you have anything to do at all with Lord Louis?

Peter Birch : I certainly did, because when Lord Louis knew I was coming out there - he was a great cinema man, was Lord Louis, and his camp cinemas out there were a bit haywire from a sound point of view - and hearing I was coming out, he asked if I would, whenever I could, get away from my own duties, and go round the cinemas and school the boys to put up a better show, you see. So I had to go to Kandy; and eventually after I'd been out there a month or two, he applied for me, and I came from Trincomalee to Kandy, put up at his residence, had a marvellous time going out on horseback and things like that - the way the rich live - and went round his cinemas, and gave the boys a little schooling in running their projection, particularly the sound side of it. I didn't meet up with Lord Louis out there, but I met with all his headquarters staff and they gave me a wonderful time. Lord Louis was away in Burma, doing something or other. He was always doing something or other. But I knew Lord Louis right from the days the Duke of Kent was recorded at Shepherd's Bush, and he was a Commander, and he came and shared with me the recording of the Duke of Kent.... who died, he was killed in an air crash. So yes. I knew Lord Louis, but latterly not personally. He was a too big a man for me, well I don't know, he wasn't really....

[End of side one] [Side two]

Alan Lawson : When were you demobbed?

Peter Birch : I think it was November 1945.

Alan Lawson : Did you have any reinstatement rights?

Peter Birch : Oh I went back to Gaumont, yes.

Alan Lawson : What. the News?

Peter Birch : Well, no - Rank had taken over then, you see, so I was taken back as a mixer, and put in charge of the Instructional side of the firm right away. I was a bit rusty, but I managed. They had a studio out at Elstree, Gaumont British Instructional. I ran that department for seven years, and then they folded up. So I went freelancing for my remaining three years, and funnily enough I was engaged more by the BBC, who had fired me at one time, than anybody else.

Alan Lawson : What were you doing for the BBC then?

Peter Birch : Their location stuff, they were making films. I did mixing for them, you see. Went round the country.

Alan Lawson : That was when we met

Peter Birch : You were there too were you?

Alan Lawson : I worked from Alexandra Palace, then Lime Grove, and then from Ealing.

Peter Birch : Ealing was the place I used to work from mostly. I know Alexandra Palace, of course. Yes we've lived a parallel life.

Alan Lawson : Can you remember any of the films you freelanced on after the war?

Peter Birch : After Gaumont finished? Well they were mostly BBC stuff. No, I don't remember much about them. I might later on. Might wake up in the night having remembered. But sitting here.... it was just three years, where I made more money than ever I made when I was paid a salary. Freelancing. If you're known, and in all modesty I was fairly well-known... and I was never short of work.

Alan Lawson : Did you ever work with Ken Russell?

Peter Birch : I may have done. Doesn't ring a bell. I'm sorry, but memory fails.

Alan Lawson : I think you would have known if you'd have worked with Ken Russell. He's not easy.

Peter Birch : He was a director, was he?

Alan Lawson : Yes

Peter Birch : I never had any trouble with directors in the BBC.

Alan Lawson : Did you work with Huw Wheldon?

Peter Birch : Yes I remember that name too, I wish I could remember more.

Alan Lawson : And then there was John Schlesinger too. He was one of the "Monitor" programme directors.

Peter Birch : Yes, after I'd retired, and I'd left England and gone to the island, the BBC approached me there to do jobs for them, but of course it wasn't commercial to.

Alan Lawson : No equipment?

Peter Birch : But they wanted me to, so I must have been reasonably popular.

Alan Lawson : They don't approach you now?

Peter Birch : No, they've given it up. Signed off!. So have I! Well you do know my age, don't you? It's getting on.

Alan Lawson : Going back, did any of the heads of sound encourage you? or did they not have much to do with you?

Peter Birch : Heads of sound, where do you mean? Do you mean the BBC?

Alan Lawson : No, at the Bush.

Peter Birch : George Gunn is the only head of sound I recognise, because I was next to him, you see, with the mixers. That is the only man I had to kowtow to, but I didn't need to kowtow to George. He was such a marvellous fellow.

Alan Lawson : Of all the directors you've worked with, does any one particular one stand out for you?

Peter Birch : I don't know. I liked them all, you see I had no trouble with directors. It's like when I was at sea, I never had trouble with ship's captains. My personality is harmless, and they can't find reason to kick me to death, they like me in effect, so I never had trouble with captains or film directors - or sound chiefs. As I say, I only really knew one.

Alan Lawson : Again on this, can you remember with Klang Film and the early RCA, did they have a camera lock system, or was it that you ran each one up on its own and used clappers?

Peter Birch : The latter.

