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BECTU History Project
Interview no: 181
Interviewee: Nancy Thomas
Interviewer: Norman Swallow/Alan Lawson [NB: Identities not clear]
Duration: 02:24:07

Well, if you don't mind, you know, when and where were you born?

I was born in India in 1918.

Where?

I was born in a little place called Ranikhet, partly because, you know, pregnant mums from… my father was in the Indian Army and they were all moved into the hills, so I was born in the foothills of the Himalayas.

And what about schooling?

Well, I came home because my mother taught me to read and write and that was quite interesting, because I'm left-handed and she didn't think that they'd let me write with my right hand, so she made me write with my right hand. And we had frightful rows, she said, terrible rows. But I was reading, you see, by about the age of four and was then sent home, brought home, when I was six and lodged with an aunt and cousins. So I was really brought up by my aunt and cousins in Berkhamsted, and I went to school at Berkhamsted School for Girls.

And…

From the age of six to sixteen.

And then after that?

After that I left school because my father had a heart condition and he became very ill and the family decided, I'd like to have gone to university, but the family decided that I really ought to do something else, so I left school at sixteen and went to France for four months. I spoke some French anyway, quite good French, because my mother spoke French – she'd been brought up in France – and I then took a secretarial course and my father died just as I started that, and that was in 1936. And that was a seven month course, which was in London, and then my first job was in the National Gallery.

What as?

As a secretary. And briefly that was really very funny, because I was registered with Mrs Hoster [ph] because they thought they had a better range of jobs, because my secretarial college was quite new, very good, because the woman had been in the Foreign Office and she knew exactly, you know, she trained us very well indeed. And so the first interview I went to was at a shipping firm and I was told that I'd be typing invoices, three pounds fifteen a week, and I thought that sounded fairly dreary, so the next one was on a Thursday at the National Gallery. I was living in Tonbridge, my mother had settled in Tonbridge and I was coming up every day. And I arrived on Thursday morning and went into the National Gallery, which was fairly cobwebby in those days, into a dreary old office and there was a woman sitting with her feet up, and I thought, mm, and she said, 'Who are you?' And I said, 'Well, I've come for an interview'. 'Hm' she said, 'this is a terrible place, you can't get a job here'. 'Oh' I said, rather nervously. And then Philip Pouncey, who was then an assistant and then became very, he was very well known, in the end he became head of the prints department in the British Museum. And he was a young man and he came roaring in and he said, 'Are you…?' I said, 'I've come for an interview'. 'Ah' he said, 'would you do a few letters, because our secretary's on strike'. 'Yes' I said. So I typed all day, letters from various people, and then I went home to my mother and said they want me to go tomorrow because they need a secretary, and she said, 'Oh, very nice dear'. And so I went tomorrow and typed all day and by the end of the day they said, 'Would you like the job?' So I said, 'Yes, yes I would'. And so I was sent off to the

administrator who said, 'Now, let's see, what, you speak French and German and that'll be two pounds five and a penny'. So I said, 'Lovely, thank you very much'. And I went home and said to my mother, 'I've got a job in the National Gallery' and she said, 'Very nice dear'.

[05:00]

And I just was working, I worked for a month and then we had a little sort of thing of bells, you know, like they have for servants, and one bell rang, which was the director's and I, who was the innocent, really innocent and didn't read papers I suppose, I don't know, but I'd never heard of Kenneth Clark, who by that time was quite famous even then, just been knighted and was probably all over the gossip columns, you see. So I [incomp – 05:27] in and this very elegant man did a real double take. So he said, 'Who are you?' So I said, 'I'm your new secretary'. And he said, 'Ah. Your name?' So I told him my name, Nancy Bingham. 'How do you do? I'm Kenneth Clark, Kenneth Clark, come and…' He was totally bewildered because I was very young and I also looked much younger than my age and dressed badly and was a general sort of, you know, nice provincial girl. And he then talked to me for a bit and discovered I knew nothing about anything and he thought, I don't know what he thought, but he sort of started doing a little dictation and every time I stopped and asked him anything he'd say, 'I can't spell, you'll have to look it up'. And so everything I had to look up and I had, you know, a dictionary. I was frightfully keen, as you can imagine. And anyway, he was so amused, I think, that he took me in hand. And he used to take me up to the gallery and talk to me about paintings and he was wonderful, he was my university education.

This was before the war wasn't it?

This was in 1936. And I worked at the National Gallery for three years, and then I worked briefly for him as his private secretary, and that was in '39, you see. Then I got appendicitis and when all that was over everybody, you know, the National Gallery was shutting and they were moving all the paintings and he said, 'Well, what would you like to do? I can get you into the Foreign Office if you like', because I was a civil servant, you see. And I said, 'Well, yes', so I went into the Foreign Office. [laughter]

How much were you earning then, by this time?

Oh, about two pounds six and a penny I should think, very little.

Per week?

Yes, per week.

And were you coming up from Tonbridge?

And I came up from Tonbridge.

Every day?

Every day. But that you see was Charing Cross, so I just had to cross the road.

But the cost?

Very, very little in those days. Remember steam trains, and they took an hour and a bit and I had a lot of friends on the train and I did a lot of reading and I used to go to evening classes in Italian and I had a ball, I really enjoyed that period.

And it didn't eat up all your income?

Certainly not. I can't remember ever having been so rich. Mind you, I was living at home and I had a pension of my own from the Indian Army, until I married, unfortunately, then I lost it, and Mummy took that of course for my keep and that sort of thing, but it wasn't very much. And so I had two pounds five and a penny all to myself.

Can I go back a while, it's interesting this, because knowing what happened in your career in the future, okay you took a course, a secretarial course…

Yes.

Presumably implies that you were interested in becoming a secretary. Does that mean you had a particular profession in mind or not?

No.

Anything, could be…

My whole life is a series of serendipity. My whole life is a series of serendipity, because I didn't really want to be a secretary actually, I didn't think I did, I mean I didn't really know what I wanted to be. I thought well, I mean I've got to earn a living and I think it… you see, I was brought up in a very particular atmosphere as, you know, the daughter of the army and all that and it was always expected that I'd go out to India and marry a subaltern and become a memsahib I suppose, I mean that was what was envisaged and my aunt had no other ideas for women except that they should marry and have children, that was it. But the idea of a career… And she vaguely disapproved of me because I was a very clever child but I was also totally impractical and rather vague and didn't have what she called any common sense. And so she [laughter], she vaguely disapproved of me.

She was wrong there, I think.

I think I have got more common sense than she realised, but you know. And I read a lot, which I now realise was escapist, and she didn't believe in that, and I still feel guilty if I read before breakfast, before lunch even. But she used to say, go out and dig the garden, or collect snails, or whatever, you know, and play tennis, and she forced me to play games, which was probably very good because I'm not very athletic, but I became quite good at tennis actually and quite enjoyed it. I mean she believed in a rather different scenario from what actually happened to me.

And you were in the Foreign Office all through the war?

