John Aldred (sound recordist and dubbing mixer from 1936-1986)

BIOGRAPHY: John Aldred worked as a sound engineer, sound recordist and dubbing mixer in the film industry from 1937-1986**.** Worked in order at: Sound City (Shepperton), Denham, Pinewood, Army Film Unit, Crown Film Unit, MGM-Borehamewood, Shepperton and Rank Film Labs. Born in 1921 in Doncaster, son of a dental surgeon, educated at private school, wasn't that interested in education and he was more interested in cinematography from a young age. His family moved to Middlesex, he left education aged 16 and got a job at Sound City (Shepperton) in 1937 on £1 a week as sound assistant/playback operator. The first film he worked on was **Wanted**. Here he worked with Vistatone (Marconi) sound equipment at Shepperton and worked with the producer John Baxter (who hired out a stage at Shepperton). His contract lasted six months at Shepperton after which he was made redundant. Through his father's dental nurse who had a daughter in the wardrobe department at Denham he heard there were openings in the sound department: "…at a marvellous salary of £2 10s. a week". He used Western Electric equipment at Denham. Worked as sound camera loader? At Denham he was involved in organising the Denham sound department (which consisted of 8 sound crews at that time) into the ACT union in 1938. The membership increased dramatically after a recruiting drive due to the excessively long hours and what he calls "elastic" approach to hours at Denham. At Denham he worked with Cyril Crowhurst who introduced night training classes to the sound department. Also worked with DP Field. Involved in productions such as **The Thief Of Baghdad**, **Citadel** and **60 Glorious Years**. During the war he was in the sound department making **The Lion Has Wings** and **In Which We Serve.** In 1942 he joined the Army Film Unit at Pinewood. Worked as sound camera operator on **The True Glory, Desert Victory, The Way Ahead**. Recorded war sound effects in Western Europe during WW2 with Peter Handford. The stories about this experience are fascinating. He then joined the Crown Film Unit working under Ken Cameron where he worked on **Western Approaches**. Through A.W. Watkins he got an interview with Douglas Shearer (head of sound at MGM) in 1947 and was offered twice the pay he was on at Pinewood as sound maintenance engineer at the new MGM Borehamwood studios, after about two years he moved back into production as assistant dubbing mixer. Worked on various films, including **Under Capricorn** with Hitchcock, on 10-minute shoots. In 1956 he left MGM and moved to Shepperton as he could get over the union rate there, at this time the studio was very busy, employing 13 sound crews. He worked there until 1968 and was dubbing mixer on many films including **The Innocents** and **Lawrence of Arabia**. Then had a year contract with Paramount, then worked in Canada and freelance with Hall Wallis, then couldn't get any work so he got a job as head of sound at Rank Film Laboratories. In 1980 he became involved with the British Kinematograph Sound and Television Society (BSKTS) and was involved in training courses and industry standards in sound. He retired from Rank Film labs in 1986.

JOHN ALDRED
Interviewed by Peter Musgrave at the home of John Aldred in Marbella on the Costa Del Sol

SIDE 1, TAPE 1
Peter Musgrave: Where and when were you born?
John Aldred: I was born at Doncaster in 1921, son of dental surgeon but I had no ambition about following in my father's chosen profession.
Peter Musgrave: Have you any early memories of childhood or school?
John Aldred: I had a normal education in private schools. I did not go on and receive any higher education because at that particular moment in time there was a slight financial crisis in the family and I had to leave school and go out and earn some money. But while I was at school I was always interested in photography of all kinds, cinematography. In fact in my last school I was in charge of doing the cinematography for the school, doing the school sports and any other event which happened to take place.
Peter Musgrave: What do you think formed or provoked this interest. Were there relatives who used cameras a lot?
John Aldred: It's in the family because my grandfather was a great photographer in 1880s and 1890s and going back to that era and he was always monopolising the kitchen to do his photography. I can remember that when I was very young. He'd given it up by then but I can remember seeing all his old equipment lying around and that gave me the urge to do something about it. My uncle had a vest pocket folding Kodak which interested me immensely and I thought I must get something like that someday.
Peter Musgrave: I remember you mentioning something to me about a magic lantern.
John Aldred: That goes back even further. One Christmas, when I was knee high to a duck, I was given a magic lantern with some nursery rhyme slides. Because its light source was an oil lamp I was not considered responsible enough to use it so it was hidden in a cupboard until I subsequently found it quite by chance and I was fascinated by projection and soon became interested in moving images.
Peter Musgrave: Did you show these to other children or invite them home to see them?
John Aldred: I'm afraid I can't remember. I believe it was pretty much of a solo effort. I mentioned moving images because further on I saw an advertisement for a film projector complete with film and battery for 12 s. and 6d so I had to save up all my pocket money which I think in those days was sixpence a week and eventually I sent off for this thing which arrived, no screen or anything, so I showed it on the wall paper and I got tired of this roll of film but it was quite interesting with moving images as I said. We had a plumber call at the house at that time and he saw what I was doing because I invited him into to see my hundred foot film and he announced he had a thousand foot film back at home which he would give to me the following day which he did and it was all about a ship trapped in the ice in the Arctic. It was a jolly interesting film but there were no titles on it so I still to this day do not know what it was about. One rather comical thing about that time, as does happen with old nitrate film, it does break occasionally and there were no instructions with this projector about how to make a join. And I said to my mother can I have a needle and cotton which I subsequently used and tied all the sprocket needle and cotton which I subsequently used and tied all the sprocket holes together. I

got a marvellous join which went through the projector but I was told that was not the correct think to do. My uncle said you go and see Auntie Mabel. Now Auntie Mabel was in the box office of the local cinema. So I went down to Auntie Mabel and said I want to make a join in some film, so a projectionist appeared and produced some film cement and said this is what you need. I thanked them profusely. When I got home I undid all the cotton, put the cement on, held it in my hands together and the result was rather a sticky mess because nobody had ever told me you have to scrape the emulsion off first.
Peter Musgrave: You were lucky it stuck.
John Aldred: It didn't stick really, not very well.
Peter Musgrave: Going back to what you said a moment ago about at school' you found yourself in charge of filming school sports and all that sort of thing. When you got the film back from processing, and we're talking now I presume about 16mm, whereas your home projector was 35mm I gather.
John Aldred: That's correct.
Peter Musgrave: Did you have to edit or did somebody else do that?
John Aldred: It was left to me to do the editing but in those days I didn't know very much about editing so a lot of it was left unedited. Basically it was a record of an event and any boy who was recognisable in the film, I had to leave it in as a record. It wasn't an edited process where you have to condense 500ft down, you had to show everything shot provided you could see something on the screen, it was all left in. But one shot I did edit because there were aquatic sports where the boys were diving off Ryde Pier into the sea and I turned the camera upside down and reversed that shot so they appeared to be jumping out of the sea back onto the diving board which rather amused the head master but he said that's not really what I meant when I asked you to take some film.
Peter Musgrave: Now you'd moved from Doncaster to Ryde and you had to cut your schooling short. What was your next move?
John Aldred: Ryde was my school and I left school at the age of 16 to start work. I had more or less decided that I wanted to go into the film industry because my interest went back a long way even though I was only 16. For instance I can remember my first visit to the cinema in the silent days, at the Majestic Cinema in Doncaster because my father was a great cinema buff and he loved going to the movies or films as they were called then. This Majestic Cinema had an orchestra sitting among the potted palms beneath the screen. One film I can remember was called **Through China and Japan** with the intrepid explorer cameraman giving his own commentary up on the stage without a microphone. I can remember going to see another documentary about a lion called Zimba. The first half was silent and the second half had Western Electric sound and the projectionist was sitting in the middle of the audience. This was about the time I bought the projector I mentioned. I also started saving my pocket money for cycling into town to buy a 6d seat at any morning matinee although it was strictly forbidden to do so because it meant going along a dangerous main road. One early two reeler I saw was called **The Farm** and to demonstrate how good the sync was he kept throwing this bucket around which made a terrible noise. Actually the sound quality could not have been very good because male and female voices appeared to be around the same pitch. Around that time I remember seeing many good films at morning matinees including **Broadway Melody** of 1929 which I saw again recently on television, **Sunny Side Up, Flying Down to Rio**, oh and a drama about an airship rescue over

the North Pole called **Dirigible**. At the same time I can remember seeing many **Felix the Cat** cartoons which were earlier than Disney but Felix were silent not sound.
Peter Musgrave: Presumably you, or the cinema, went through a period of some sound films and silent films for a couple of years. Do you remember whether the public welcomed the advent of sound or did they like so many know all say it can't last and silent is better than sound?
John Aldred: I don't remember anyone saying it can't last not in the town that I was. All the cinemas were packed, there were three or four cinemas all converted to sound about 1929 and they were all doing tremendous trade. As I said earlier they even had morning matinees to get people along. Certainly there was no suggestion that sound was not here to stay. But mind you sound was pretty poor, it was just coming in.
Peter Musgrave: Having decided you wanted to be in films if at all possible was there a sudden stroke of good fortune which enabled you to do that or did you write a lot of letters to studios?
John Aldred: I didn't have to write any letters to anyone. As you know Peter being in the industry there is now here was no recognised method of entry. Nowadays there are film schools but there certainly were not when I was young. I'll tell you how it came about. At home before I left school I organised my own 9.5mm cinema for showing silent films which I used to play records to, these had coloured lights on dimmers and tabs and things I used to give film shows to friends at home. As my 16th birthday approached my parents had resigned themselves to that I was destined to a career in the film industry. One of my father's patients was a Mr John Byers and he just happened to be head of sound at Shepperton Studios which in those days was called Sound City and it was not long before I was invited to look around. Of course he had a look round my little cinema and had a big laugh but apart from that when I went to look around Shepperton Studios they were filming **Sanders of the River** with Paul Robeson and Leslie Banks and I spent a long time in the projection room watching the daily rushes and some cut sequences. I remember there was always a crowd of native extras on the ground, living in tents near the exterior jungle film set. It was interesting to note that their shop steward who was also Paul Robeson's stand-in was Kenyatta who made a name for himself much later on as the president of Kenya. Shortly after my visit to see this film a vacancy occurred in the sound department so I was whisked away for a formal interview. The job was to be sound assistant/playback operator, work to which I was well accustomed from my domestic cinema. So I was delighted when I was told I could start the following Monday. I was offered the fantastic wage of £1 a week/ and here's the punchline, the studio manager said if you're any good we'll start paying you the second week. I don't think you'd have that today. But I was so keen I was willing to work for one week without no money whatsoever. It meant me going into digs because the studio was some distance from where I was living, so my father leant me the money to pay for other digs until I was earning enough money to support myself which was some while. For £1 a week it was difficult to get digs.
Peter Musgrave: So you'd moved from Ryde.
John Aldred: Yes we were living near Hayes, Middlesex, at the time. I went along on the Monday morning and the first production was a comedy called **Wanted** with Zazu Pitts and Claude Dampier. I was very impressed when I saw the first day's rushes - I didn't know what rushes were till then - with synchronised sound. I marvelled at the overnight service offered I think in those days by Kay's Laboratories. We started work promptly at 8.30 and always broke for lunch at 1.00. Unfortunately the finishing time varied but it was usually about 6.00 or 6.30