Alan Lawson : You didn't have camera locks? Not like the original ...

Peter Birch : You're thinking of Newsreel stuff aren't you?

Alan Lawson : No, I'm thinking of the original BA. On the original BA, we had Peter Paulson Motors[?], and they used to get centre position and start swinging and then suddenly they go in reverse.

Peter Birch : Oh to be in sync, you mean?

Alan Lawson : The sound and picture camera came up together.

Peter Birch : No, we didn't have that, we ran in independently. I would start my sound camera prior to the picture camera starting, so that we're up to speed and able to record. And then we had, of course, clappers to do the synching.

Alan Lawson : When you were on the floor, what kind of authority did you have?

Peter Birch : Well I had a boom man, I had my cameraman, he was in his own room and I had a boy on cable. There was usually a crew of four: mixer, cameraman, boom man and his assistant.

Alan Lawson : Did you find the rest of the floor crew easy to get on with?

Peter Birch : What do you mean, the camera people?

Alan Lawson : Yes

Peter Birch : Yes I never had any real trouble with them, I mean sometimes we used to have a slight barney about shadows and things - 'where do you think I'm going to get that edited sound from?' [??], if they had too many shadows. Had to get somewhere near the people... Incidentally, talking about that, you know, looking at the box [TV], a lot of these films where you know the sound is being boomed, it's a terrible job to understand what the people are saying, so they haven't improved much.

Alan Lawson : I think it's got worse, it's picture only; and if there's a good sound there, jolly good luck.

Peter Birch : Unfortunately, a lot of people want to hear the sound. It's a silly idea, but they do! - they want to know what's being said. It's a bit quixotic, but there we are. I always like to know what they're talking about, and that's why I seldom look at these soap operas, because it's so difficult to follow the plot by virtue of that trouble.

Alan Lawson : And looking back over quite a long career in films, which to you is your outstanding memory?

Peter Birch : Well I must go back to Hitchcock. You see I have a diabolical sense of humour, and he had too, and each afternoon a cup of tea was brought to Hitch, who was sitting in his directorial chair by his secretary, a cup of tea in a saucer, and Hitch had one unflinching characteristic which I adored: he would drink the tea, not look, throw the cup over one shoulder, the saucer over the other; Crash Bang, and that was the end of that, and I used to wait and adore

seeing that, knowing almost the precise moment that 'Away cup, away saucer' would happen. Nobody ever complained, after all he was almost like God Almighty on the set.

Alan Lawson : Do you remember his secretary, Joan Harrison?

Peter Birch : Joan Harrison, that was his girl. That was his secretary.

Alan Lawson : She went to America with him.

Peter Birch : Yes, I believe she did.

Alan Lawson : And she's still alive, I believe

Peter Birch : Is she? Oh she was everything a secretary should be. Very good. She didn't react to my charms, I'm afraid!

Alan Lawson : If you could start again, would you want to change courses?

Peter Birch : What do you mean, through my career? That's another leading question. I think I would have devoted more time to making money, rather than going from just here to there at my own sweet will. I didn't collect an awful lot of money, but I had an awful lot of experience, so you take your pick, you see. You either go for experience without money, or become a money man. That takes me back. Am I boring you?

Alan Lawson : No

Peter Birch : The period between my leaving the sea and going into the BBC was taken up with an advertising man for about three months, that doesn't rank really - that was quite funny, but if I had stuck to that I should have probably.. . the advertising business does make money you know. No, but when the war finished in 1918, my stepfather, who was a money man, he had an stockbroker in Throgmorton Street, and he got me a job with him before the Marconi Company took me back again. So I went there as sort of a general run-about in this stockbroker's office, and I was quite popular there. I think if I'd have stayed, I would have become eventually a stockbroker and made money, but I did not like office work. I thought, "back to sea". So I departed. No, that's the only one regret I have but I'm quite sure I would have been a different character had I remained in an office.

Alan Lawson : I don't know if you remember Peter Sargent [?] at the Bush, he was a camera operator, he used to say the wonderful thing about the film business, was to see the world at somebody else's expense.

Peter Birch : That is true.

Alan Lawson : Would you have liked to gone on to direct?

Peter Birch : No.

Alan Lawson : Why's that?

Peter Birch : Well it never occurred to me, quite honestly. I can write, I mean I've written many many articles, lots of things. I suppose if I'd devoted my mind towards directing I might have managed it, but I don't like ruling people. I wouldn't like to be a director, to have to tell an actor he's a silly twerp and doesn't know what his talking about, and why doesn't he memorise his lines? You have to get angry with people as a director, generally speaking you do. From time to time actors and actresses, you know, they're a funny lot ,and to manage them you need to have a certain quality, which I'm afraid I haven't got. They have to be chivvied around. No, I think I'm a technician at heart.