[09:54]
Yes, I was in the Foreign Office throughout the war. I started in the pool and then we were sent all over to anybody who wanted a secretary, because they didn't have secretaries, I mean even Roger Makins who was head of the Central Department in those days, and you can imagine that at the beginning of the war how busy he was, he answered his own telephone. So if he was trying to do a very difficult memo or… he would then be

interrupted all the time, I mean it was a ludicrous system actually. But we used to get sent to everybody, so it was very varied, you know, all the departments, and it was very interesting, I found it absolutely fascinating, but it was secretary, you know, one was just a pool secretary. And then in December 1939 there was a vacancy in the Paris Embassy so I went there. And I learnt there to type very fast because most of our time was copying despatches with *nine* copies, no photocopying in those days, all of which if you made a mistake you had to alter quite well. So you didn't make many mistakes if you could help it. But it was always, you know, they wanted it two hours earlier, so that one was always in a frightful flap and you worked extremely hard. But Paris was wonderful, there was no traffic, no nothing, and there was a blackout, yes, but I lived with a French girl and it was very nice. And in May 1940 Winston arrived from Belgium where he'd seen all the sort of chaos there and he said, 'What are these women doing here? Get 'em out'. And so we had to pack a suitcase, we had to rush back, pack a suitcase, leave all our things and we actually caught the last boat out of Le Havre. Afterwards Le Havre was bombed and they didn't get any further boats out. And I arrived at home, walked up the garden path and of course caused complete consternation. Apparently they looked out, 'That's Nancy', because I wasn't able to warn them or anything, you see, and of course then they immediately realised that things couldn't have been that good, in spite of the… And it wasn't that good, as we all know. So I came back into the Foreign Office and I was then made secretary to Sir William Strang, and he did have a secretary, he was Under-Secretary of State and he was at that time the chief liaison with de Gaulle, and so we used to do long despatches into the night about all de Gaulle's activities and it was fascinating. He was very meticulous, very punctilious man and I became very fond of him although he was, as you know, I mean he was a grammar school boy and the Foreign Office were very snobbish in those days, blow them, you know, and I don't think he really got his due. He was very highly strung, very nervous man and I think he had a difficult time, actually. But he was, I liked him very much indeed and he was extremely intelligent. And that was very interesting. And then something else happened because I then got engaged to somebody I'd met in London early in the war and he was an airman, I mean he was an air officer and he was in Cairo and he was a navigator on bombers, and at that time he'd been taken off active, he was not very young, I mean he was older than some of them, and put on to training and I had an offer of going out to Cairo with the Ambassador to the Yugoslav government, King Peter was then, you know, the approved, and all the government in exile were in London. And then they decided with Tito coming up that they'd try and

effect a reconciliation and that it would be better if the government and the embassy of course were in Cairo, and so I managed to get through to Dick, my fiancé, and said, 'Shall I? Shall I come?', because he was due to come home I think in a year or something. He said, 'Yes, you bet'. And he was killed the week before I was going, and at that time of course I couldn't, well I mean the family didn't think I could pull out or anything, I'd had all my injections, you know, it would have been awkward. So I went to Cairo all the same. And there I worked for, I think the sort of negotiations lasted about eight months, and then they failed and the government went back to London with the Ambassador and I transferred to the Head of Chancery, the First Secretary, who was sent to Italy, to Bari, to try and deal with SOE – Special Operations Executive – who were a bit out of hand and giving gold to all the wrong people, like the communists in Greece and the communists in Yugoslavia and everything, and so Philip Broad, who was my boss then, was sent there to try and get the Foreign Office some control again. And we arrived in Bari just after it had been… I don't think it had been bombed, but a mustard gas ship had blown up in the harbour and so there was a good deal of sort of alarm and despondency, and then Vesuvius had erupted and all the ash had fallen on Bari, so it wasn't in what you might call a very comfortable state, and we were put into the Imperiale Hotel, which Mussolini had built for his Albanian adventures. And that didn't work, the plumbing was ghastly and it was quite… And then we moved into the waterworks headquarters, which was an extraordinary sort of art deco building full of people with amphora, you know, and tiles and everything, but it was the only place that had any hot water, so that the whole of everybody used to come and have baths! [laughter] It was very funny really. And we lived there and worked there and it was a very interesting period of course.

[15:52]

This was before the end of the war?

This was between '44 and '46, I came home eventually in '46 because I felt, by that time Philip Broad moved to Naples and I'd moved with him, and he was then the Special Adviser and he took over from Macmillan eventually, because Macmillan, as you know, was the Minister of State in charge of Mediterranean affairs, and Philip, when he came home to stand for the election, Macmillan, in '46, Philip took over and then I thought that really I didn't have anything to do, which indeed I didn't, so I did some broadcasting for

the army hospital unit. I used to flip discs and do nice messages and things. I enjoyed that very much.

You spoke?

I spoke. I was…

DJ?

I was the DJ, yes, because a boyfriend of mine at that time was in the army and he was sort of running it and so he… So I spoke and I flipped discs. I became very proficient at being my own disc jockey, because I put on my own discs, of course.

And you did that from London?

And I did that in Naples.

Oh Naples, sorry. You're not back yet?

No. I did that in Naples, because as I say, there wasn't really much to do and we used to swan about Italy a bit and sometimes I was in the C-in-C's aircraft, very grand, and other times I was in a six-wheel truck with other friends trawling about. And so we went up to Rome after that, had been released, went up to Venice, had a good time in Italy. I felt rather ashamed of myself really because, you know, we had plenty to eat and… So I decided that enough was enough and I'd better come home. That was in '46, yes. And so I came home and I didn't know what I was going to do, I resigned from the Foreign Office. By that time I was earning six pounds a week and they said, [sharp intake of breath], you know, you'll be earning seven pounds soon. And they were very annoyed when I said I… but I didn't really want to stay in the Foreign Office, I knew there was no future for me there because I didn't have a degree in, you know, I was well what they called 'below the line' of the bosses and the non-bosses. And so I wrote to Kenneth Clark and said what am I going to do, and he said, oh come back to me. So I went back to him for a year, as a private secretary when he was living in Hampstead at the time, and then I saw this advertisement in *The Times* for an assistant secretary to the Director-General of

the BBC. And I said to Kenneth Clark, 'I'm going to apply for this'. And he said, 'Oh, for heaven's sake, you can't do that. I mean Sir William Haley isn't a bit like me'. And I said, 'No, I'm sure he isn't but I mean I ought to have a career, oughtn't I?' And he said, 'Well…' So I applied and I got a board, which I'd never had before, and I arrived with these serried ranks of people – BBC board, you see – and in the middle was the chairperson, somebody from personnel, who happened to be the Chief Wren in Naples, whom I knew very well. I didn't know she was going to be the chairman and of course we fell upon each other and had a great gossip about life in Naples, then I saw everybody going [yawns], you know, and she said… and then pulled herself together and we had… And I gather I was put at the bottom of the shortlist, this was what subsequent information I found. However, shortlisted, and I was then summoned to an interview with the Director-General, Sir William Haley, and I didn't know much about the BBC or about Sir William Haley. I did a little bit of rapid sort of reading, and I arrived in the BBC in '47 when it was very cold, if you remember, it was a very bad winter and I had a lot of clothes on and a hat. My hair is inclined to fall down, it's very fine and it was pinned up, it's inclined to fall down, so I stuffed it all into a sort of overwhelming hat and had a lot of clothes on and arrived at the BBC, which was boiling. [laughter]

Broadcasting House?

[20:04]
Yes, Broadcasting House, and it was simply steaming, so I had to sort of, removed a coat or two. And then the secretary arrived – there was a secretary and an assistant secretary – and she was clerk to the board, and she was a woman called Dorothy Singer, who became a great friend of mine eventually. And she came, she tottered in and she said, 'Would you take your hat off?' And I said, 'No', because I knew if I took my hat off my hair would fall down, it didn't seem to me a good start. So she looked totally taken aback and she went out and then she came back and said, 'The Director-General insists that you take your hat off'. So [laughter], I took my hat off and stuck a few pins in my hair and thought, oh God, I mean, tyrant. So I went in very, with my head, absolutely head still because I couldn't wobble or anything like that. I'm going to have a cup of coffee for the moment.