and this included Saturdays, it was a full six days week. The fact that most of the artists arrived at Shepperton by train brings to mind the following rhyme which was going around at that time, it was called the assistant director's lament: *What shall I do, What shall I do, An Actor has missed the train, The Crowd's got lost, In Love I'm crossed and we're working late again*.
Peter Musgrave: Shepperton was about a mile and a half from the station. Can you remember anything about Shepperton at that time, how many stages did it have, was it like many studios at that time a converted house with stages built round it?
John Aldred: At that particular moment they had just built four new stages and they were on permanent hire. One pair was on hire to John Wainwright and another pair was on hire to John Baxter. They rented the things full time and did their own movies.
Peter Musgrave: There was an old house at Shepperton was that in use?
John Aldred: Not as a studio but as a restaurant and bar area. It was not used as a studio. You must remember in those days you had to have a fully soundproofed studio. You couldn't shoot anywhere because the equipment was so bulky. Subsequently they did build studios onto the old house at Shepperton but I'm talking about much later in the 60s.
Peter Musgrave: So there were just four stages. Did they run as far as having their own dubbing theatre?
John Aldred: Yes they did. They had three small theatres and one was equipped for dubbing but there was no dubbing crew employed as such. Everybody had a turn to do their own thing. Basically it was an RCA Studio but they had some old Visatone equipment and this enabled you to mix three tracks together or two tracks and a loop. The equipment was so built that you had to thread the machine and then join the loop. You couldn't thread a ready made loop onto the machine. The size of the picture was about 10" by 8" or ten by 12 and the whole thing was rather shakey. Most of the time, and I'm talking about 1936 and 1937 they didn't really do a lot of dubbing, they simply cut the sync track together. If it had some music then it had to be mixed, obviously, but you didn't do a lot of serious dubbing because the sync track was always pretty good, at least it was supposed to be pretty good, and I think it was, listening back on some of those old films the sync track is quite remarkable. My very first week working at Shepperton, I was put into digs. On the third day my parents turned up to find out how I was getting on. My father said, "what have you been doing today?" I said well I've been on strike because the management refused to negotiate with the electricians. He left me wondering if the film industry was a good idea after all but I was determined to persevere with this career and it was shortly after that incident that I joined ACT as it was called then with a weekly subscription of sixpence a week, six old pence. I can remember during the period when I was on strike somebody plugged the camera motor up to do something, I don't know what it was and the camera ran backwards till all the film ran out and unleashed itself. He said does anyone know how to fix this, so being very young and determined I said yes, I got my screwdriver out and somebody held my arm and said I wouldn't do that if I was you. So I didn't. That was a long time ago and it's all I can remember about it.
Peter Musgrave: You were paying 6d a week out of your £1 wage. What about your digs. What did that cost you?
John Aldred: My digs cost £1 5s which my father paid.
Peter Musgrave: So you were left with 19s and 6d for eating. I must say he was very cross one week when I spent my 19s 6d on Pifco Multimeter [valve tester?] and he thought it was a

complete waste of money but I had to have something to progress in my chosen career.
John Aldred: Thinking about progress you came straight from school albeit very keen and self-taught on some basic things but did you have any opportunity or were you encouraged to go to any sort of evening classes in electronics or microphones or recording systems?
Peter Musgrave: Not at that time. I was learning on the job is the expression. Nobody said we would like you improve your knowledge by coming and having a chat and ask any questions or go to school. There was no school to go to anyway. Really I was just learning as I went on. I learnt very fast I might add. I remember on one occasion when we were using Visatone equipment manufactured by Marconi to a design by a certain Captain Round whose visits to Shepperton to check the equipment never went beyond the bar. My job was to run up the sound and picture cameras on DC, check the AC interlock system for phase, throw in two more switches and shout speed and electric motors did not always respond and sometimes it took me a full minute to obtain a satisfactory interlock before I shouted speed. On another occasion I can remember I set the soundtrack on fire which did not exactly render me very popular. I plugged the DC into the AC and the AC into the DC. Instead of firing me on the spot as I thought they would do, the studio manager summoned the head of sound into his office to explained why these two sockets were exactly the same so any fool could plug the wrong one into the wrong one. So I got off very lightly on that occasion. Later on when I left Shepperton. I was made redundant after 12 weeks, I did get some training when I went to Denham studios but I'm jumping ahead a bit. Nothing happened at Shepperton.
Peter Musgrave: This was pretty short, 12 weeks at Shepperton, presumably only on two films?
John Aldred: One film, **Wanted**. However having fired me they called me back again a month later to do another picture.
Peter Musgrave: So your total time at Shepperton was what roughly
John Aldred: About six months.
Peter Musgrave: You were then made redundant again?
John Aldred: I would like to talk a bit about my final days at Shepperton because "that included a location. This was all exciting stuff for a lad being on location. We went to Grimsby shooting exteriors around the harbour. We had this Visatone truck, a 5 ton Bedford truck which housed all our equipment operated with very large car batteries. It all went well until the final days shooting when the ship's siren blew the mirror off last galvanometer modulator which was not a good idea, but he just blew his siren and the mixer had the volume a little too high so we were all scraping around on the floor looking for this mirror which we never did find. After that I went straight onto another film. This was a musical called **Talking Feet** with virtually unknown artists doing a series of vaudeville acts, Dagenham Girl Pipers were most interested in our new Parmico playback which we also used for disc cutting. That was one of my favourite jobs, doing playbacks, This particular film **Talking Feet**, I don't know what happened to it, it probably got shown somewhere, I have no knowledge of its cost even. Indeed a similar film on another film they didn't even finish the shooting they got as far as Teddy Brown and had to pack up. Teddy Brown was an expert on the xylophone. After 6 months at Shepperton I was fired due to lack of production. But as one door closed another door opened.
Peter Musgrave: Two of the stages were John Baxter and two for John Wainwright. Which of the two companies were you working for?
John Aldred: Baxter. I was working for Shepperton Studios and hired out to Baxter and it was

Baxter who made **Talking Feet**. He specialised in children's films in the 40s. There were a lot of children in **Talking Feet**, Hazel Court was one. It was like a filmed variety show.
Peter Musgrave: He also turned up as part of Group 3 Productions. How did you handle the situation of finishing at Shepperton at such a tender age?
John Aldred: As I said as one door closed another door opened. My father's surgery had a nurse and she said that her daughter had just started work in the wardrobe department of Denham Studios and they were looking for staff in all departments. So it only meant a phone call and I got an interview with the head of sound, A. W. Watkins who engaged me on the spot when he heard of my Shepperton experiences at a marvellous salary of £2 10s. a week. I'd never heard of so much salary. My first tasks was to keep all the sound recording trucks - and there were six of them - supplied with magazines of sound recording negative. In those days all recording was done on photographic film. The Denham equipment was Western Electric and it gave far superior results to the old Visatone which I had been used to before. In fact the sound department won a Hollywood Oscar in 1939 for the sound recording on Goodbye Mr Chips which starred Robert Donat and I think it was the first British film to achieve this award.
Peter Musgrave: Western Electric came from America. Where did Visatone come from?
John Aldred: Visatone was manufactured in England by Marconi to the design of the certain Captain Round.
Peter Musgrave: He was British was he?
John Aldred: Yes. Western Electric was portable but was mounted in trucks. So if you had to go up a mountain you could unstrap it all and a team of men would carry it for you because it was quite heavy. The actual sound recorder we called it a sound camera because it did photographs and that was - it was about 5 ft long with a steel lid - affectionately known as the coffin when it had the lid was on it, and it took two or three strong men to life the coffin apart from all the other gear, batteries and things. Around that time the ACT was making a strong effort to form a Denham shop because at that "time not everyone working at Denham was in the ACT and I was about the only member of the sound department who in the union. One lunchtime I remember we had a meeting with both Anthony Asquith who was the president in those days and George Elvin and they both addressed us and the late Percy Dayton who was microphone operator he was elected as shop steward. I remember I was his deputy for a time when he couldn't get away from the set. I don't remember the exact details but for one period the management withdrew the concession of work's meetings to be held within the studio so we had to adjourn to a cafe down the road. When I told Percy Dayton he said silly bugger what have you been saying at these meeting's? But it wasn't me at all.
Peter Musgrave: These recruiting meetings, did they have much results in terms of increasing the number of members?
John Aldred: It did dramatically. The entire department at that time consisted of 8 sound crews and at that time the projectionists also joined the ACT so a large number joined overnight.
Peter Musgrave: Was this because of excessive working hours and very how wages. Or were there other reasons?
John Aldred: Basically the hours were long. They were longer than Shepperton. For instance certain producers seemed to find they worked better in the evenings or halfway through the night. Yet the crew would always be called in the morning at 8.30. You never knew when you were going to get home. It could be 9.00 at night quite often. Or break for supper at 7.00 and

come back and work till completion. This could be midnight. It was very elastic. In fact the staff got fed up with this and an agreement was worked out, nothing to do with the ACT but an internal studio agreement, we were to be paid overtime after 60 hours work which was better than nothing I suppose, and around that time ACT came in and took over the negotiation of things like hours numbers, salaries.

Peter Musgrave: Aside from the better equipment at Denham what were the other changes there. It was a newer studio purpose built, much bigger?

John Aldred: Denham was a curious place because it was newly built but it wasn't very well designed. For instance all the shooting studios, stages you call them, were all in a line. You came to them on the main road all in a line. And the dressing rooms were all in a line. And way away in a corner of the lot were all the workshops were, where the scenery was made and the paintshop and the plasterers were. So the studios had a whole lot of beautiful low loaders, mechanical trucks with very low loading platforms tearing around, taking equipment a quarter of mile there and back. It was rather a tedious business carting scenery up and down, it was an expensive studio to run. The stages themselves were interesting. I can remember it was the first time I'd been in a film studio where they had lighting gantries suspended from the roof. If we'd done that at Shepperton the roof would have caved in. All the lighting at Shepperton was built - up from the floor on scaffolding so it was quite and awful mess HI all over the studio floor with cables and scaffolding and what have you. When I went to Denham the first thing I noticed was all these cradles suspended from the roof and the floor was relatively free for filming which it should be.

Peter Musgrave: Did this mean directors could be much more flexible in calling for a wall to be flown for instance and changing their angles whereas at Shepperton were they very locked in?

John Aldred: That is true. It is much easier to do what you described. Float a wall. You could do that in 10 minutes. But of course the cameras were getting more mobile. I don't mean they were getting bigger but the actual camera dollies were getting more sophisticated and no longer did you just have to push the camera in a straight line and the microphone booms were getting more versatile as well and the early ones took two men to operate but these ones at Denham were operated by one person.

Peter Musgrave: You mentioned the dollies being better. Did they still have to work on tracks or did they start to crab?

John Aldred: No. In those days everything was on tracks. There was no way you could crab. The floors were not that even. They were wooden floors laid on concrete but not all that even for crabbing. If you did crab, sometimes you had a camera crane with under-inflated tyres for doing certain shots. I remember them being in use but they were not propelled any way but a dozen labourers on the floor.

Peter Musgrave: Would you say conditions were rather unsafe there. Did equipment tend to fall or come adrift?

John Aldred: No not at all I don't remember anything like that happening.

Peter Musgrave: What year did you go to Denham?