Alan Lawson : Going back to those early days with Baird Television, were you on mirror drums or were you on the Nipkow[?] disc?

Peter Birch : Disc.

Alan Lawson : Up to what time were you there?

Peter Birch : I think it was 1930, 1928 to 1930 I would say.

Alan Lawson : In that case you would have known Tony Bridgewater.

Peter Birch : Tony Bridgewater was one of my boys.

Alan Lawson : Tony's still alive.

Peter Birch : I know, I've been in touch with him. Yes, he was on my staff.

Alan Lawson : There was Douglas Birkenshaw too. Did you remember Douglas?

Peter Birch : Campbell and Bridgewater were my two immediate assistants at Long Acre. Oh yes, Bridgewater got to the BBC, and so did Campbell, but as I'd been fired from the BBC I didn't enter the list.

Alan Lawson : Were you made redundant when you were fired?

Peter Birch : I wasn't disgracefully fired, but I had been a party to this revolution, nine engineers against the fellow in charge, and I unfortunately, as one of the senior ones, allowed myself to sign the round-robin asking for an investigation. We got it, and he won.

Alan Lawson : Can you remember who that senior man was?

Peter Birch : Yes, he'd been at sea as an operator. Harvey. The funny thing about Harvey was after demobbing, when I was still in uniform, I met him on an underground station, and he was so pleased to see me; because although I'd been fired, he didn't hold it against me. He knew I'd been docked into the position of being fired, and he asked me to come and see him. He was in a

very big position in the BBC then. He said "I'll get you back tomorrow, if you'd like to come when you have finished with the Navy". So I said, "Well its very decent of you but I don't know, I'll have to see". And when I thought it over, I thought no: "It's a retrograde step, I don't want to go back to the BBC - pastures new". I went back to Gaumont, you see. That was more to my liking. And of course they immediately gave me a sound chief's job in the Gaumont-British Instructional Films. I'd already been in ordinary British Instructional Films, which was distinct from Gaumont.

Alan Lawson : Bruce Woolfe.

Peter Birch : Yes, but Gaumont British Instructional, I suppose they thought that would be up my alley. It was.

Alan Lawson : But that was also Bruce Woolfe.

Peter Birch : Mary Field, Donald Carter, he was a sort of administrator. There was Harold Goodwin.

Alan Lawson : He was production assistant.

Peter Birch : Well he would write scripts and that sort of thing.

Alan Lawson : Can you remember much about the Gaumont British Instructional set-up?

Peter Birch : Out at Elstree, yes, out at the old B & D lot. British and Dominion used to be there.

Alan Lawson : Did they have a studio?

Peter Birch : Oh yes, there was a dubbing studio. There was no shooting studio. Because British and Dominion, I don't know whether your remember, they were burnt down. No it was a bit of a mix-up. We had several buildings which we used for offices, and this big dubbing theatre. And rooms for the sound gear. It worked all right for seven years anyway. I won't say it was a brilliant success in the stuff we turned out. But it was mostly instructional stuff. I mean Mary Field used to do Secrets of Nature and things like that. It went around mostly as fill-up in the programmes. There were no big pictures made there.

Alan Lawson : So really you were only dubbing on that.

Peter Birch : I would go out on the van. We had a recording van. I'd go out if we had outside work to do. But generally speaking it was dubbing.

Alan Lawson : By this time, how upmarket had British Acoustic become - or hadn't it?

Peter Birch : Now that was a long time ago since I dealt with them. I don't know. I don't whether they are still in existence.

Alan Lawson : I can remember Bacon. Can you remember Bacon from their research department?

Peter Birch : I do, Leslie Bacon.

Alan Lawson : And there was a sound recordist who worked with them too. He wore sandals but never socks. A mop of hair.

Peter Birch : I think I might have remembered that. No. Of course I went to Marylebone Studios. You know that don't you.

Alan Lawson : No that I didn't know. When was this?

Peter Birch : Well, I finished my career at Marylebone running the studio and the sound department. Marylebone Road.

Alan Lawson : The sound system was Fidelitone [?] wasn't it?

Peter Birch : Western.

Alan Lawson : Oh it was Western. Where did they get the money from?

Peter Birch : Well, it was an old cameraman, a well-known lighting man. You'd know his name if I could remember it. He had a Rolls Royce didn't he, so he had some money.

Alan Lawson : Wouldn't be Morton Lewis?

Peter Birch : Not Morton Lewis, no. I've worked with that crook too. I liked old Morton, he was full of fun. What was his name?