[pause]

So yes, that must have been in the autumn of 1946 that I had this extraordinary interview and we, I can't really remember much about it except that I was very cross, so I called him Mr Haley and I was very terse in my replies and he asked me about a picture he had over the top of his desk, which was a sort of nice piece of modern art, and I said that I quite liked it, I didn't know who it was by, and he must have asked me a few questions about what I'd done. But I went back to Sir Kenneth the next day and said, well that's alright, I haven't got that job, I did the most appalling interview, and we didn't think about it any more. And then I got a telegram from the BBC saying 'Start next week'. So I had to send a telegram back saying, 'Shan't, because I've got to give notice, I've got to find a secretary' and so they then wrote a very apologetic letter and said, of course, start when you can. So I got another secretary for Sir Kenneth and I started in January 1947 in the Director-General's office.

(1) So what about that, was that a happy time, for how long?

Oh yes. Absolutely fascinating time because, first of all I conceived an enormous admiration and affection for Sir William, who was a very shy man, and there are all sorts of tales about him in the BBC, but he was very shy, but he was an incredibly clever, but more than that, I mean he was a very erudite man and he had total recall, so that he used to quote great stretches of novels and everything that he read, he remembered everything. And he had read practically all the Victorian novels, that was his great love that he'd ever read, and he was always coming out with little quotes and things. And the other thing about him was that he did shorthand, he did Pitman's shorthand because he was a journalist, you see, and he used to lean forward over and he'd say, 'I think that should be above the line' and I'd say, 'I don't think so, Sir William'. And then we'd have a little argument, and that was that. And on one occasion I remember, he came out, wreathed in smiles and he said, 'You've got the wrong word here, you must have put it above the line', or below the line, and I can't remember what it was, and it wasn't that the letter didn't make sense, but it was something he didn't say, he said something different. And we had this argument about that and finally, you know, we both roared with laughter and that was that. But that was the only time and you never opposed… and you knew that if you didn't please you would be out, you know, because he… And I really got on with him, I really liked him, you know, I really loved working for him. And then I became clerk to the Board of Management, Dorothy was clerk to the Board, and then he set up the Board of

Management while I was there and I was made the secretary of it, clerk to the Board of Management, and I did the minutes and the papers and the whole of that office with the whole of the governors and the whole of the Board of Management was run by two people and a junior secretary who did the typing. And that lasted until Sir William left, and when Sir William left he was succeeded by Sir Ian Jacob of course, who'd been Secretary to the War Cabinet, and so he set up a sort of War Cabinet, and I felt very doubtful about that, but then I left. When Sir William went, I went too and…

I mean you left because he left?

[24:22]
Well, I thought I… I mean I was so… I didn't really want to work for anybody else in the Director-General… anyhow I'd been there for six years and I thought that that was long enough, probably. And I went as the assistant to Joanna Spicer in television planning. That job was advertised, you see, and obviously, I mean the great thing about a nice hierarchical organisation is that if you start at the top as a sort of, you know, you… And by that time I'd had a lot of experience, it was at the time, all through that time the BBC had got back its independence under Sir William, and he'd fought for that and got it back, because the government were really determined to keep it and Sir William was determined that they would not. And so it had got back its independence and then there were all these commissions of enquiry and, as you know, under Beveridge, who looked into everything, he was the most meticulous a chair on that commission, and then there was the question of breaking the monopoly and, as you know, Selwyn Lloyd had a minority vote in that and said the monopoly ought to be broken. And Sir William was determined, if he could possibly stop it, that it shouldn't be. And the famous monopoly, anti, you know, pro-monopoly paper, was written in a hotel in Cheltenham by him with me typing away and taking it all down in shorthand, that sort of thing, and it was very, very interesting indeed. And Sir William wrote to me, we used to write at Christmas every year, until he died, and he used to remind me frequently, because he loved the BBC and he really loved his time there and although he couldn't resist being asked to be the editor of *The Times* when he'd started as a telegraph boy, as you know, in *The Times*, and he couldn't resist that, I don't really think he was as happy at *The Times* as he was at the BBC. He was a remarkable Director-General and he was absolutely fair, he was, really he was a remarkable man and I have enormous admiration for him and he's not really been, because he was so shy and

sort of remote, some people said. He was remote in a way, but I don't know, he… Anyway, the monopoly paper, that was the time when the monopoly was broken, his ideas about finance were extremely strict, you know, he wouldn't allow the BBC to borrow, that only happened after him. He said, if you once borrow, even against your assets, which were enormous, you will be in hock and every time you want more money you'll have to ask for a… and that'll get… you know, so he never allowed the BBC to borrow. It had to live within its income, and he agreed that it was very difficult because the producers always wanted more than they had and had very good reasons for wanting it, and I realised that when I became a producer myself, but on the other hand, he said look, we've got an income and we've got to live within it. And at that time of course there was less problems; there was no inflation and we had a rising income all the time, we went from radio to television, from television to colour television and there was always a rising income and the BBC was very well off. In fact, the government up to, I don't know when it was, that the government took quite a slice off the licence fee. But then it stopped doing that when inflation started and things, so at least we got the whole of the licence fee minus the six per cent the Post Office took for collecting the licence.

About the general atmosphere in the BBC in the days when you were with Haley, I mean I was myself a radio producer in Manchester, you know, north region as it then was, and – having come out of the army – I found, being innocent to all this structure of television and whatever, how it worked and how it didn't work, I've never ever I think in my career had so much freedom. I mean the programmes I wanted to make, it seemed I could make them, and I often wrote, usually, my own scripts and many, looking back, I know were controversial, some were, caused discussion and debate and all this. But I never seemed to have any interference. Looking back on it, it seems quite remarkable, but you would probably know how on earth this atmosphere was created.

Well, Sir William believed in the responsibility of the producer. I mean one of his arguments always was that although the BBC might be a monopoly when you looked at it, it wasn't, you know, there were 300 or so producers and they all had their little empires and they all were more or less autonomous. And there weren't these great structures of heads and assistant heads and heads of sections and all, you know, who were looking at the treatments and the scripts and that sort of thing, there was none of that. And the producer was king in those days and Sir William believed in that and so did, I mean his

Board of Management was George Barnes who became Director of Television, Nicholls, Basil Nicholls, Benjie [ph].

He was the Assistant Director-General wasn't he, Nicholls?

Yes, he was. And, you know, overseas and everybody, the Board of Management was about six, I think, or seven, there was the Director of Personnel and… But, the two people who were important of course were Benjie [ph], who was an old broadcasting hand and absolutely determined that the producer should remain king. And Lindsay Wellington was there. And there was a remarkable, you know, the Third Programme started in those days. There was the change of structure that instead of having two sort of ordinary programmes, the Home and the Light, they then had generic, much more generic broadcasting with the Light Programme and the Home Service, as it was called, and then the Third Programme. [30:02]
And Haley had this idea, I mean he was an autodidact himself and he believed that the BBC had a role of broadening people's minds and 'education' in inverted commas, because he didn't believe in, you know, but he believed that people should be exposed to good stuff and with good stuff they would flourish. So he had this idea of them perhaps starting with the Light Programme and being introduced to various things, and then going on to the Home Service perhaps, and then going into the Third Programme. And as the Third Programme in those days wasn't just music, it was plays and they did the whole of, you know, the Greek and the whole of Chaucer and it was amazing, actually. And everybody, you see, wanted to come on to the Third Programme, and George Barnes, who was a broadcaster and he used to be fairly sort of wary of all these academics droning away, he didn't really approve of them, and when family, you know, the autocue was introduced into television, I remember him groaning and saying, oh God, now all those bores who we managed to keep off radio will come and read their scripts on television. So he was against the autocue very much. And he's right to some extent, as we all know, unless you know how to broadcast, you shouldn't use the autocue.

If I can slip in a personal footnote, which might be relevant, in fact you mentioned Basil Nicholls, Assistant Director-General, I never had any communication as a mere producer with the Director-General, but I do remember – I'll never forget it – an internal memo from Nicholls, presumably to me, producer in Manchester. And there'd been, one of my

programmes had been viciously attacked all over the place, it was a slightly controversial thing, and Nicholls, I remember the memo said, 'This is probably your first experience of the slings and arrows of outraged Whitehall, in which case, please do not let it worry you. We have it all the time, carry on, good luck'. Which seems to me to be, well you probably think so, the atmosphere of the day.