John Aldred: 1938 I remember it very clearly because 1938 and 1939 because my father died in 39. I started in 1938 and I was still there when my father died. I remember my uncle came and talked to A. W. Watkins to find out if they were going to keep me on salary at the end of the picture or fire me because I had no father, no home and no income and thought it was essential

that I had one of those three. I was assured I was considered satisfactory and would not be fired and I stayed on at Denham working under A. W. Watkins.
Peter Musgrave: Any particular films you remember from that period were there any memorable directors or encounters.
John Aldred: Several encounters. Films that stand out in my mind are three classics. One's the **Citadel** with Robert Donat, that was in black and white. **Four Feathers** which was quite a famous Korda film and that was my first introduction to Technicolor, a great big blimp they had, three strip cameras and of course Herbert Wilcox came along with his **60 Glorious Years** and that was also in Technicolor. It was quite interesting especially the amount of light required. I think it was something, you had to have something like 600 ft candles and of course everyone's makeup would melt if they stood in the light too long. An enormous amount of light I remember being used. Everything was arc light because you to have that to get the colour right because it was balanced with daylight. Early Technicolor films had intense blue arc lights all over the place.
Peter Musgrave: The non-Technicolor films were processed right next door at the new Denham Laboratories?
John Aldred: Not necessarily. Some of them were. We used to have vans calling from Humphreys and Kays if the picture demanded it. The film did not have to go to Denham Laboratories. You could chose whichever laboratory you wished to go to. I remember on one occasion I was left in charge and I had all these tins lined up for different laboratories and I put the wrong labels on the wrong films and I sent Humphreys rushes to Denham and Denham rushes to Humphreys, so the first thing that happened in the morning was that I was up before Mr Watkins who said don't ever do that again laddie. I could see this was not the right time to ask for a rise.
Peter Musgrave: Do you remember any personalities?
John Aldred: Among the technicians I remember very well was Henty Creer who was a camera operator at that time and he was a nice man. He would have gone a long way. He was working at that time with Jack Cardiff and unfortunately during the war he volunteered early on and he ended up in these mini submarines with a two man crew and he went down in a submarine one day and never came back. That's one person I can remember. I think the whole film industry remembers Zolly Korda and his famous remarks and his method of directing which is not everybody's. I remember him very clearly. I don't think I'll expound this at this moment. Another personality connected with sound, we had a chief maintenance engineer called D.P. Field and he was really a little bit eccentric and very good at his job and loyal to his staff. But he used to put the fear of god into everybody else and called them the most outrageous names. I had a pet name. He used to call me Skimball because he couldn't remember Aldred. It's a rather difficult word. He could remember Skimball. So my name has been Skimball since 1938 almost to this day but laterly I have managed to suppress it and most people just call me John. He used to run around doing most of the work himself. He was a very difficult man to delegate, he didn't like delegating so he just did everything himself and created havoc and mayhem and I was stuck with him rather along time. I remember he joined the territorial Army in 1938 because he came from a military family He said there will never be a war, so he signed up and was the first to go when war broke out. He disappeared just two days before war was declared.
Peter Musgrave: He was very good at his job but did he help people like you to understand

what was behind what you were doing, maybe more about circuitry or the layout of amplifiers.
John Aldred: No he was as reticent in offering advice as he was in delegating. Nothing at all. What did happen was that after he left to join up, his place was taken by Cyril Crowhurst who was a well-known character, sound engineer and he did institute a lot of training in the evening because we were getting quite a lot of turnover in staff at that time and half of them didn't know much about equipment, so he used to have sessions once a week on motor systems and the sound recorder and amplifiers and things like that. It was really much better than going to school and reading books because you are talking about the equipment you're using during the day and learning more about it. And I found that very useful. That stood me in good stead later on in life.
Peter Musgrave: P M Watkins was the head of sound, D.P. Field was his right hand man. Where did Mr Crowhurst come in in this hierarchy?
John Aldred: Watkins had left to join the Territorial Army.
Peter Musgrave: If you were there in 1939 now comes this big moment of Britain joining the war. How did this affect you. Were you liable to be called up?
John Aldred: I was around military age at that time and the war came one Sunday morning. We were filming another Korda picture called **The Thief of Baghdad**. After the announcement by Neville Chamberlain that we were at war with Germany everybody, including the extras were all given sandbags to protect the main entrance from practical air attacks. Why they would attack the main entrance of Denham Studios I can't imagine. Eventually we made a Korda propaganda film called **The Lion Has Wings** in seven days with five units. Since three of those units were working on the same stage it got a bit involved. I did stay at Denham till 1942. One of the many films I worked on was **In Which We Serve** which was quite a memorable film about the destroyer sunk in the Mediterranean.
Peter Musgrave: You were 21 then, well into military age. What kept you out of the Army?
John Aldred: It wasn't exactly reserved occupation. I was not old enough to be called up, I was old enough to volunteer. So I decided to stay until I was called up because I wanted to get as much experience as possible. 1942 I was called up and strangely enough instead of being made a cook or a dentist or any other trade I stayed with films and ended up in the Army Film Unit which was based at Pinewood which was only five miles away from Denham. The Army Film Unit was attached to the Ministry of Information. It wasn't making training films, mainly short films for cinemas, propaganda films. My job at that time was sound camera operator, photographic. The Airforce Film Unit was also at Pinewood and the Crown Film Unit moved in. So the whole studio complex at Pinewood was full of government units.
Peter Musgrave: What happened to Denham at this time?
John Aldred: Denham soldiered on for a few years and eventually was closed because it was getting very expensive. It was also requisitioned. They wanted it to store sugar. The studio floors were quite useful for that but I believe one stage leaked, the rain came in and it made quite a mess of rather a lot of sugar. Of course the workshops were used for manufacturing components, subcontracting. It ceased to be a a film studio for many years. Although having said that I got called up and went to Pinewood, six months later they were so short of staff at Denham that myself and some other array personnel we were demobilised to go and work as civilians on a film at Denham called **The Way Ahead** with David Niven. I was one of the few persons who were called up and demobilised twice in the same year. It was rather useful, because the first time I was demobilised to go to Denham I drew my full allowance of £12. 10sh to get my demob

suit and of course I got that again when I was demobbed at the end of the war so I got two lots of expenses.
Peter Musgrave: We won't tell the government about that. You stayed at Pinewood right through to the end of the war.
John Aldred: Yes I was the last service person to leave. I was right at the bitter end. There was just nobody there at all. Everybody had gone. I got myself first of all attached to a Remy unit in Slough and I remember the adjutant and sergeant would come by once a week to pay me my pay and my naffy rations. I was tied to this spool machines and I'd just sign for it briefly. They thought it was a good morning out for them. They would say then what films are being made and they used to go round the stages having a look. I think they enjoyed coming to see me. Before that I would like to mention some of the. films we made in the Army film unit. One of them, we made one or two cinema type productions. We had Roy Boulting with us and his brother John was in the Airforce film unit and he made **Desert Victory** which Montgomery's historic dash from Alamein all along the Coast in pursuit of Rommel. This film was also shown all over the USSR. They took our sound and over dubbed it with a Russian commentator. Eventually they sent us a print, printed in Russia with a soundtrack and I thought what a diabolical noise it was nothing like the result we had when we started. I suppose it was their technique at the time. We went on after, we made **The True Glory** which was about the second front.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1
John Aldred: The Americans flew in Frank Capra to direct this movie. We were all doing fire watching, one evening. And this evening it just happened that his evening coincided with mine. We were standing watching the Blitz on London and he said fantastic, this is much better than a movie, more searchlights over the docks and the bombs falling.
Peter Musgrave: You were mentioning these wartime films like **The True Glory**, these must have needed naturalistic sound effects like explosions bombs. If you were at Pinewood how did you obtain these effects.
John Aldred: On **True Glory** there was nowhere you could get sound effects of Second World War in action so myself and fellow ACT member Peter Handford were dispatched into Northern Europe with a portable Western Electric channel to record authentic sound effects which was rather a dangerous undertaking. We had all our equipment mounted in a little station wagon and we had a corporal for a driver who was quite a character - I'll come back to him later - we went all over Belgium and Holland and into Germany wherever there was some action, sound, gunfire, tanks convoys you name it we were they're. What used to happen was that we would find out where there was going to be some shooting, we'd go up to headquarters and go in and find out what was going to happen that day. They'd get their map out and say the Germans are there and we're going to take that village either today or tomorrow, I'm going to have lunch first but around about this afternoon we're going to mount an attack. Our troops are here and they're going to fire over the German positions and then we're going to advance down this road and hopefully we'll give them a big surprise. That's what we're going to do. Peter Handford and myself said if the guns are firing there, if we get down that road we'll be out of sight of the Germans and the guns will be firing over us and falling into the distance which is exactly what happened. On that occasion the guns did hit the German troops, not our own. Later on when the gun barrage had ceased we got all the sound effect of the convoy going down the road to knock the hell out of the

Germans. That was just one day's work. This sometimes went on into the night. I remember on one occasion we found a nice stop and set the mike up, we found a dug out deserted by the Germans, we put all the camera gear in the dugout. It wouldn't be safe to leave it in the truck in case we were hit. We got some good shell fire and shells landing and when we came out in the morning we found the microphone had been knocked over. We wondered why it sounded a bit peculiar but if we'd stayed there we'd have been knocked over too. That was one example of recording natural sound effects. We did our homework on one occasion and the battalion commander said we're entrenched down that road there, just go down and ask the sergeant what's happening. We saw all our troops in the ditches at the side of the road keeping their heads down and we were boldly driving on in our station-wagon and we went on for about half an hour and we suddenly found there were no troops left in the ditch and at that moment in time the Germans must have spotted us and started aiming their mortars at us. If you know anything about mortars you want to get out of the way as quickly as possible. So we turned round and came back and I said to the first guy we came to is there any one in front of you and he replied only you. So we beat a hasty retreat because we didn't want any mortar fire at that time not on us at any rate.

Peter Musgrave: Were you and Peter Handford given ordinary ranks to enable you to cruise round and not be challenged.

John Aldred: We were not given honorary ranks. We had the most impressive document, an identity card, and it was signed by General Eisenhower and I'm only too sorry I don't have it today but I remember the wording. It said no one, in great big capital letters, must interfere with this man in the execution of his duty as a sound engineer and recordist, which meant you could go anywhere and if you were stopped by the military police either British or Canadian or Americans you just showed them this card and they waved you on. So we had a free range around the whole of the second front, north middle and south. We went right down into the Ardennes where the Germans were being pretty naughty and putting a great big bulge and pushing the Americans back and we got some fantastic sound there of tanks sliding around on the ice. Another side effect of this pass was that we could go into the American [px?] and get all our rations from the Americans which were much better than the English rations and we lived quite well on American tin food for a long while.

Peter Musgrave: If this was recorded on 35mm optical film how did you cope with the unknown quantities of film which was needed for an assignment which was totally open ended, if you were holed up in a ditch for a couple of days and good barrages were proceeding how on earth did you cope with thousands and thousands of feet and having shot it how did you get it processed?

John Aldred: You won't believe this but it was processed at Denham, Denham Laboratories. In those days Western Electric was variable density not variable area and the processing had to be much more accurate because you couldn't compensate at the print for the neg. as easily as you could with area recording so we had to be very careful about that. How it ever got back to Denham I couldn't tell you. We just left it in the film unit office and it went with all the picture rushes and it got back to Denham eventually. We came out with 100,000 ft of film and our brief was to stay 12 weeks and we thought that 100,000 ft would just last out. In the event we were recording so much interesting material we were allowed to stay a bit longer but eventually after about four months D.P Field had now attained the rank of captain and was my official GO back at Pinewood Studios and he was one of these very flamboyant characters who said I'll get the

buggers back, we won't send them anymore film and then they've got to come back. What he didn't know is that Peter and I had discovered a hoard of Agfa sound recording stock back in a bunker left behind by the Germans and we sent Agfa back to Denham and that confused him enormously. It confused Denham as well because the exposure wasn't correct but at least we got quite a lot of sound using this material. That was how we extended our stay.
Peter Musgrave: Did you only use one microphone or in a dangerous situation did you plant several.
John Aldred: We never used more than two and generally one, seldom more. We had about four with us and we used one for announcement and the other two sometimes out. But generally one microphone was sufficient. The microphones we used were D18s. Fabulous mikes. You could never blow it to pieces. We had some D630s also. The D18 was a directional coil microphone, one of the original Western Electric ones and the D630 is a ball and [bisket?] type make by Standard Telephones and Cables and we had both of those microphones. We never lost a microphone. The one that got blown over it didn't break it. We were quite lucky.
Peter Musgrave: How did you wind-gag them?
John Aldred: We had soup strainers and nylon stockings. Don't ask me where I got the nylon stockings but the soup strainers came from Woolworths. It was D.P. Field's idea was never to spend anything if you could get away with making it yourself which is what happened, it was very effective too.
Peter Musgrave: You were eventually recalled and finished your time as the last man at Pinewood on the Army roster. What happened next?
John Aldred: I found myself when the army film unit was eventually disbanded as the sole survivor at Pinewood. The army had no job for me because I was only marking time till I was demobbed and I managed to get myself posted to the Crown Film Unit under Ken Cameron until the time came for my release. This was rather unusual because the Crown Unit was a civilian organisation and here was I a service man got myself posted to it. Very strange situation but I enjoyed it and I lived in digs just outside the studio and I was learning quite a lot because Ken Cameron was a very good technician and I learnt a lot from him. His speciality was music recording and I remember I built a whole monitor system, amplifier and speaker and it did quite well. He was quite pleased with me.
Peter Musgrave: Many people may think the Crown Film Unit was another section of the Army but as it was composed of civilians. In what way did it functions differ and what sort of films did it make and in what way were they different to the Army Film Unit?
John Aldred: The Crown Film Unit was really part of the Ministry of Information and they made documentary films related to the war once again for showing in the cinema. They could be 2 minute shorts be saying be cozy in the kitchen, don't light fires all over the house, be careful in the shops, how to make a cup of tea. But they made for serious films, feature length films for cinema showing connected with the war. One was directed by Humphrey Jennings called ***The Fires were Started*** which is all about the Blitz. There was another one called **Western Approaches** which was photographed by Jack Cardiff in Technicolor that was about crossing the Atlantic, convoys crossing the Atlantic bringing food and supplies to Britain. Things like that. It was part of the Ministry of information so they were regarded as a civilian unit. They did have uniforms, brown uniforms with a flash on the shoulder, Crown Film Unit, but it had no military significance but it allowed them to mix with military personnel without being too noticeable.