Alan Lawson : That was quite a little place wasn't it, Marylebone? I've worked there several times. I've worked with Widgey Newman.

Peter Birch : Did you really? Eric Van Damm [?] was in charge when I went there, and what's his name, an old cameraman that took it over and started to use it to make films. He made a lot of it. This fellow, oh he's a director at the moment, he started there. My memory's terrible. Anyway, he [?] gave me the job of starting the sound department there, and all sorts of bits and pieces were handed to me to make into a sound department, which I managed to do. And then we bought a Western Electric film recording outfit. That was about ♦1500, a lot of money in those days. But I had all the other things, I could carve discs and recording outfit generally - portable things. Yes it was, although I say it myself, it was a work of art making a sound department out of really what was nothing.

Alan Lawson : Do you remember it being called Blattnerscope when sound first came out?

Peter Birch : Blattnerphone I remember.

Alan Lawson : That was the same system that the BBC had which was called the Still Wire system. And that was a stainless steel quarter-inch.

Peter Birch : Oh yes, stainless steel, it was lethal. Blattnerphone.

Alan Lawson : Yes it was Blattner Studios. It was Leslie Fuller Studios. It was British National studios.

Peter Birch : Yes I remember Blattnerphone, I never used it.

Alan Lawson : No I don't think anybody ever did - I've read it in that book by Ivor Montagu.

Peter Birch : Ivor Montagu, yes, I remember him awfully well. Oh Ivor, yes, he was at Shepherd's Bush.

Alan Lawson : I think it was all right for recording sound on, but no way of synching it all.

Peter Birch : The chap that owned Marylebone Studios, what the dickens was his name? Bernie Knowles, no,

Alan Lawson : No, it wouldn't have been Bernie.

Peter Birch : No, he was a tall chap, good looking.

Alan Lawson : Pat Gay.

Peter Birch : No, it'll come to me probably at 2 a.m. tomorrow morning.

Alan Lawson : You've programmed your mind to find the answer.

Peter Birch : Yes, stowed away somewhere, I know it as well as I know myself really. I was working with him for seven years. Steve Dade was another cameraman, I remember him.

Alan Lawson : Yes Steve Doodle Dade.

Peter Birch : He's dead, I suppose.

Alan Lawson : Oh yes, he was at the Bush when I was at the Bush. He was already there - and Ching [Carlisle] Mountenay.

Peter Birch : Ching Mountenay was a sound man.... He was in the Navy, Ching Mountenay.

Alan Lawson : Yes, very much so.

Peter Birch : Yes, a few of us went into the Navy. Some went into the Air Force. All did pretty well. I don't think many of them flew. They were too clever for that.

Alan Lawson : Feet on the ground.

Peter Birch : Yes. But I did go to sea, I will say that.

Alan Lawson : You got your feet wet.

Peter Birch : I once dived over in the North Sea to get a fish. I've told you stories about the Navy.

Alan Lawson : That'll have to be another occasion I think. Separate chapter.

Peter Birch : I was empowered to... if I did a sea trial, I could get the skipper to drop depth charges, you see. And it never occurred to me to do it, but my assistant said to me one day, he was a Lieutenant, he said "please Peter, why don't you get him to drop a depth charge, and fish'll come up by the thousands. We'll have fresh fish." So I said "If you think I can do it, I'll do it." So I said to the Captain, "Could we drop a depth charge, I think it would be rather a good idea to try the result, see how we do." He said he didn't know if the ship could stand it, but he said I'll try it; and we drop one. He killed the engines, they didn't think they'd get the engines going again, but the fish came to the surface in thousands. And I'd have a few whiskeys, I might say. A lot of the crew were trying to get the fish out of the water with buckets, brooms, sticks, whips, anything you like, and not succeeding at all. So in desperation, I thought 'I'll get one' so I took my jacket off and dived in, and came up with a mackerel in each hand. And I hung on to those mackerel what time the ship was a long way away, in the middle of the North Sea, I did feel rather a twerp. Going down with a mackerel in each hand. Anyway the skipper was decent about it, he turned the thing round and came back and I was picked up. But I hung onto the mackerel and I had them for breakfast the next day.

Alan Lawson : What about the rest of the crew?

Peter Birch : They didn't come after me. Nobody volunteered to come in with me. You know, make it a swimming pool effort. No I was all on my own in the middle of the North Sea, but the ship came back. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. What else can I tell you?

Alan Lawson : It rounds it off nicely. Thank you Peter, very much.

Peter Birch [Transcriber: Julia Albert] Sound Recordist, Television Engineer, Newsreel Recordist