Absolutely. And, you see, the BBC in those days was extremely robust. If people criticised it, it would listen. I mean Haley was very meticulous in listening to complaints and then he would call up the programme and he would perhaps talk to the producer and that sort of thing, and he would then make his own judgements on that. Sometimes they would be hauled over the coals and said, you know… he did not believe in the producer being his own presenter, his own… because he said that is not the function, we are an entrepreneurial broadcasting organisation and we use other people, we do not put ourselves on, we're in too powerful a position and it's quite, quite wrong to use your position in order to further your own ideas. You've got to, you know, I mean he was very, very, he was always very praising of the BBC producers and he'd say, you know, when he himself had to do a broadcast and he had this producer, he said that they were marvellously helpful to him, you know, how to pace, how to use words properly, to have short sentences. And he was always, I mean he thought that they were wonderful, so you know, he thought the BBC was wonderful, you see, and he thought that producers were wonderful and should have responsibility for what they did, but also should take account of the fact that they were not kings, they were midwives.

Anyway, so you went on to…

Yes. When…

This is?

'53, the television service, I mean we'd had a good deal, I mean I'd noticed a good deal of anxiety in the television service in those days because I think they felt that they were definitely the sort of despised, rather younger sister, and they didn't feel they got proper resources, they didn't feel they got proper interest and sort of support from the centre, and I think that there is an element of truth in that. I don't think that Sir William was very, I

mean he wasn't a visual man to begin with and he didn't think that pictures could really tell stories or, you know, so he was a word man and he, you know, he was a reader and he was a word man and he believed that radio was the serious and proper means of broadcasting, and television, well yes, it's okay, but it was a bit sort of frivolous and would never be able to carry the same gravitas as radio. And he and Norman Collins, as I think everybody knows now, because Norman's written his own autobiography, didn't really get on and there were constant, constant friction really. And as you know, when Norman resigned…

Sorry, he was Director of Television? Official title?

Yes, Norman was Director of Television. Maurice Gorham I think was Director of Programmes up at Ally Pally. This was before Lime Grove even.

[35:00]
Cecil McGivern was Head of Programmes wasn't he?

Then Cecil McGivern took over from Maurice Gorham, yes, when he retired. But then, that was before Cecil had taken over I think, and then after Norman left - stormed out I think could be truthfully said - George Barnes was made Director of Television. And I went up with him, he said, oh for heaven's sake, to Sir William, you know, could I have some help, and so I got out various reports for him and I went up to Ally Pally with him and we had a sort of look round and, you know, and he obviously was slightly daunted by the job, because he again, I mean he loved the Third Programme and then he was Director of the Spoken Word, which was a very curious title and job altogether, I think. Anyway, he became Director of Television and again, I think the television service thought that this was a sort of putdown, to some extent I'm afraid, and maybe, I mean I think it's true too, that George Barnes was probably again a word man and not very sympathetic. Although he was much more visually inclined than Sir William, I mean he did, you know, he was a collector of paintings and china and all that sort of thing, I mean he wasn't just a literary man. Anyway, I think that's where it had got to. By the time this job came up Joanna had been made Head of Planning, Programme Planning, under Cecil McGivern and at that time they'd moved to Lime Grove and I applied for the job and got it, as Joanna's Planning Assistant. Only two of us then, and then somebody looking after *Radio Times*

and somebody looking after the finances. I mean there were hardly any of us. [laughter] And that was marvellous too, I mean I adored Programme Planning, I mean I found it, it was very hard work. I used to take all the schedules home because I had to keep them absolutely up to date, any changes, and dear, darling Cecil McGivern was always making changes at the last minute if necessary, but usually a little bit ahead, but one always had to get everything absolutely meticulous, every change. I used to take all the schedules home at night and alter them and then I had to pass them on to the *Radio Times* girl and we were constantly retyping schedules. And then I did…

You were involved really with programme offers too, weren't you at that time?

Oh yes. I mean they went to Cecil of course, I mean he made all the decisions in the programme terms. But, they used to come in, particularly there was Cecil Madden, you see, there and Cecil Madden was always having bright ideas and he'd come hurrying in, usually to me, because he felt that Cecil McGivern was not going to very sympathetic, and so he used to come and tackle me first and then of course they had to go to Joanna. Joanna used to go over them, then they used to go to Cecil McGivern and we'd have to fit them in somehow, find a studio, find the money. And they were always little short programmes, you know, Bransby Williams, marvellous actor. Cecil was always pressing Bransby Williams upon us at very short notice. And all sorts of other things too, I mean it was an incredible time and the schedules used to be torn apart all the time, because Cecil didn't like the look of them or something cropped up or, whatever, whatever, and they were… it was a very curious time in television. Still a monopoly of course, one service only. And as you know, the Sunday play repeated live on the Thursday and everybody pressing for studios, and they all used to rush in, you know, saying 'I must have a studio', 'I must have more money'. Michael Mills in those days was the, you know, light entertainment, marvellous, marvellous man. He used to call me Gargantua. He was very small himself and I'm very tiny and he used to rush in and say, 'Gargantua, I must have…' whatever it was he wanted to have, you know. [laughter] I knew him right to the very end because I used to see him at BAFTA and various places and his voice would come ringing out, 'Gargantua! How are you?' And everybody would turn round. [laughter] This very small character would be seen. [laughter] Lovely man. But it was a very exciting time because the BBC was really… it was very, very flexible and nobody minded too much about ratings, although Cecil McGivern occasionally got rather annoyed if they had a very,

very small audience and an even smaller RI. There was the famous Dennis Vance who used to do very experimental plays, you know, got no audience, less appreciation.

Perhaps we should explain for the people who use this tape, what an RI was?

[39:51]
Yes. And RI was the – what is it?

Reaction Index.

Reaction Index, and that just…

Audience reaction, yes.

Audience reaction, and that just measured the numbers that were supposed to have watched, and as you know, the BBC in those days had the Gallup poll method, they interviewed *x* thousand a day, drawn from all the stratas of society, allegedly, and then their reports used to send in and they would get some idea of the numbers of people watching. Then they had what they called the Appreciation Index, the AI, and that was a self-selected panel who would write in and say, yes, and they were, I think for six months or something, and they had to fill in really quite elaborate forms as A, B, C, D, E as to how much they appreciated, what they thought of it. And out of that they got an Appreciation Index. So sometimes you could get a very small audience and a huge Appreciation Index, sometimes you got an enormous audience and a very low Appreciation Index, it depended. You could get all sorts of combinations. And quite rightly, the BBC looked at both, although as pressures mounted and competition mounted, of course the audience size has become much more important than the appreciation, unfortunately. Nobody minds if the programme is greatly appreciated by about four people and you can understand that in the present climate.

Yeah, that especially started after ITV.

That's when it started.

It mattered then.

Yes, nobody minded at all.

Carry on.

They, I mean Cecil McGivern was extremely critical, I don't mean that he just took everything, I mean people are very rude about those early days in the BBC, quite wrongly in my view, I mean it was very experimental and there were all sorts of things done which were quite extraordinary. I was put in charge of Paul Johnstone's Elizabethan Evening when the whole of the evening was devoted to a reconstruction of telly as it might have been under Elizabeth I. They were all dressed up in costumes, Mortimer Wheeler cooked an Elizabethan meal out of the remains of some [incomp – 41:56] he'd found and I mean it was quite extraordinary. And I was put in charge of the finances, I remember, and the resources and that sort of thing. And that was just very interesting, because it wasn't… can you imagine it being done now? No, you can't, of course you can't. This is 1991, after all. But there were all sorts of things done in those days which were very interesting and sometimes successful, sometimes not very successful, but lessons were learnt and they weren't done again. But I don't think the mistakes were repeated at all, but at least scope was given for producers to try their hand at things. Do you remember those days, Norman?