Peter Musgrave: Did you work on either of those two films
John Aldred: Yes I did. I didn't work on Fires were Burning but I worked on Western Approaches, the music recording and also the dubbing the rerecording of the film, I was on the sound camera at that time.
Peter Musgrave: Did you have to go out on any of the location shootings at sea . I remember Jack Cardiff saying about the great problems with cabling and lighting.
John Aldred: Yes they had lots of problems during the filming. I did get a location out of this which was purely shooting sound effects. There was a scene where the submarine, this is another film made by the Crown Film Unit about submarines and they wanted the sound effect of depth charges as recorded underwater in the hull of a submarine.This was a sound nobody knew what it was because they hand't heard recorded it. So we got our portable machine including the coffin, loaded it onto an old DC3 and flew up to Prestwick and went up to Loch and boarded HMS which was a submarine depot ship and had a good meal, the first good meal I'd had for a long while, then we descended into a submarine and all our batteries were lifted up by a crane in a net basket sort of thing. They all went upside down into the machine. Fortunately most of the acid was kept in the batteries. So we took off in this submarine and we sat on the bottom of Loch L and a destroyer called the Cutty Sark started at a distance of three miles dropping depth charges every half mile as it approached us. The nearer it got the more cork lining fell off the inside of the submarine and I was getting a little scared because I wasn't being paid submarine money. I was being paid army film unit money which wasn't the same thing. Any rate that was how we recorded the sound of depth charges hitting the hull of a submarine and everything inside rattling and shaking, rather frightening really. I can remember too it took us all day. One occasion w had just gone down and we sat on the bottom waiting for things to happen and where I was in the bowels things were definitely happening. I claimed to be cold so one of the seaman gave me and electric fire, a thousand watt fire and he just stood it there to keep me warm, it's darn cold sitting on the bottom of a submarine. They had ballast tanks fore and aft for blowing and flooding to make them go up and down and the gauge which says when the tank is quarter full and half full and I was watching these gauges and they were full because we had just gone down the bottom and it didn't stop there, one of the tanks, I think it was the fore'ard tank indicated up, up, up, and the water got so high up the scale that it started coming in and flooding the floor where I was and it was just about to touch the electric fire and I phoned through to the control tower and I said you better send the captain up here it's not quite right. He came up and said Christ. Apparently somebody standing on the surface said the submarine shot to the surface and it came out of the water at a big angle and went splat and what had happened was that driftwood had got stuck in one of the valves and if it had not been for me we might still have been on the bottom of Loc till this day. They were the kind of films the Crown Film Unit made. Very good documentaries. In fact the Crown Film Unit before the war was the Post Office Film Unit and they made the kind of films such as *Night Mail* in 1932 which was a great classic in its day. After the war it reverted to being a private film company and called itself Anvil Films.
Peter Musgrave: We reach the end of the war and you were 24 and presumably demobbed?
John Aldred: I wasn't demobbed till 46 or 47 or something like that. What happened was that while working for the Crown Film Unit Ken Cameron said I hope you'll continue working for me when you're demobbed. I said I'd love to because he had a new studio at Beaconsfield and he offered me a nice salary. The fact that I had worked for Denham before the war and Denham

Studios closed, it was still under the same management and so was Pinewood Studios and when I was demobbed and Pinewood Studios opened up again for commercial production I had automatic reinstatement rights if I chose to accept them. I did make some tentative enquiries. Around this time a lucrative offer at MGM through my old boss A. W. Watkins reared its head. MGM were opening a new studio complex at Borehamwood which used to be Amalgamated Studios before the war and it was used for aircraft production during the war. And they were spending a fortune because they couldn't get their money out of Britain at that time for showing American films. They had to spend the profit of American films in the UK so they spent it on this studio at Borehamwood. So they gave me an offer I couldn't refuse. I was engaged as a maintenance engineer at MGM by the legendary Douglas Shearer who was the head of sound at MGM Culver City. It's rather interesting we had an interview at the Savoy Hotel which was all very social, we had dinner in Doug's Suite. It was the first time I realised the Savoy Hotel had telephones in the loo as well as all the other rooms. The evening was a great success and I got myself engaged at three times the salary the Crown Film Unit would have paid me and twice the salary Pinewood Studios would have paid me. So I considered it was an evening well spent. Also I would be working with the legendary D.P. Field, he was also being taken on by Watkins when he came out of the army.

Peter Musgrave: Did Douglas Shearer spend any real time over here or did he just come over to interview people and set up the sound department at the refurbished MGM?

John Aldred: Basically he came over to set up the department to look over the premises and decide what was required and then he got his engineers to order up the gear because it was all manufactured by Western Electric in Hollywood and it was the latest technique and it was specifically designed for us. It was more modern than anything MGM had at Culver City. It really was state of the art in 1948. It was rather complicated but at least it produced some really good sound.

Peter Musgrave: MGM had the system I think I'm right in saying where sound cameras were in one central area and lines lead from all the stages to this one central area, am I right?

John Aldred: Not exactly. We did have six photographic cameras all in one big room but they were all taken up with recording in the two dubbing theatres, past sync, so really the recording for production was done from mobile trolleys moved around on the floor. When I say they were mobile, they were mobile if you pushed them, there was no motor system, we just pushed these heavy things round from one stage to another. There was certainly not a recording room as such. Still photographic sound. Magnetic sound had not really come our way yet.

Peter Musgrave: You were a maintenance man at MGM, did you stay in that position for a long time or did you go back to floor mixing, dubbing mixing?

John Aldred: I stayed as a maintenance engineer for at least two or three years because it was a good 18 months before the studio became operational and during that time we were installing the equipment. There was no production as such going on. When production did start I was promoted to assistant dubbing mixer, that was the job I'd first undertaken in the Army Film Unit. In this capacity I worked with dubbing mixer J.B. Smith on films like **The Guinea Pig** with John and Roy Boulting, **Edward my Son** with Cukor, **Under Capricorn** with Alfred Hitchcock, **Spring in Park Lane, Maytime in Mayfair** with Herbert Wilcox and Anna Neagle, also **Return of Mrs Miniver, Ivanhoe, Beau Brummel and The Man Who Never Was** which was the first stereophonic picture I worked on. I was also at that time give n the job of production

mixer on one or two films including one called **The Flame and the Flesh** with Lana Turner directed by Richard Brooks and another one **The True and the Brave** with Clark Gable which gave me a lot of good experience both on location and in the studio. So I had quite a good run. I regard that part of my career as being part of my formative years.

Peter Musgrave: On dubbing mixing, by now nobody cut the original soundtrack negative and used that for final release printing as you mentioned happened before the war on some films. Every foot of every film was presumably dubbed or mixed together through a dubbing theatre. Was this an exciting and rapid time of development would you say or was it relatively gradual and what was the attitude towards background effects versus music. I can remember MGM seemed to say that dialogue had to be paramount and intelligible above all else. This is judgement from my experience on *The Hill* when I first went in there.

John Aldred: I think it was true. The evolution was very gradual. There was no sudden dash to lay a lot of soundtracks. First of all the actual the mixing consoles weren't as involved or as complicated as they are today. It would not have been possible in those days to have do a rapid mix of a lot of tracks. You couldn't just go on rerecording photographic sound forever because it eventually it got terribly grotty. Another point is that there was no real sound library of any large size so sound-effects everything had to be recorded and working to a budget, even MGM worked to a budget, and you couldn't necessarily put in everything that moved on the screen, you couldn't put in a sound for it, a lot of it was left to the dialogue track or the sync track to carry the whole thing. Obviously it was filled in from time to time. I remember they were extremely fussy about backgrounds. You had to have a continuous background. Where dialogue was cut about a bit you had to fill in little bits and match it all up, probably playing on a different reproducer up in the projection room, it was quite a job balancing these backgrounds and that seemed to be of paramount importance, perhaps rather more than having a lot of sound effects. Of course, they used music, a lot more than they do today, symphonic type music to create mood much more than sound effects. So some of the early MGMs we didn't have many sound effects like all. Something like a Wilcox picture such as **Spring in Park Lane** might have quite nice sound effects track laid for it because there was quite a lot of post sync in that film.

Peter Musgrave: You mention post sync which we haven't really mentioned before. Did this accelerate now? We can reprise and say before and during the war post sync was very little done. It was regarded as rather a lot of trouble and a bit too technical and it was put on the floor mixer to get the best sound he could. But did you find the post sync accelerated after the war and if you did was this because higher standards were required and people were not willing to accept the original track or because of changes in performance which the director had decided?

John Aldred: I think there was a mixture of things here. First of all you mentioned earlier that the dialogue was of paramount importance so anybody couldn't understand what was being said due to the fact that the artists wasn't intelligible or the microphone was in the wrong place, that was a good excuse to post sync. Another favourite one was a complete change of wording. When they edited a sequence together they may want to change a few words here and there and of course you had to loop and there was no disgrace in looping, you were expected to loop, so there was no problem there. Talking of looping it was quite different then because we were still on photographic sound so only the picture and guide track were on loops and the camera had 1000 ft on it so you just went on turning and counted the number of times it went around and hopefully you'd get it within the first 10 or 20 turns of the loop you'd get a good tape. It was much more

difficult to fit because you couldn't have a lot of joins on photographic film in a sentence for example. So post sync was no disgrace and a lot of it was done. The American artists by which I mean people like Clark Gable and Robert Taylor were real pros and they'd get it in a couple of goes. There wasn't a great deal of wildtrack shot on the floor because nobody would give you time to record on the floor, it was all done in the looping theatre, all the dialogue replacement, certainly no wild tracks with dialogue, nobody ever shot them, because they would not hold up the production for that.

Peter Musgrave: A few moments ago you mentioned a lot of memorable titles. Are there any that stick in your memory not only for happiness of working on them or memorable characters or changes in technique or a new way you did something or some happy discovery of a new way of recording?

John Aldred: I don't remember many happy memories of discover. I can remember a picture called **Under Capricorn** which was produced by Sidney Bernstein, and directed by Alfred Hitchcock set in Australia and starring Ingrid Bergman, Michael Wilding and an American actor called Jo Cotten. This film was made using Hitchcock's controversial 10 minute take so you had a specially laid studio floor which was flat enough for camera travelling and tracking, whatever and the sets moved apart to allow camera movement form one room to another. This required several microphones and several operators and that was quite a new technique. The sound mixer was my friend Peter Handford and I was on one of the microphone booms at the time and a ten minute tape without any fluffs or flaws from any department was quite an achievement. I can remember we got through one difficult one, we got about 8 minutes into it and the stills man decided to take a flash because he thought it was a rehearsal and we never saw the glowing of it he disappeared so fast from the scene. We never saw him again. That was one of the occupational hazards. He thought we were rehearsing. That picture, I don't think it made a lot of money but it was interesting from that point of view, a ten minute take. To rehearse a ten minute take would probably take two days. Then you'd get the whole thing in ten minutes on the third day so you got ten minutes screen time in two and a half days which was average, quite good in those days.

Peter Musgrave: There were many legendary stories about working with Hitchcock. Is there anything you remember. Did you find him not really interested in sound but much more interested in the visuals?