Can you name a few, I mean programmes you remember? One way or the other: the good, the bad, the marvellous? In terms of history, which is what we're concerned with.

Yes, God, my…

Your personal view?

There was a famous, because you see my memory's very bad. I had an assistant who said she'd come with a microphone one day and the thing would be called 'Nancy Thomas tries to remember' and I know exactly what he means by that, because my memory for names and titles and that sort of thing has become very bad. But there was one play that Dennis Vance did which was… I can't remember what it was called, but it was very experimental

and it got a, not a very big audience and a very, very low RI of about ten or something, and everybody laughed a lot and said look, Dennis, you mustn't do this again. Then of course there was the famous *1984*, which caused the most *enormous* scandal because of the rats and all that, but it was a wonderful production, and the BBC repeated it regardless. I mean they'd done it on a Sunday and they did it again on the Thursday.

[end of side]

[46:07]
Nancy Thomas, side two.

1984, yes, you were talking about.

Then in those days Mary Adams was in charge of talks and of course there was very little, well, not very little, there wasn't much attention to time and things did overrun quite badly and Cecil McGivern got very annoyed and they did tighten up in those days. And I remember that there was a programme about Leonardo de Vinci produced by Peter de Francia, who then became a professor at the Royal College of Art, and it overran by about an hour and Mary was somewhat annoyed about that and so was Cecil McGivern, and Peter de Francia merely said it should have overrun two hours, [laughter] which is what his sort of attitude was, and I don't suppose it was very interesting at that, I mean at that length. But that sort of thing.

Can I interrupt just a second? In those days, did Cecil say I will give you an hour or did he say, how long is your programme, if it's that long, fine, okay, that's the time slot for it then.

Yes indeed, that's how schedules were booked. I mean he…

On the offers?

On the offers. And if they said they wanted seventy-nine and a half minutes, he might say please make it eighty, but producers used to come up with lengths that were all over the place and as there was no competition in those days, I mean he would say well, can you

sustain that amount of time, do you really think it'll hold, and then he would say okay. And on the whole the schedules were built out of what people had suggested on the timing, there was no fixed points. And of course, to that extent, I mean it made for interesting programming and nobody had anywhere else to go so they'd just sit with the BBC until it finished. That all changed in 1955 when commercial started. And, is there anything else you want to know about my time in planning? I was also, I had to do a long report on the use of OBs, I remember, which I did with the outside broadcast organiser, and that was very interesting in terms of how they were used and whether they were used properly and that sort of thing. I got a bonus for that, I remember.

You mentioned Mary Adams, sorry, what about Grace Wyndham Goldie? I mean this was her epoch, or beginning of it wasn't it?

Well Grace, no, Grace came, was Head of Talks much later. Grace was the number two and I think, although I wasn't in Talks at the time and I'm sure other people will have talked to you about that, like David, for instance - David Attenborough - because he was there at the time and he would remember, but I don't think relationships between Mary and Grace were very good and I think that they disagreed probably on most things. But Mary had a very interesting mind and a very unusual form of intelligence, or whatever, and her ideas were always quirky and interesting and not very sort of mainline, I don't think, and Grace wanted… was much more interested in current affairs and I don't think Mary was, very. So that there was always that, but there was, in between Mary going and Grace taking over, Grace Wyndham Goldie, there was Leonard Miall of course, and he was made Head of Talks after Mary Adams retired.

Anyway, sorry, go back to your own career. What about Joanna Spicer?

Yes, and if I could remember great successes and great failures, I would tell you, but I don't know that I can really. I mean there were certain things that stood out like the Elizabethan evening, which I happened to be particularly connected with.

[50:03]
How long were you there?

I was there… I went in ’53 and then I was lucky enough, you see, to benefit from ’55, the arrival of commercial television, the great exodus of the BBC staff. Joanna had sent me on a production course, a month’s production course when I first joined because she thought I ought to know what was going on, and I didn’t, I was just an observer, I didn’t actually do any… But I was around and I watched it and I was there with Hal Burton and all sorts of other people, I mean it was a very interesting production of course. So I learnt something about production, although I didn’t practise it at all.

You didn’t do any of the exercises yourself?

No, because they had more than enough, you know, but I was there and I was usually asked to act or something like that, you know, to take part as contributing rather than as actually pressing any buttons or directing cameras. So I’d done that and when ’55 came and they, you know, they were very short of hands, they asked would people who had any sort of knowledge of television at all whether they might apply. So I applied to the Talks Department as a research, well, as a sort of PA, they called them then, Production Assistant, which wasn’t then the secretarial side, it was research and… And I went over and joined Paul Johnstone, who was doing *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* in those days, and working up *Buried Treasure* which was his film, great film series on archaeological digs, and doing various other things, and I joined him as a researcher, but because there really was pressure, you know, there were people being trained and that sort of thing, it wasn’t long before I started taking the rehearsals, that’s what he first did, of *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* He was also doing a series on astronomy with Ray Lyttleton. Can’t remember what it was called, but it was six programmes about the universe and he put me on to those, and I remember directing the rehearsals with Otis Eddy, who was my TOM [?], who was a very severe man, and he was also very sarcastic and I had a horrible time with Otis just because he was always sort of putting me down. Very good for me, I’ve no doubt. But I was pretty green, as you can imagine. I didn’t actually say ‘track in telecine’, as somebody’s alleged to have said, but…

That was Siefky [ph]?

But… [laughter] But I was, you know, I was very confused. But it’s really quite interesting, I used to take the rehearsals of *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* and I started

actually, you know, going with Paul to set up the whole thing. And one evening he said, you'll do the direct… you know, you'll take the show this evening, without giving me any warning or anything. And so I did. And interestingly enough, James McClure [ph] came in, who was a colleague on the science side, came into our office the next morning and he said, 'Paul, who was directing *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* last night?' And Paul said, 'Nancy was'. And James said, 'Yes, I knew there was something different about it'. I mean he didn't say it didn't work, but he just said there was something different from Paul's direction. Wasn't that interesting? I had no idea because I thought I just followed, because it was a set pattern to some extent, I mean, but I suppose you have different rhythms, I don't know, perhaps even a different way of lining up shots. And then I actually directed this astronomy series and out of that came *The Sky at Night*.

Sorry, are we are Alexandra Palace or Lime Grove?

This is Lime Grove, yes. I was at Lime Grove as a planning assistant and then towards the end, in about '52 or so, we moved over to the Centre, and so I'd been operating out of the Centre and then I went back to Lime Grove with Paul and we had an office in one of the houses in a sort of hall. It was a long, thin office, I remember. But still, it was wonderful really. And…

The Sky at Night*, you said.*

The Sky at Night arose out of that astronomy series because they had a sort of discussion at the end about it and Patrick Moore was one of the protagonists, and as Patrick was always Patrick, you know, and madly enthusiastic, I think it was about… I think it was about little green men, you know, flying saucers. [laughter] And there was one mad… Adamsky was on it, and he was saying that he'd met all these little green men in the desert and they'd descended in a flying saucer and had a long conversation with him. Patrick Moore was extremely sceptical, as you can imagine, and said that this was a load of rubbish and Paul then thought, well, why don't we put up an idea for *The Sky at Night* out of this, and that also started when I was with Paul. And I was the first producer/director of *The Sky at Night*. I mean Paul was always there and always in charge, but I did it for a year or so and enjoyed it hugely, and I was also doing *Animal, Vegetable or Mineral?* and there were other series.

[55:16]
And then – this was in, must have been '58 – I'd done one or two shows, Paul had a series on living history, I remember, and I'd been in charge of one or two of those and Cecil had been quite pleased with them. These little memos that arrived from Cecil McGivern on your desk the next morning always, 'What do you think you were doing…?' etc, or, 'That was very good. Congratulations'. I mean either/or, but sometimes they were extremely abusive, quite rightly. 'What was that boom shadow doing right across your…' etc, you know. Boom shadows I see have come back. There's a new, what you might call epidemic, of boom shadows in programmes now.

A vogue.

A vogue. Whether it's on purpose or whether they think it looks nice, I'm not sure, but I remember the boom shadows were things that Cecil used to go absolutely berserk about.

Maybe it's to improve the sound, get the microphone nearer.

Well, it may be, it may be, but he didn't approve of boom shadows, he thought that was terrible. And we'd get a great wigging if we had a boom shadow. And that time, then as I say, Grace had taken over from Leonard by then and there was the start of *Monitor* and they advertised for producers and I put in for – I was still a PA – as a producer of *Monitor* and I was desperately anxious to get that job, as you can imagine. And it so happened that they'd decided to do an outside broadcast from Brussels from the Russian Pavilion about the first sputnik into James McClure's [ph] programme on science, and because I'd done outside broadcasts with *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* and pushing my own buttons and everything, I'd, you know, I knew about outside broadcasts, I was asked to direct it. So we went over to Brussels and that was extremely interesting because we had a recce – reconnaissance – and we met all the Russian people and our interpreters and my interpreter was Boris Belitzky and Tom Margerison was the presenter of that little item and he had a beautiful blonde, whose name I forget, but she was lovely and she was his interpreter. And Boris Belitzky's rather a famous character because he was Gagarin's interpreter when Gagarin came over here and he now broadcasts on the Russian World Service in English and I often hear his voice. And we went over and the Russians had seventeen cameras in their Pavilion, all over the place, and when I arrived and saw the set-

up, there was a very ferocious looking female engineer and the camera, three cameras I was going to use were linked up, one at each end of this huge space with seventeen cameras and one in the middle. And I said, through the interpreter, I said, look, couldn't the three cameras be in the middle? It's very difficult to direct if you've got such a big space between your eyes of vision, because you wouldn't even be able to see them, you'd have to look. And they said, 'Niet!', no. So I said well, that's alright, but of course it's very easy, you know, you just have to re-plug them, the BBC wouldn't find any difficulty doing that, pretty well knowing that this would… And that was that, and we saw everybody and that was that, and Boris Belitzky said to me when I arrived back, when we all arrived back, of course the three cameras were plugged in the middle of the show, and I thanked them very much. And Boris Belitzky said out of the corner, he was saying, 'Don't use camera three, he's the KGB man'.

[laughter]

So I put camera three on a static shot, holding shot, and then I asked the other two cameras, you know, I said I want some very big close-ups and they'll have to be quite quick, but they'd never done this before, you see, so they had turrets, you know, which they had to swing, and so I'd say please give me a close-up of Laika's head – it was a dog, you know. And very, very slowly they ground round the turret and got out of focus, and I said 'Focus' and they focussed, and I said, 'That won't do at all! You must be much, much quicker than that, because I shall have to get very big close-ups and that sort of thing'. 'Oh.' This caused them total panic, but they then started, you see, and they started swinging their turrets round, you know, and in a state of high excitement and high pressure. And I said, 'That's wonderful, that's terrific'. And poor old camera three was on this static shot all the time. So we did this little item and it went very, very well and Tom was very good, and they were thrilled, everybody was absolutely over the moon. And at that moment the telephone rang – no, Leonard was still in charge, that's right, still in charge – and Leonard first came over and said 'That was wonderful'. It went down very well.

Leonard Miall?

[59:59]

Yes, Leonard Miall, who was Head of Talks at that time. And he said, 'And incidentally, you've got the *Monitor* job', over the telephone. And of course I was thrilled and I told everybody at once and they said, 'When will you be doing this, will you be promoted?' I said, 'No, not exactly' because that's not how the BBC works, but I'd put in for it and it's wonderful. So we had a terrific celebration and a marvellous meal, curious sort of meal of wine and chocolates and fish, really very odd, and I got a little badge. And then Boris Belitzky said, 'Let's go out into the fair', there was a Flemish fair at that thing, 'And we'll give the KGB man the slip and we'll have a lovely time'. And so we all went out and the poor little blonde interpreter was extremely nervous, and I don't blame her, and we did give him the slip. We rushed into the fair and back and went round and then we looked round, said, 'Well, that's it'. And then we went on the dodgems for two hours while he told me the story of his life, which was quite interesting, and well out of the way of any overhearing things, and then we went and had a meal and finally they had to climb back under the wire fence and everything – we sort of helped them – into their digs and we went back to our hotel. And that was a very interesting… and I reckon I was the first English producer ever to direct a Russian crew, because it was closely followed up by somebody else doing a sport or something, but I was the first. [laughter] And then I came back and then I was one of the producers on *Monitor*, and *Monitor*, as I think everybody knows, was the first of the English… the talks, of the arts magazines on television, run by Huw Wheldon as editor and chief producer, and also presenter, and I was with Peter Newington as the other producer, and then there were all sorts of very famous figures: David Jones, Melvyn Bragg, Patrick Garland, Ken Russell, John Schlesinger, all of whom of course worked on *Monitor*, on and off.

And Richardson too. And Tynan, weren't they?

Tynan did *Tempo* for Thames, if you remember. He was the…he didn't, no, he didn't.

Come on to Monitor.

No.

But Richardson did, didn't he?

Tony Richardson?

Yes, Tony Richardson.

Well, he didn't last, if that… No, he certainly wasn't. He might have done a little bit at the beginning. I came on, it started in about February 1958, and I joined it in the August I think after that particular… so that it had just started, and I took over most of the studio direction and in the autumn we had a complete rethink, I remember, and we had a new set and a new… that moving image that *Monitor* had, that was my idea because I was mad about Naum Gabo and those sort of shapes are a bit, rather like Naum Gabo. And I think we got a new signature tune and the whole thing really sort of started in that autumn. And as a sort of throwaway, I actually chose the signature tune for *The Sky at Night*, which still exists some thirty years later, I notice.

What about, well what about Huw Wheldon? He was an important figure in the history of...

[break in recording – interviewee coughing]

Sadly we can't interview him.

No, alas. Huw Wheldon is another of the seminal figures in the BBC who I really revere actually, because I do think that they represented the BBC at its very best. There was Haley, there was Joanna, Huw. Well, there are others, but I mean the ones that I was connected with, so to speak. And Huw, as I think everyone knows, I mean Huw had very firm ideas of how he thought this programme should go. He certainly wasn't, I mean he always expressed them very forcibly, but equally he was prepared to go along with things that he might not actually have accepted if he thought that your commitment was strong enough. And I mean he didn't always agree with Peter Newington and he certainly didn't always agree with me, and I had a roughish passage. And I realise too, I was not… I was a frightfully tentative producer. I mean I was nervous. Peter Newington I remember once talking to me and saying, look, you must believe in yourself more, you're too tentative and you don't… And it was true. I mean I was nervous. I mean I was a good director and I didn't mind directing, but I hadn't done a lot of film, I'd done a little, so my beginnings of

my film career were a bit nervous too, I think. But if one really believed in something and you went in and told Huw that this is what you wanted to do, he would listen, he would then say, 'Hm', or 'Now, come on, convince me'. And then if he became convinced he would then let you go ahead.