John Aldred: He was more interested in editing I think than sound and he wasn't really interested in actually filming. All the time we were making this ten minute take he'd be round the back having a coffee and doughnut in a production chair. He wouldn't be watching what was happening. He'd just say tell me when you've got it. He wouldn't be there watching everybody's performance he'd do that in rushes. Very strange way of working. Another strange way. A picture called **Edward My Son**, that was the first film that MGM made a picture in their own studio, previously they'd let it out to rent and this one was directed by George Cukor and it starred Spencer Tracy and Felix Aymler and it was about a boy's school. The sound director was Sash Fischer, another legendary figure who used to wear a dagger inside his socks, I don't know what for, perhaps to attack the director. The picture was finished and we were dubbing it and we didn't know this at the time but the director, George Cukor was an absolute terror at dubbing sessions. He was sitting in and we'd run through rehearsal and then he'd start trying to redirect the thing. He would say I'd like Felix to be more expressive. I want him to be on top of Spencer

Tracy and later on I want Spencer Tracy on top of Felix. But we'd say that's not the way you shot it, he'd say I don't care that's what I want now. After a whole day spent doing this, messing around, not getting anywhere, we had a word with the producer and on subsequent days George Cukor was confined to his office and not allowed to interfere with the mixing of his picture. Also we subsequently learned that he's never allowed in a dubbing theatre in Hollywood. We learnt these things the hard way. *The Return of Mrs Miniver* was quite interesting at least from the sound point of view, we had Ted Heath and his orchestra, they did the jazz score and of course Ted Heath is totally deaf and to check a tape he goes right up to the speaker and cocks his ear right into the speaker like it's a headphone almost and he can just about hear that. Any rate what I was going to say was that a lot of the picture was intercut with the previous *Mrs Miniver* recorded in Hollywood, when we came to do the dubbing mixing, we had to match our sound into the original Mrs Miniver sound which was like two generations away on old optical track. It worked quite well in the end but it was hard work at the time. Another film called **Mogambo** which was Ava Gardner and Clark Gable directed by John Ford. That went on location to Narobi because it was an African subject and there was a great hoo ha who was going to go on this film and Sash Fischer who was the chief mixer thought he would be going so they gave him all the injections, there were 12 injections to go on this film. Then there was some question about whether he was fit enough or not and they wanted a back-up mixer. They said you'll do and they sent me along I had all these injections and I was very ill. I was in bed for 48 hours and off work for a week and eventually when the time came I never even went on location after all and that was a disappointment. Another interesting film was **Knights of the Round Table** and that was the very first one we made in Cinemascope. Robert Taylor was horse riding again with sword and lance, and Elizabeth Taylor not far away. At this time, it was 1952, film laboratories could not convert film format so if you were filming Cinemascope you could not automatically get a straight print out of it so we had to have two cameras, one doing Cinemascope and one doing normal. The camera doing Cinemascope, you had to take the glass out of the blimp or you couldn't get the scope lens on so the entire picture was covered in camera noise so it was a 100% processing film. It was one of the first films made in Eastmancolor, as opposed to Technicolor, single strip film. That together with post sync all round and was a memorable film. It was memorable in another occasion too because this was one of the early simulated stereo sound films using an invention, not an MGM invention, an American invention called Perspectasound. Perspectasound it a poor man's stereo and it came after Cinemascope sound. Cinemas which couldn't afford to put in stereo could buy a gadget which they could put into the projector room called an integrator. And on the sound negative, you mixed the normal film first onto magnetic and then you added control frequencies when you went to photographic sound. When the film was shown in the cinema, which ever control frequency was the loudest you swung the sound to that particular loud speaker so you had left centre and right speakers behind the screen and a mono track swinging from one to the other. So if somebody on one side of the screen is speaking to someone on the other side there had to be certain interval to allow the panning of the sound from one side to another otherwise it all got a bit lost. What was rather disconcerting that one scene was in pouring rain and as you turned your head from one side to another the rain went right across the screen so it was raining one side of the screen but not the other, by sound anyway. It wasn't a very good system but that remember very clearly because it I am about the only British technician left who was ever used Prospetasound in a studio. We only made two or

three pictures using this method before it was disbanded.
Peter Musgrave: The control frequencies were low weren't they?
John Aldred: 30, 35 to 40 herz or cycles as we used to call them.
Peter Musgrave: So the range of the dub itself had to be restricted.
John Aldred: The cinema had a filter in to prevent control frequencies coming out as a hum. They were split off in this little box called the integrator.
Peter Musgrave: So you couldn't get any rich bass on the actual dub track that had to be cut.
John Aldred: That's true. But mind you. There wasn't very much coming out of cinema systems at that time. Not real bass. You got a sort of woofy bass but it wasn't real bass. Those are some of the things I remember from my days at MGM. They're also my introduction to Gene Kelly. He came over to do a film called **Invitation to the Dance**. That was done entirely on playback. It was his own idea. They'd given him carte blanche to do whatever he liked and he came over and directed this. It was a composite film, three or four sections, each different styles and type of dance. We recorded all the music at MOM and I was doing all the playback, I mean guide track, it wasn't hard work but it was interesting film to watch his technique. The way he cuts and uses editing in compiling a complete dance sequence is quite remarkable. I learnt a lot from that.
Peter Musgrave: Why do you think a film like that was made here? It sounds like a natural to be made in Hollywood.
John Aldred: I never did get to the bottom of that. It was finished in Hollywood. They took it away from England and added another complete two reels in Hollywood and mixed it in Hollywood. So I really don't know why it was made in England.
Peter Musgrave: When did you period at MGM end and why and what happened when it did so?
John Aldred: MGM had a habit of paying the union rate and the union rate pure and simple and not a penny more. Some friends of mine had moved back to Shepperton Studios which at that moment in time were extremely busy and they were offering a little bit over the union rate. I managed to get an interview down there and decided since there was no chance of advancement at MGM beyond the old union rate or even advancing beyond assistant dubbing mixer, I decided to change studios around 1956. That's what happened. I just left Watkins after working for him since 1938, I just left him. I was very sad about this. But I went to work for John Cox at Shepperton Studios. John Cox I had met during the war because he was with, not the Army Film Unit but the Army Kinema Corp, which was stationed at Wembley specifically for making training films and he was the sound man there and I'd met him when he came to Pinewood to do a music session one day. So he did know me and I knew him. So I managed to get a job at Shepperton, and the day I arrived, and this shows you how busy they were, there were 13 crews operating.
Peter Musgrave: He was head of the sound department at Shepperton.
John Aldred: Yes he was. He had quite a good reputation at that time.
Peter Musgrave: What was your first impression when you arrived back at Shepperton in 1956 where you had been in 1937ish. Had it changed a lot. Were there more stages, more buildings. Obviously it was a lot busier as you explained. You had said there were four stages originally.
John Aldred: They'd built another four stages since those early days. Post war they'd built another four stages, one was a silent stage mainly used for shooting picture effects, special effects, three shooting stages and one enormous barn called the silent stage because it was so

noisy. There was no soundproofing at all. That was used for gigantic model or ship scenes. Shepperton had changed considerably. They had a giant power house generating much more power than previously. A lot of new buildings The old house was still there. The management had changed so really it was like going to a complete new studio. The old Visatone equipment had long since bit the dust and was no where to be seen. It was all Western Electric and RCA at that time.

Peter Musgrave: They already had some RCA because in 56 they had the Westrex dubbing theatre but they didn't have the new RCA. Wasn't there a tiny dubbing theatre in what eventually became the viewing theatre in the old cutting room. That was not used for dubbing after the war. Everything was done in what was called the Westrex Theatre which was the one where an engineer, another ACT man called Red Law, was in charge of that theatre and I used to work with him and other technicians like Bob Jones and Paddy Cunningham, Dick Langford. We all worked in this theatre in turns and the music stage was adjacent. The music stage was where we'd made **Talking Feet** all those years ago and I was walking on familiar ground but it was a new stage, it had been converted, they put in the poly cylindricals to liven it up. Once again I got a vast amount of new experience from just changing studios. I was working on different equipment with different people and a whole new range of films. Whereas at MGM I was in rather a narrow channel being assistant dubbing mixer.

Peter Musgrave: Just possibly at the risk of echoing what we were saying earlier, still it was not the habit in the industry for there to be any updating in the training of people. If new invention came out, it would be commissioned and delivered but nobody gave working technicians the theory behind it, you had to fumble you way along with it, you would perhaps give the manufacturer the specifications you wanted from it but nobody would teach you the theory behind it.

John Aldred: I don't think anyone specified for a manufacturer. Things were made in bulk and you just bought what suited you. At that time for instance they were using the new Levers Rich spool to spool magnetic recorder instead of the photographic soundtrack and when I first went to Shepperton there was not a Nagra there because they were just coming into use. Basically it was either Levers Rich or nothing or take a sound track out, a magnetic soundtrack. But as regards training, if you didn't know what you were doing, it was training on the job and if you fell down that was it and you weren't engaged again. Certainly no training as regards magnetic technique. They were left to our maintenance staff to set up the equipment, if anything went wrong you just had to use a bit of Gammon sense. If you could put it right you did. If you didn't, you sent it back and got another one.

Peter Musgrave: So this studio was extremely busy when you joined it. What were the first productions you were assigned to there?

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

John Aldred: Shepperton was a musical called **Charlie Moon** and the unlikely duo was Dennis Price, no longer with us unfortunately, and Max Bygraves. I can remember this because I was mixing with Red Lav and we completed the whole film in 2 and a half days much to the producer's delight because he'd booked five days in the theatre. Other pictures which come to mind. **Subway in the Sky** I worked on, I can't remember- much about it. **Silent Enemy** was an interesting war film, as also was Cockleshell Heroes. Cockleshell Heroes, there was a lot of spot

effects I had to record for that. **Cockleshell** was a canoe, that meant men paddling in water and all the movement there . That was one of the first jobs I had when I went to Shepperton shooting all the effect is for that. I spent 14 working days solidly doing water effects and it worked out rather well even though I say it myself.
Peter Musgrave: It was with Chris Greenham who sadly died a little earlier this year.
John Aldred: Yes Chris was the sound editor on that film. Unfortunately we didn't get much recognition for all the hard work but it was a satisfying film to work on. **City of the Dead** was one of those films best left forgotten about. It was dubbed at night and I don't think it achieved very much in its life. My first contact with Carl Foreman was on a film called **The Mouse that Roared** which was a skit on the international scene with the Americans meeting the Russians and things like that. It was quite a good film, lots of sound effects any rate. Much more sound effects than I was used to handling at MGM so I was kept pretty busy. Also Chaplin came in at that period with his picture **King in New York. King in New York** did have dialogue as well as effects and music but not a lot of dialogue. Chaplin still retained a lot of his original style in that he would like to have whole scenes going on for several minutes with no dialogue, just comic action and he would compose music for this and some sound effects but he didn't like too many effects. When I said he composed the music for it, when the editor had finished giving him his fine cut he would then score it and he conducted the orchestra himself . Sometimes to picture but usually not and he just went on and on and quite frequently the music was far longer than the picture but instead of altering the score to fit the picture, he would alter the picture to fit his music. Being a musician he didn't want to cut anything out at all. We did another film immediately following that called **Hill in Korea** because at that time the Korean War was at its height. I can remember it was very hard work because it was non-stop chat among a lot of Cockney solders and there was never room for effects except the occasional shell landing or exploding. It was solid dialogue and it was a very tiring film to listen to. Dialogue films like that are really not particularly good. **Virgin Island** was an interesting film. A very gentle film shot in the Virgin Islands with lots of sound effects of lapping water and carefully chosen background. **Tunes of Glory** with Alec Guinness, that was another film and I was taking over on the floor on one occasion during production mixing and I remember the soundtrack went wrong and we get into a take, two minutes into a long take and the soundtrack goes wrong and I send for John Cox because everybody is getting at me and I thought I better get at somebody and in the end we had to change the whole track, we couldn't fix it. Alec Guinness I must say remained remarkably cool, much copier than the producer because we'd lost about an hour or more. Round about this time we did another film called the **Guns of Navarone** which I think is in everybody's memory, once again Chris Greenham was responsible for laying all the sound effects. I only learnt this quite recently when I was reading his obituary that he spent a lot of time time in Greece during the war so he had first hand knowledge what was going on in there, so he was the ideal person to lay all the sound effects. Another film, **The Day the Earth Caught Fire**, that was not particularly brilliant and then Carl Foreman came back again on a picture called The Victors which explodes the myth of war and the uselessness of the whole thing. Not a particularly brilliant film. I can remember the optical photographic soundtrack we made was rather a disappointment and unfortunately we had a lot of razzamatazz at the premiere, we had a real live trumpets on stage and a military band which was great, really nice sound and then the optical track came on and it was all plum pudding. Round about that time I met Otto Preminger and

once met never forgotten. He's a very extrovert person, one this particular film we had an awful job with the dialogue track and because we couldn't cope with it we had certain sections sent to Hollywood, where they fixed them in the dubbing theatre and sent them back to us.
Peter Musgrave: Which film was this?
John Aldred: Exodus. We had to get rid of the background noise and things and we didn't have enough filters, equipment but now we're coming to a very interesting films, one of my favourite films produced by Sam Spiegel and directed by David Lean and I remember we had a lot of trouble at the beginning because Lawrence was killed on a motorbike accident which was rather tragic in England and we had to get the sound effect of a bike going fast. And I don't know if you've ever been on a motorbike at 80 mph but when you play the soundtrack back without the picture it sounds as if you're doing 30 or 40 mph. Fortunately at that time we had the Levers Rich spool recorder and you could vary the speed of this so we got this soundtrack which we recorded at a motor racing circuit with the motorbike doing 80 mph and by the time I'd wound it up it was doing about 160. But at least it sounded as if it was going fast and that' s how we got the sound to be the correct pitch for the picture. But following on that it was another stereo picture, full of stereo sound effects and mono sound effects spread to stereo but I can remember some of the original stereo sound effects recordings done by the production mixer, Paddy Cunningham. They did sound excellent. Much better than getting a mono track and spreading it across all three tracks. What we did have to do was that we got Paddy Cunningham's two track recording and we made an artificial centre. That worked extremely well. We had a three track in effect. The picture, if I remember rightly, was 26 reels in length and Spiegel would sit in on the final rehearsal and take of every reel and when we finished a reel we both got a cigar. I don't smoke so by the end of the picture I had 26 cigars in the drawer besides me. In addition when we finished the final reel we all got a box of cigars as well. I must confess I did start to smoke on during dubbing but smoke got in my eyes, I felt awfully sick and my face turned green. So I gave that up because it was affecting my work. I must say it was a great surprise to us all when that picture received the Oscar for the best sound, we were all thrilled to pieces about that.
Peter Musgrave: How would you describe the relationship in the dubbing theatre between Spiegel and David Lean when it came to any decisions being made about for instance should music take preference over effects or should dialogue or the crowd be kept down.
John Aldred: I must say David Lean really got his way all the time. Spiegel never made any suggestions like that. Spiegel would make a suggestion if it was going to cost more money to stay over till tomorrow to finish the reel. If he wanted it finished today, he'd put his oar in but otherwise he left it all to David as regards music and things like that. Also a lot of the editing was David's idea. I think Anne Coates was actually the official editor but David was by her elbow most of the way. It was his picture really. I might add at this time that truth is stranger than fiction. When Spiegel came down in his Rolls Royce the chauffeur was the driver, the corporal we had in the army Film Unit so you never know in this life.
Peter Musgrave: Did you find that David would be receptive to your's and John Cox's ideas of balance or was he very single minded.
John Aldred: John Cox would say what could be done and what couldn't and would make suggestions, for instance there's one scene where they're going to the military headquarters Cairo and there's a military bank outside which you see visually. As they go all round they go up a quadrangle of steps about two flights and we kept switching the sound from one speaker to

another on the board. It wasn't recorded that way but we switched it so that it appeared to be coming from that courtyard here, there and everywhere and David loved it.
Peter Musgrave: Can we go back a little to Preminger. Did you find it behoved you best to keep quiet or did you find you were able to make suggestions.
John Aldred: No, I'm afraid you could not make any suggestions. It was Mr Preminger's picture he knew what he wanted from it and all you had to do is sit there and do it. And if you didn't do it, you stopped and did it again. But you didn't really make suggestions to him. He'd make suggestions to you but not the other way round. So you do get to know the various habits of producers and directors and act accordingly. On some films you practically control the mix yourself because you're making suggestions all the time out of what is available to you. It just depends on how sound conscious the director or the producer may be.
Peter Musgrave: Do you think it might be fair to say this was a period when the standard or soundtrack provision and editing and dubbing was going up markedly all the time?
John Aldred: It went up with a bang literally when magnetic recording took over in the dubbing theatre. Previously everything was on photographic and tracks got very noisy and dirty. As soon as we had magnetic sound the whole system changed and the quality went up dramatically and that came in about 1955, at Shepperton at any rate. The necessary cutting room equipment and expertise was taking place at that time. It caused the biggest improvement in sound and people like Chris Greenham were getting used to laying sound for stereo work. They would come and ask the mixers perhaps how can I lay this so you can handle it on the deck. Things like that which today they don't often do that. I must admit at Shepperton we had two mixers but we also had a third mixer who was doing the panning. He was deciding, or operating a separate board putting which sound to which speaker which was quite separate from the mixing operation. It did incur a slightly different technique.
Peter Musgrave: Was it about this time that you met your wife or the lady who was to become your wife, Beryl?
John Aldred: Yes she was John Cox's secretary and subsequently the secretary to the studio manager at Shepperton Studios and that's how we met.
Peter Musgrave: How long were you at Shepperton.?
John Aldred: Quite a long time in effect. I was there from 1958 to 1969.
Peter Musgrave: What would you say was the most memorable film you worked on at that time and why, good or bad?
John Aldred: I've explained about **Lawrence of Arabia**, that was probably the most interesting film. There was a film with Jack Clayton called **The Innocents** which I worked on and I remember doing some special techniques on that. The sound editor in question who is not sitting too far away from me brought in a tape recorder and we did peculiar speed change things on certain effects and it was rather a weird story. I enjoyed doing things like that. Apart from that I enjoyed when I was dubbing on my own, I had some very interesting experiences. For instance there was a film called **Judith** which was all shot in Israel. The name of the producer and director escape me completely but I remember very clearly that the director was being another George Cukor and interfering with the mix so much that the producer took out a court writ to prevent the director giving me any instruction. If the director wanted to say anything he had to talk to me via the producer. That sounds funny but it puts quite a strain on a working relationship. Another film I made with Kubrick. *Dr Strangelove*. I mixed that for him. I can

remember it was one of his early films, he hadn't been directing all that long at that time, he was an expert stills photograph and when I was doing a take, never when I was rehearsing he would always dash around with his Nikon taking photos of me under stress. I thought that was rather strange. I don't know what he did with them all. He never showed them to me. At the end of the film, it was the habit in those days if you were lucky you got a little present from the producer for all your hard work. I got a message from the production office if you want to pop down there's a bottle of whisky for you. I thought how nice. I went down to the office and said John Aldred bottle of whisky and they said that's yours and it was a gallon, there were five bottles and each bottle had a label specially printed and it said specially printed for John Aldred on every label. That was a nice touch. Another film I was interested in because it was so complex and I was really pleased with the whole thing was finished it was a Schlesinger film called **Far from the Madding Crowd.** We were in the RCA theatre and as you know that was a mono theatre and this was a 70mm picture. The idea was that we would mix mono and eventually my mono mix would be taken to America and spread for 70mm and all the printing would be done in America. I can remember it because it was a very busy sync track and certain voices had to dominate at certain times. There was a lot of mixing involved. Very busy sound effects. There was a hay barn caught fire and dancing and Schlesinger is very sound minded, in fact he sits between his mixer and whispers to you what he wants you to do. All the time. It's very, very wearing. Anyway the thing was quite satisfactory and when they took it to MQYl I got a letter from Franklin Milton who was the head of sound, Douglas Shearer having retired, I cannot possibly read it but perhaps you would like to read the first two paragraphs.

Peter Musgrave: Dear Mr. Aldred I was so much impressed by the excellence of the rerecording of *Far from the Madding Crowd* that I thought I should mention it to you. The balance of dialogue, music and general effects are probably the finest I've heard.

John Aldred: I might add this was in 1967 so his remarks might not be so valid today because we have different techniques and Dolby and Dolby Stereo but I was rather pleased to get that letter. I haven't mentioned yet that while I was at Shepperton I was also recording music because I had done some music recording at MGM and that was part of the reasons they employed me in the first place at Shepperton. I got myself quite a number of credits, I'll just run through them. There was *Cockleshell Heroes, Silent Enemy, Pattern of Violence, Virgin Islands, Sammy Going South, Surprise Package, Tom Jones*. Now that's interesting, *Tom Jones* was scored by Richard Adinsell and he got an Oscar for the best original score of that particular year but they didn't mention the sound recordist unfortunately. Other titles included *The Grass is Greener* which is all Noel Coward music, *Darling, Fire Down Below*. That was a Pinewood picture and they hadn't got any room on their scoring stage so they came to us, *Drop Dead Darling, St Trinian's Great Train Robbery, Danger Man, Judith, Is Paris Burning*. *Is Paris Burning* was probably the most memorable music session. Firstly the orchestra was 105 musicians which is rather tight on the Shepperton scoring stage. But in addition to that they had 12 pianos. Normally when you're recording you get the best possible piano available. When one session wants 12 pianos by the time you get past no 5, the latter 7 are anything but perfect so they have to be put in the back somewhere where you can hardly hear them. But I had listened to this score several times and I can't hear 12 pianos I can only hear three. But we had 12 on that occasion. Maurice Jarre, it was his idea and he did the orchestration. That was my contribution as a scoring mixer to the British film industry.

Peter Musgrave: Was your technique then heavy into multimike or did you try as Ken Cameron used to preach to use one or a stereo pair and only use spotlights when you had to
John Aldred: When everything was mono, we used to go to one main monitor for the entire orchestra because it was a symphonic type of orchestra generally speaking. We had an additional microphone on the string section to emphasise the strings and any other microphone required would only be for a solo passage such as a flute or oboe or something at the back in the percussion. Generally speaking we got an orchestral balance on one microphone and the balance was achieved by the conductor and when he came into the monitoring room to hear a playback he wanted to hear he wanted to hear in the monitor room what he had heard on the stage. The best way to do that was with one microphone. When it came to stereophonic recording, it was not really stereophonic recording at all, it was what I call widescreen sound. For instance we would have 3 microphones fairly close together and perhaps three space microphones about 6 ft apart, not too close, for left, centre and right loud speakers. The orchestra would be set out as normal, as concert fashion. Then the other mikes would be added as required but the main sound came over three mikes and because there were three mikes, of course you got this rather extra quality you got front stereophonic sound where you get the two outside mikes, one would pick up the direct sound of the instruments near it whereas the other one would pick up the reverberation from the studio wall and that is what gives you clarity, you're separating the direct sound from the indirect sound and that worked very well. Latterly we built a new music mixing console at Shepperton which was multimike because techniques were changing and I did do several sessions on that but I never had more than 20 mikes out and I found that far too many. You couldn't concentrate on that sort of system. The only way to do multimike techniques successfully is the system they had to adopt eventually and that is that you record not on film but 24 tracks on tape. When the orchestra has gone home you then do what is called a mix down onto one two three tracks, whatever you like, and then you have a sort of rebalance so that the conductor is sitting there with the score and you can sort things out at leisure but when you've got all you musicians out there and a multitude of microphones it's very difficult to get a proper balance that's going to stay forever. It's always done in the mix-down. I think about a dozen microphones, 10 to 12 microphones is quite enough for one person to balance correctly, it's quite adequate. Really you want another pair of hands if you're going into 24 microphones. I don't see how your brain can assess 24 sound sources all happening simultaneously. I don't think the human brain is capable, you have to do it in two stages.
Peter Musgrave: What brought the Shepperton stage to an end and what came next?
John Aldred: Latterly at Shepperton I was doing fairly interesting films. Apart from ***Far From the Madding Crowd***, I did a musical for Paramount called ***Half a Sixpence*** with Tommy Steel and this I was doing in the Westrex and it was stereophonic sound and it worked out rather well. We had Irving Costell who composed all the music and he was sitting in all the time. The director was nowhere to be seen so really it was the producer, John Dark and Irving Costell. They'd gone through several producers and this time it was John Dark. We got through this film and everyone was quite satisfied with it. It was never a big box office success but a lot of work sweat and man hours went into recording the final sound. About that time John Dark had another film for Paramount and he wanted a sound supervisor to go to Rome for 12 months to do all the music recording and mixing of playback tracks and asked if I'd be interested. Having just worked for him and the net result was that I went to Rome did a recce of the studios and facilities and

said I'd like to do this. It was something you don't often get a chance to do so I got a contract for a year from Paramount and I gave my notice to John Cox at Shepperton. I must say it came as a bit of a bombshell to him. I'm very sorry to say he actually broke down into tears that I was leaving, he must have thought quite highly of me. He knew what I was going to do and he wrote me a nice letter saying I'd worked at Shepperton for so many years and had left of my own accord. That's how I left Shepperton in 1968. As I said I had a 12 months contract but I never went to Italy because Paramount decided that musicals were very expensive and the last couple they made hadn't done very well at the box office so they cancelled the picture. But my contract did not have a cancellation clause in it so they had to pay me for 12 months. So I sat at home and the weekly cheques came in and I got a bit tired of this. I finished decorating the kitchen and everything and I thought I must do something so I got myself loaned out to Columbia or anyone who would have me just to occupy the time till my contract ran out.