[1:05:08]

I'll never forget going in and telling him about Marcel Duchamp, who Richard Hamilton the painter rung me up and said, 'Look, we must do something about Marcel, he's getting on and he's in Paris and he's just…' So I didn't know much about him either, but I hastily read up a few things and then I went in to Huw and said we want to do this programme about – Richard Hamilton and I – about Marcel Duchamp. 'Marcel who?' said Huw. So I explained who he was, I said this was a painter who stopped painting, who did the *Large Glass* called *A Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, who did ready-mades, ie, he took calendars and put a little red dot on, and that was an assisted ready-made, he had a urinal in a famous show which he called a ready-made. And Huw was, he said, 'Really N', as he called me. I said, 'Really Huw, he's wonderful'. So Huw said, 'Okay'. So Richard and I went over to Paris and set it all up and then Marcel was coming to stay with him. So we set it up in Richard Hamilton's house in north London, the interview, the main interview, and then of course we were going to do various other things. And it was going along and Richard was talking to him, and Marcel, looking as he always did, like an icon, was sitting there making the most extraordinary statements. Suddenly I felt a grip on my arm and I turned round and there was Huw, and he said, 'Who's that?' 'Marcel Duchamp'. And he said, 'But he's wonderful!' And I said, 'I told you', you know. I mean Huw obviously wanted to take the whole thing over and direct the whole thing, and he really fell in love with Marcel Duchamp, he said, 'I can imagine myself being Michelangelo, even Beethoven, I could never imagine myself being Marcel Duchamp'. And it would be difficult to imagine being Marcel Duchamp, actually. And so that was one of the things that I remember. And I always felt that probably, I mean Huw was totally unsentimental and I felt so strongly that I was a bit on a knife edge in *Monitor*. And then there was another programme I did, a film programme, about *The Devils* with John Whiting. John Whiting's play, *The Devils* had just been set up at The National, I think it was, or the Royal Shakespeare or wherever, at the Aldwych, and he'd based it on Aldous Huxley's book and it's about the – what's the word I want – but anyway, these nuns who became hysterical and there was the famous priest. Anyway, it's a well-known story and John Whiting did this marvellous play about it and I asked Huw whether I

couldn't take John back to Loudun where it was all set, because he'd had a block about the play, he said, and he said it wasn't till I went to Loudun and was there and saw the place that I suddenly was unblocked about this play. So I said can I take John back, and then we can… And Huw was very doubtful about the whole thing. Then eventually he agreed and two days before I got really roaring flu, but I thought well I can't say no now, so I got out of bed with roaring flu and went over to France where the flu disappeared and I had David Prosser as my cameraman, who as you know is a very precise cameraman, very good cameraman, but he wasn't what you might call very flexible. However, we went to Loudun and we set it all up and it was, it was a very curious place, a very tight little French provincial city and one could see with the citizens and everything, exactly how it might have gone. And there was one particular incident. When we arrived there was a little tiny, ferocious little black dog, with a face like a devil, who started barking at us. And I said to David, 'David, for Christ's sake, turn the camera on him and get him in very big close-up'. And David said, 'No' and he wouldn't. So I said, 'Well, we've got to get that dog, whatever else happens'. And so we then did the show, and I said, 'Well, what about that dog?' And so we went back to find the dog. In the meantime the dog had settled down, you see, and didn't really wish to attack us any more, and so his little ferocious face had become rather mild. So I had to torture that poor little dog until he really got ferocious again to get that, and that was a famous shot in that film which Grace said, 'That shot!' However, she didn't give me the credit for it of course, she gave the credit to Allan, who was furious when I told him that, the film editor, Allan Tyrer. But I'd shot it because I knew that that would be an absolutely, you know, a shot that would cause the whole of that film, because he was such an evil little dog – wasn't really of course. [1:09:49]

But that was my first film and Huw was a bit unhappy about it and he said, 'Why did you shoot so little film?' So I thought about that and I said, 'Well, I thought I'd shot what I needed'. And he said to Allan, 'Have you got enough film?' 'Yes' said Allan, 'I've got plenty of film'. But I was rather a mean filmmaker because, I don't know, I wasn't, I mean I'm not a natural filmmaker, I'm not a natural producer actually. Maybe I'm a natural producer, not a natural director, I don't think. And I always shot rather, well that was very good when I went into the Open University because we didn't have any money or much… we were allowed to shoot three to one in those days. But anyway, Huw was a bit unhappy about it, I think, and I was very unhappy about it because I thought that probably my end was nigh. And the next day, anyhow it did have quite an impact, that

little film, and the next day we went down to see Michael Rattan [ph] because he did a lot of work for us in those days, the artist, and Michael opened the door and said, 'My God Huw, that was a wonderful little film about…'. [laughter] And Huw's face… you know, what he was like, I mean his face registered a lot of emotions. And then he turned to me and he said, 'Well, I know N knows…' And Michael said, 'Oh Huw, you never had any taste anyway', you know. And that was alright, so my career in *Monitor* was at least reprieved and then I stayed until the end of *Monitor*. But I don't blame Huw at all, I mean he… and I know exactly what his reservations were and what my own reservations were. But I became rather more confident after that film and I made a film about Tinguely, which was also, was very, I think worked, you know. But on the whole I did most of the studio direction on *Monitor*. I did some films but mostly I was doing studio items and studio direction. And I loved it and when Jonathan Miller took over from Huw in '64, I suppose it was, and we went over to America to do a lot of things, he was determined to introduce this famous new style and the famous Susan Sontag, Jonathan interviewed on that huge sofa with the camera whizzing round with enormous close-ups of people's ears and things, caused an absolute outcry. I was rather pleased with it, actually, I thought it was quite interesting. But it did cause an outcry and nobody's ever forgiven me, actually, or for some of the films we did, because Jonathan would not do any noddies, he was not going to sit there nodding so that I could, you know, he wouldn't do it. So I had to devise other ways of getting over the editing situation of, you know, things in the room or whatever, whatever. Anyhow, it was a much more fluid style and it was the beginning, which is now absolutely normal and nobody thinks about it at all, but it did cause a lot of flak in those days, and I enjoyed very, very much working for that year with Jonathan. Quite, I mean the atmosphere was so different because whereas Huw knew exactly what he wanted and what he thought the programme should be, Jonathan had very little idea and he was very tentative and he used to have marvellous ideas and we'd go into a meeting and he would build up these ideas like candyfloss; they'd become bigger and bigger and more and more elaborate and we'd all get more and more excited, and then he'd suddenly say, oh no, it's a bore. And the whole of the candyfloss would disappear, *phhhhh*, and we all would then start again. But it was very exciting and as you know, when he first started, he still had a very bad stammer, which he's got over completely since, and we had, I mean it was agonising actually, those early days of Jonathan's at *Monitor*. And I know it wasn't considered a great success, but it had a sort of, it did have a kind of atmosphere and it was a much more tentative programme and people weren't… it never ought to have been

called *Monitor* really because it was so different, it should have been given another title and then it would have probably been alright. So that takes me to '65.

Yeah, and the end of Monitor.

End of *Monitor*.

And you?

And I went over to education. There'd been a tremendous battle in the BBC about education and Grace was 200 per cent against it, basically, although she'd been forced into producing an educational type output from Talks Department and there were certain producers working on it. But I wasn't, I mean I was still with *Monitor*. And then Richmond Postgate, who was some bigwig in the BBC, he won the battle and persuaded the Chairman to set up a separate department for education, Continuing, I think it was called Further Education, in those days, Further Education, and Don Grattan was the first head of it. And it was set up to do educational programmes, and it had a formula attached to it, to give people some skills over an area, I don't know, I can't remember what the formula was, but it did have a formula attached to it, to which we were supposed to work. And I went over to it because really I think it, I mean I think really that I am very interested in education and I believe that television, although it shouldn't be ghettoised in the way that perhaps it has become, educational television. I believe that it can be a tremendous force for extending the mind, I don't believe it's a very good teacher, I believe it's a marvellous motivator and inspirer and gives people access to areas where they perhaps never thought, and less and less can do that under the present system. But still, in those days it could and I went across to Further Education, which was then at Villiers House in Ealing. No it wasn't, it was in… it was in… Threshold.