Peter Musgrave: Before we move on to the next stage I seem to remember that you used to write articles for Amateur Cine World or Cinema Magazine as it was at that time. Was it an ongoing thing which dated back to when you had first become interested in films at school or had it just sprung up again?

John Aldred: No as a spare time occupation I was a member of one or two film societies. When I say film societies, I mean making film not screening them and I used to have a lot of equipment go through my hands and the editor of Movie Maker magazine whose name was Tony Rose suggested that, I might like to do some contributions so I used to write articles on sound for him and in addition I used to review cameras, projectors, tape recorders and write and an annual sound supplement for his magazine and all this stems back to the very early days after the war when I first met Tony Rose at the film society at High Wycombe and it started from that. In the end I remember I wrote practically one entire issue, they were short of material and everything in that particular issue was mine. The management got hold of Tony and said who is this guy, I thought you were the editor, where's all your contributions. That went on quite a while till I got tired of it. The reason I stopped doing these equipment reviews and things is that I emigrated in search of a better life.

Peter Musgrave: Is this the next step after Shepperton?

John Aldred: It's the next step after my experience with Paramount. I did get a picture with Hal Wallis called **Anne of a Thousand Days**. I did the floor recording on that plus the dubbing. That's unusual in England. Normally they're poles apart the floor mixer and the dubbing mixer but this was a rare occasion when I did both of those jobs and I must have done something right because I got an Academy nomination for **Anne of a Thousand Days** but due to the competition that particular year I don't think I got very far in the voting. At any rate I got a very nice telegram. This was for another film actually, it said I'm delighted to inform you officially that you have been nominated for an Academy Award for sound, the presentation will take place on Monday 9th April at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles Music Centre, I hope that, you will be with us. That was from the president of the academy. Unfortunately I couldn't get there which is probably just as well as I didn't get the Oscar. I got another nomination for Mary Queen of Scots but that was a couple of years later on in life. What happened was that after working for Hal Wallis - I thoroughly enjoyed working on **Mary Queen of Scots**, I earned more money dubbing it than I did not production because it went on for longer, for quite a long period. Having done that there was rather a lull. The phone wasn't ringing very much saying would you

come and work for me and I saw an advertisement for a dubbing job at Film House in Toronto and I applied with 17 other people and the boss man came over to London to interview us all and he chose me. Presumably because I gave him this long list of credits to read and I think he must have been a bit impressed and in the end he chose me. I signed on for a 12 months period initially. What I didn't know until I got there was that the money was pretty good except that there was no recognition of any union agreement and my terms of agreement were hours as requested. So I would work all day till 6.00 pm on one film and start dubbing another until the early hours the following morning. So you never really knew when you were going to finish at all. Probably the most rewarding production over there was the first IMAX film which I worked on which just happened to coincide with my working in Toronto. This was a half hour documentary called **North of Superior** and this gained a major sound trophy at the Canadian film awards for that year, 1971. I recorded a 6 track magnetic master because it was a separate mag which they ran with the IMAX picture and this track was "replayed over 55 loud speaker systems in a specially built auditorium and I remember one of the most fantastic scenes was a forest fire. A forest fire is frightening at the best of time but when it's in IMAX and it's right in your peripheral vision all over and you've got lots of fire crackle loops coming out of 50 speakers it's enough to give you a heart attack. In fact on one occasion there was a shot of a helicopter flying overhead observing what was going on and I thought it would be good idea to have the helicopter fitted with a siren to warm people to get out of the way and they said no. I played this back with the siren coming out of the roof of the cinema, frightening , and the producer said no it's too frightening, there might be a panic and everybody might rush for the exit and we had to take it out but I thought it was rather good at the time. By the way they have a copy of that film at the National Museum of Photography at Bradford, they wheel it out occasionally, and run it. But the film is so complicated to mix we had to do it in three minute sections. But it's quite true what I said that the forest fire came out of about six cassette machines which I punched in here and there and it was really amazing and I was the only mixer on it, I didn't have an assistant.

Peter Musgrave: Did you find that you were in terms of experience and technique way ahead of other people in Canada at the time?

John Aldred: The Canadian film industry was just becoming alive, they don't like the Americans very much so there was never much rapport between Hollywood and Canada and also Canadians are very much on a tight budget, a low budget, the artists are people you've never heard of. In fact there was one English soundtrack editor came over and he revolutionised the whole industry because no one had ever seen tracks laid before and so that got them off to a good start as far as dubbing. But certainly they didn't want to spend a lot of money dubbing bits of sound. You had to do it like about two days or three days at the most. If you asked for a week for dialogue premises they thought you were out of your mind. It was really hard work all the time. So when on occasions when I'd finished during the day and I had to start another picture during the night and I just had time for a bite of something to eat and then you're back in the room on another picture probably 16 mm. 16mm films were all mounted up in 1 hour running time and you never stopped, you didn't have time to go to the John, you were just glued to this seat rocking and rolling and doing your best with all these horrible sounds, some of them were really fantastic, the track laying was not good so that you'd get tracks butted together with had no relationship to each other in any shape or form. It was very difficult. In fact on one short film I refused to dub it. I told the man to take it away and dub it properly and he immediately

complained to my boss. The boss said he's the mixer, he knows what he's doing, if he says take it away and relay it. So he took it away but he never came back. But since it was only a short film it didn't really matter. That was my Canadian experience and the weather was not very suitable. My wife was rather ill at the time, and when the 12 months was up I said I'm for home, I'm going back to England. Beryl made my mind up for me. I would have stayed if it hadn't been for Beryl. So we just came back on the first available flight after a 12 months period. Really I was just getting my foot under the door and getting to the stage when people were asking for me when it was time to come back home. I must say the offer to stay was extremely tempting. First of all I was to get an immediate pay rise of 25%, a company car, shares in the company and more or less chose what work I did. I'd probably have had greater job satisfaction if I'd stayed on in Canada. As I said they were beginning to learn to do things properly sound wise and the sound was getting better all the time. As it was having said goodbye to everyone 12 months later there was I back on the door step saying hello I'm around again which is really not the way to operate. People begin to wonder why you came back.

Peter Musgrave: You weren't the only one. Other people went out there and didn't like it and came back, it was not unique.

John Aldred: I was lucky to be in Canada because on one unbelievable occasion instead of doing a rough mix putting it on a plane and sending it to Hollywood they loaded all the tracks on a plane sent all the tracks to Hollywood and put me on the same plane and I had to go to Hollywood and do a rough mix in one of their theatres so the money men could see the state of the picture. I would have thought it much cheaper to do a rough mix and send the film but they decided to send me. So I used my time well there and I contacted Hal Wallis again and I got myself a job on the next picture he was going to make back in England which he was going to make two weeks after I returned so it was fortuitous in that score. The film was *Mary Queen of Scots*. As soon as I got back to England I was working. I got an Oscar nomination for that but the competition was a bit too powerful.

Peter Musgrave: What year was this that you returned to England?

John Aldred: 1972.

Peter Musgrave: You immediately worked on **Mary Queen of Scots**, what came next?

John Aldred: After that was a film about Nelson and Lady Hamilton called **Bequest to the Nation** that was another one done at Shepperton. I didn't do the dubbing just the floor mixing on that one. That was probably his last picture and then he returned to the States after that because he wasn't in good health. So he never made any more films. He had a very long career at Paramount. You see his name come up on old movies. I worked for him on three or four movies. I must say because he was not totally deaf but quite deaf he used to choose me because I always got reasonably clear dialogue tracks and he could understand what people were saying. The only exception to that was a film called **Follow Ma** which was a strange title and it was Topol and he was not feeling himself or either he wasn't happy with the part but he was mumbling away and I remember after two or three days I kept saying to the director what's wrong, ask him to be clearer. After a couple of days Hal Wallis came steaming onto the floor having just heard rushes and blew Topol right through the studio roof in front of the entire unit which was not the correct thing to do and poor Topol got worse and worse. It's a sad story, anyway that was the end of my connection with Hal Wallis. I was unemployed after that for quite a while and we were quite worried because we saw the bank balance going down and nothing coming in and doing an odd

day here and there but that doesn't pay the rent, not for long and my wife decided I ought to get a permanent job because at least it would be handy to get some money coming in. So I did find a job which was in a completely different area of the industry and I joined Rank Film Laboratories as head of sound which is quite different from recording sound but when the phone doesn't ring there's no use saying I'm a recordist, so what, so when the phone didn't ring I got this job and the man there whose name was John Lusteombe who I knew in Korda's days, he was in the sound department then. I took over from him I was responsible for all the sound negative processing and printing as well as running quite a busy sound transfer department which did magnetic and photographic sound.

Peter Musgrave: What year was this?

John Aldred: 1972. By this time all the major studios except Pinewood did not have permanent sound departments. Sound was becoming freelance. Everybody was on it. One dubbing crew permanent and the production crew freelance. So in addition to and as a result of my laboratory work I became increasingly interested in film standards and I was elected to both the British and the ISO, the international sound committees, first as a member and later as chairman, The ISO involved meetings in various European countries every two or three years. So I met a great number of my contemporaries over a 12 year period and it was interesting to find that we all had the same problems and I v/as able to assist many of those relating to laboratory work relating to sound. At that time I was also elected as a council member and a fellow of the British Kinematograph Sound and Television Society. I assisted in organising sound training courses and other industry related events. In 1980 I was elected president of the Society for a two year period and visited the USA on several occasions to participate in SMPTE, that is the Society for Motion Picture and Television Engineers. Finally I organised in 1983 a BKSTS conference and exhibition in London and I stayed with Rank Laboratories till retirement in 1986 at the age of 65. That just about completes my career from the end of the War.

Peter Musgrave: A very full life.

John Aldred: A very interesting one and so many different areas. I seem to have poked my nose into several things which I would not have done if I'd stayed at Shepperton full time. For instance Shepperton folded shortly after I left. MGM at Borehamwood folded shortly after I left. I have a habit of leaving a place just before it closed. I don't think Rank Laboratories will fold but I don't know about that. I'm not qualified to say.

Peter Musgrave: In the period you were working for the laboratories would you say that collaboration with Dolby has been very fruitful and would you say that processing a Dolby track has been very useful. And is processing a Dolby track more critical than processing a mono track would you say?

John Aldred: There's quite a long answer to that.

SIDE 4, TAPE 2

John Aldred: Talking about Dolby's contribution to film sound I was very much involved because Dolby started taking an interest in about 1970-71 and all the initial work was done at Elstree Studio and the head of sound the late Tony Lumpkin and from Dolby a Technician named Allan was responsible for organising the entire thing. Kodak at that time had got a special optical, system which could fit a camera to produce stereo sound and that was borrowed and fitted.to an RCA recorder and Allan devised all the electronics to go with it to produce two

stereo tracks. A lot of the initial work meant processing, printing was all done at Rank Laboratories, and I was intimately connected with all this work prior to the first Dolby release track for a cinema. I was involved quite closely with that. The second part of your question regarding processing, there was no difference in processing between recording Dolby stereo and an ordinary mono track and that is the beauty of the system. As far as the laboratory is concerned it does to have to know if it is one or the other. I might add at this time all recordings from about 1957 onwards were variable area and that includes Dolby not variable density. Variable density was too difficult to process and did not respond well to modern colour printing and the variable area system is much more comparative together with the fact it is easier to control in the laboratory. If there is a mistake on the negative you can correct it easily on the print which you cannot always do with density. Basically providing the processing is technically correct there should be no problem. But if the processing is not correct then there is certainly a problem, the quality goes very peculiar. Although not as bad as with some mono film because with Dolby you get extended frequency range so the ear is listening to a more natural sound. This means that the dubbing mixer does not have to tweak his controls so much, does not have to put in quite so much equalisation so there is less distortion on the sound negative so that the whole thing sounds a lot more natural and it does help the processing. That I think is the answer to your question.

Peter Musgrave: Do you think that there is any possibility that magnetically stripped copies will come back?

John Aldred: When you say come back Peter they've never gone away. The only thing which has gone away is the 35mm cinemascope format with the four magnetic stripes, that is a bit of a dead duck. When you go to a round show and see a 70mm print, they do have a six magnetic track on four stripes and that always will be so. There is no photographic sound on a 70mm print.

Peter Musgrave: I should have said on 35mm.

John Aldred: Of course if you apply Dolby noise reduction as well to 70mm prints more so the Dolby system of enhancement down the base end with additional subwhcopers, as we call them, you get a most fantastic sound as you probably will have heard on films like **Star Wars** and many others. It really has brought cinema sound right up into the 80s, it really works well. There are at least 7 or 8,000 cinemas worldwide with ordinary Dolby sound and 70mm and the equipment in the projection room is all manufactured by Dolby right up to the fader, everything ahead of the fader in a cinema is all manufactured by Dolby and after the fader you can have whatever power unit you like and loud speaker system. It has revolutionised sound, indeed it’s almost as big a step as sound was itself in my opinion.

Peter Musgrave: Widening the question a bit about equipment not merely in the cinema but filmmaking in general, you've told us some very interesting details about what the equipment was like when you first started. Now in the current stage of development what way do you think its changed other than modernisation and which direction is it going in and has it been influenced by television techniques?

John Aldred: There's rather a lot to answer there. I think the most outstanding change in my career is the change over from photographic recording to magnetic recording. One thing film editors could no longer see the sound track as they had for many years and they were obliged to work with a new medium where the recordings were invisible. The changes in equipment were dramatic from heavy amplifier track or portable cases, loaded batteries and a very heavy sound camera, all we have now is a small transistorised magnetic recorder. I think Nagra is considered

industry standard and is used in almost every country in the world. Magnetic recording was a great boom to post sync or looping processes because the artist could here immediately play back of recording without having to wait for it to go to laboratories. Modern digital recording can produce an in sync recording from one which was recorded out of sync which is another interesting development. In the early days of sound there was no facilities for post sync for rerecording, only the sync track was used so during a musical we would all be on the set all day long and the music mixed in as required. The need for mixing tracks for rerecording soon became apparent and special mixing theatres were built for this purpose. Magnetic sound recording in the dubbing theatre meant that mixers felt they were under far less pressure and I certainly agree with this. My hands used to perspire when we went for a take but not for a rehearsal. But once we went to magnetic you knew you could go over it and wipe it and do it again so the pressure was taken off. This was especially when rock and roll was introduced so the mixer no longer had to struggle through a complete thousand foot reel in one take. New motor systems allowed fast rewind or fast forward without unthreading the picture and you could punch in a new recording or section to replace a previous one, such is progress. Another big change took place in microphones. The early models were designed and manufactured by telephone companies in the 20s, they were omni-directional, bulky, had a limited frequency and transient response and often had no sensitivity. I can remember that some of the quality was so dire, so uneven that we used to have to put several layers of silk round the diaphram and hold it with elastic band to get rig of sibillence. Nowadays better quality capacity mikes are used with various directional characteristics and ones which are also highly directional and they can be used much further away from the artist and that is quite a big step in itself so you can get out th e way of the lighting cameraman. You were always having an argument with the lighting cameraman about where you could put a microphone because you were casting a shadow. If you could pull the microphone way back he would be highly delighted. Miniature lapel microphones appeared which could be concealed but they're not usually as good as having a proper microphone. Radio mikes are of course very popular but they cannot always be relied upon. So really these improvements fall into several areas.

Peter Musgrave: Do you think digital sound has a part to play?

John Aldred: It's already with us. The system of putting a track out of sync in sync is entirely digital. It records the track, compares it with the sync track of the original adjusts it and plays it back. That's entirely digital,-using computer techniques. Another thing which is entirely digital is laying tracks on a hard disk. You have a thing like a micro-processor on a big hard disk with enough sound on the hard disk to last an entire feature film, there's enough space there, that's entirely digital using computer techniques. You have a digital to analogue converter to listen to it, you can't listen to digital sound as such, and that is coming into dubbing theatre although I don't think it will appear in the feature industry just yet. You may find it's used in shorter films where you don't want to go into a lot on track changes. In television where budgets are tighter, it would get a very good system for television, much cheaper to use once you've laid your tracks probably in the cutting room on a hard disk system, you just take it along to the sound mixer and in half an hour or an hour you've got your programme. I don't see it coming into the feature film side just at this stage. The Russians have been trying to develop something in digital sound. You can get digital sound on ordinary magnetic film but you've got to occupy the whole width of 35mm film with four or five tracks and each track takes a certain frequency band and then you

can get one digital soundtrack on a piece of 35mm film. But it's not very practical because you can't afford that amount of film just for one track. Digital mixing consoles have been tried in England - there were two made by me. One went to the BBC and one went to studios at Wembley. The one at Wembley never did get to work. They had so many problems, I realise it was a first initial design, but they had so many problems they ripped it out one weekend and put the old console back otherwise they would never got off the ground on Monday morning. Digital is so complicated, that you can't afford to have anything to go wrong and if it's in a music studio you have 50 musicians out there you can't have something which is unreliable. But I think the problems with unreliable equipment eventually but it just needs a lot more time and since we've got systems like Dolby which have made a great contribution and their very latest technique which is called spectral recording really is in my opinion virtually as good as digital sound. I have heard test recordings which sound excellent to my ears even though I'm getting an old man new. I would approve of Spectral Recording and I wouldn't want to know about digital. For instance if you're putting on - the best way to listen is on a pair of headphones because then you have nothing to distract you from the sound. You've got no room tone or anything. When you're reproducing sound in a cinema it's always going to deteriorate from he speaker to your ears so that amount of deterioration is much greater than the difference between spectral sound and digital sound in my opinion. So whatever comes out of the screen the quality is going to suffer slightly as you approach the listener. In fact I did a lot of work on this when I was in my international standards operation. We did together with Allan of Dolby Labs we did construct a special document explaining to people the problems in cinemas and how to line them up for quality. This is now an industry standard which is followed world wide. So going back to digital I think it will be some time before it appears - it hasn't even appeared in television yet - and it will appear there first.

Peter Musgrave: Just before we come to our final question let us have a word about our sponsors. Do you have any feelings about ACT's relationship to the industry and do you think it has served a useful and progressive and forward looking purpose and policy. Do you think it still has a future bearing in mind there have been changes in government legislation rather anti union in the last few years. Do you think ACTT still has a useful role in helping the shape of the industry?

John Aldred: Yes. I do. I think it's been given a very hard time at the moment but ACTT has certainly been very useful to me though I must confess and I know this is on record that I have never been a close ACTT member and I have never been closely involved in the union other than my experiences on the works committee in Denham. My work has taken me to so many places it is difficult to always be able to go to head office for meetings and things and since my involvement with BKSTS took up quite a lot of my spare time which I was directed towards, also the standards work, but I was not a great union man. Which is not to say I'm not a great union believer. I've never been an active union person. Nevertheless I've always discouraged anti-union practices when they have occurred if I see them happening. But I really think it's a bit of a shame that the various agreements which I remember so well and I have worked to them in the past seem to have gone by the board' today and we're no longer talking about a fixed week, we're talking about almost unlimited or very unpredictable working week. That's certainly a retrograde step. It doesn't do the individual any good and I think one's health can suffer and when one's health's suffers one's work also suffers. Really that's not a good thing. The reason I think that's

come about is the fragmentation of both the film and television industry because more and more I read productions are no longer made by the TV Channels or the film studios. Anybody can produce a picture, rent a four wall studio, engage Tom, Dick and Harry and make a movie. Anyone can make a programme for television under any circumstances whatsoever, sell it to a TV company as a freelance and the TV may or may not accept it but I read the other day that one TV station, about 80% of programmes transmitted by this station were not made by this company itself they were made by freelancers or stringers or call it what you like and what conditions were used to record and photograph those programmes? I've absolutely no idea. I can only imagine. I think ACTT should exercise a little more force. But since the employment is so fragmented it's difficult. If you've got a studio full time staff of men and women it's much easier to control from the union point of view than a lot of freelance people coming and going, leaving the country. Once they leave the country, of course they're really no longer under the ACTT's jurisdiction. When I was in Canada I was divorced from the ACTT really, I paid my subscriptions but they were no good for me in Canada.

Peter Musgrave: Let me ask you which film or section of your career gave you the most satisfaction. What do you look back with the most pleasure on?

John Aldred: I think - I'm a great traveller - and the long location I had in Austria for a remake of an MGM film called **The Great Waltz** was the one that I probably most of all. I was the only English sound technician engaged on this film and the rest of the crew were Austrian. We worked in all the palaces of the old Austrian Empire which was fascinating because I'd never been to Vienna before so I had a very good education experience. All the music was pre-scored by Anvil Films at Denham. There was an awful lot of playback and I can remember on one occasion which was very moving, the Austrian musicians we had grew rather tired of playback and the conductor said we would like to play you some of our music and this was towards the end of the working day. We all sat down and off they went and the result was a fabulous impromptu concert of Viennese waltzes and I think that's the sort of camaraderie I enjoy and I really enjoyed working on that picture. That was one of the last pictures I worked on as a sound mixer and it was made by Andrew Stone. Probably the budget was a little tight but the film was never a hundred percent success. It was a great occasion and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Peter Musgrave: One final question if you could start your career again, what would you do differently or would you have wanted to go into the film industry?

John Aldred: Yes I certainly would. I don't think I'd choose sound. I'd be a lighting cameraman by now. In fact very early on in my career the ACT had an employment bureau even then and one of the jobs they got me was a week's work at Ealing studios in the camera department where I worked as clapper loader for Ronnie Neame. I used to hang his overcoat up in the morning, load the magazines, do the clap sticks and mark the artists position on the floor and hand him his coat in the evening. I thoroughly enjoyed that for which I was paid the princely sum of 35 s. I remember. The end of the week they said you've done jolly well and if there's a chance we'll bring you back again on the next picture. They never rang back. I did enjoy that and it gave me a little insight into how the camera department works. I'm interested in photography, that's one of my hobbies and perhaps I should have stayed and persevered in lighting rather than sound. Which does not mean I haven't enjoyed what I've done. It's just I'd like to try something else next time if I'm re-incarnated you might find me as a lighting cameraman.

Peter Musgrave: To quote a Shepperton title *The Grass is Greener*. Thank you for your time.

John Aldred: I've just got a final account here one of the pictures I worked on for Paramount was **The Italian Job** in Turin with Michael Caine. The final week's shooting was in Dublin, three days in prison with Noel Coward and two days in a cemetery. You must say variety is the spice of life.