Kensington? Threshold.

[1:15:50]
Yes, Threshold House on Shepherd's Bush Green.

On the Green, yes.

Yes, that's where it started.

Sorry, this was your idea to go there?

Yes. Oh yes, I decided to go there. I mean most people thought I was 'copping out', as they say. I didn't feel that at all, actually.

And what was your relationship with Grace like?

[laughter] Grace's comment to me was, 'Oh Nancy, you're so sensible!' The exact opposite of what my aunt said what I was like, which was not a term of approbation at all. But that was Grace's, she thought I was extremely mundane, I think, and she didn't really like women producers anyway very much, bless her heart. She loved Catherine Dove, Catherine Freeman as she subsequently became. And that was about the only person she did really like in the female line. I mean I think she was quite fond of me but she didn't think that I was any good and she was probably right, and I certainly wasn't what Edward Barnes, another producer in the BBC who subsequently became Head of Children's, he used to say, 'Those terrible grey suited young men that Grace has around her', which was Michael Peacock, Donald Baverstock, Antony Jay and all that lot, you know, he couldn't stand them and he used to…

Was it your, do you think it might have been your lack of university education?

No, I don't honestly think so. I mean it may have been. I don't analyse my situation very much and I felt that I'd learnt a very great deal of life, I mean from my jobs and that sort of thing, and in a way I, although I've always regretted my not having a university education actually, and I have a sort of slight chip on my shoulder which I polish when I feel that it's useful to polish it and when I feel that other people have benefited because of the 1944 Butler Act, like our dear ex-Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, who then doesn't allow anybody else to go. I couldn't go because we couldn't afford it, when my father died we didn't have any money and in those days, although you got a scholarship and my Latin teacher thought I would, she wanted me to read classics at university and I've just started learning ancient Greek actually, classical Greek, to make up for my lack of, no

classics education. But I don't really think it actually hampered me. They may have thought that, perhaps, but I don't think so somehow. I don't think it was that.

I wouldn't have thought Grace would be affected by that.

No, because she didn't have a university education either. No, she didn't, but she picked on people who did always, and I daresay it would have been nice if one had had a degree, but… it's too late now.

Sorry, you're now…

So now in Continuing Education, Further Education, which then became Continuing Education. And I did endless series of programmes about the arts, about architecture, about communication. Then we did a series on community action and we got chucked out of a DHSS office, I remember, by an enraged manager, and poor old Beryl Radley, who was head of the department at this time, was extremely shocked. She said, 'Nancy, how could you have got yourself into this sort of situation?' I was very considered, you see, and probably was a sort of pillar of respectability and of the establishment and I remember once going to personnel in the head of a delegation because we thought we didn't get enough money or something, something was wrong, and that was Michael… can't remember his name, Michael Kitchen Smith [ph], and I went in heading the delegation and he took one look and he said, 'Nancy, what are you doing?' I was always, you know, he'd always thought that I, well I probably was, a pillar of respectability, but I mean all the same I used to rebel occasionally. And Bella was rather upset by this little… because we were chucked out and we had that wonderful cameraman who was a huge man who wore a kilt, what was his name?

Yes. He died of cancer.

Yes, poor darling, he did. And he was a very big strong man, you see, and they tried to take his camera away, you know, and he just…

[1:20:01]
Wasn't it Wolf, something Wolf?

Yes, that's right, yes. And, you know, he just sort of, meantime while he was swearing at us and having this great row, the recordist went on with the recording, so we got a very good… and we were able to send, actually send that tape to the Home Office who said that we'd behaved so badly, and they had to admit that the [laughter] manager behaved a great deal worse and so we were able to do the film and even include that sequence. Because there's an argument as to whether the waiting room of a DHSS's office is public space or private space, and he said it was and I don't think it is, I think it's public space. And they were leafleting the little organisation called… I've forgotten what it was called now, but it was to do with trade union rights, and they were leafleting the area and we went in and we just followed them in, which I didn't think we did more than that. So that was a very interesting series. We did two programmes up in Liverpool about a community school and about a newspaper called *The Tuebrook Bugle*, which was a community newspaper started by a marvellous character called Chrissie Maher, who has now become head of the Plain English unit and is always appearing nowadays – in '91 and before that – trying to get rid of gobbledegook, as she calls it. And she was always very severe on me, she said, 'Oh Nancy, you use such long words, what do they mean?' And I said, 'I don't Chrissie'. Chrissie had had even less education than I had, poor darling, but she's done really well and I do feel that she's… but we sort of set her on the road really, because we filmed, she set up that newspaper because she felt that the situation was so bad in Liverpool, because you know, she'd been brought up in a little terraced house and she moved, when she married she moved next door to her mum, who was a ferocious character, who lived next door and kept an eye on her daughter and had four children and still lived in exactly the same conditions with the lavatory at the bottom of the courtyard and everything. And she felt that that was simply not good enough and she was right. And so that's where… So I did that series, film, and then somebody suggested that I should go up and take over the humanities section of the BBC at the Open University and they said would you like to do it. Didn't seem to be having a board or anything, and I said yes I would. And I remember I was a bit nervous, no degree and all that, and I remember meeting Huw somewhere and saying that. He said, 'Oh N, that's wonderful, of course you must do it. Can I help you?' And I said, 'No, no, I think it's, it would have been a bit easier if I wanted it', and he said, 'Yes, yes'. I decided I would, 'Of course you must do it, it's a wonderful institution'.

Huw was Managing Director, Television?

He was MD Television, yes. And he was thrilled actually because he found the Open University the most – and it was, I mean the Open University was one of the great institutions of the century really in education, after the '44 Butler Act. And at that time I was there, not quite at the beginning, but about a couple of years in.

You were at Alexandra Palace then?

I then went up to Alexandra Palace from Villiers House in Ealing, yes. And I was, I went there in '72 so I was eight years. I retired in '78, on my sixtieth birthday, much to the fury, I'm glad to tell you, of the Open University, who said we cannot possibly get rid of this woman, she must stay. And the BBC said, no. So they appointed a man, upgraded the post, etc. Anyway, I was there and then I went back part-time for two years as Information Officer, part-time. Which was very nice because it sort of, you know, eased me into retirement in a way that perhaps… but I was there for…

Is this AP or Milton Keynes by now?

I never went to Milton Keynes, they moved to Milton Keynes in '80 and that's when I left them and they wanted a fulltime Information Officer and all that. So it worked wonderfully really and I adored my time at the Open University. I found it absolutely fascinating, valuable, everything. And they gave me an honorary degree.

So you have an academic degree now, despite all you've been telling us. [laughter]

The chap who – Arnold Kettle, the Professor of Literature up there, the most wonderful, lovely man – he did my address, you see, and it was very funny because he sort of had visions of me in my retirement sitting with my parrot on my shoulder. Mind you, I wouldn't have my parrot on my shoulder if you paid me because he bites my ear! But then he said at the end, 'Nancy was always so worried that she didn't have a degree and was always worried about her grasp of things and so we thought well we'd better give her one. So that was the thing. So it was marvellous and it was the most moving and wonderful moment almost of anything I've ever done. It caused me enormous pleasure.

Lovely.
Got a gown. [laughter]

[laughter]

And since then?

That was, yes, that was '78 and then these two years as Information Officer. Since then I took a course in teaching English because I thought I'd better have something to do, and then – which I think we'll do after lunch – I became an independent producer.

Which is where you are now?

Which I still am, yes.

We're now going to have a commercial break.

We'll now have a commercial break.

[break in recording]

[1:25:54]
We've had our commercial break.

Well, when I finally retired, I did a bit of teaching of English at a community language centre, and then my ex-assistant on *Monitor*, a woman called Sally Harvey, was working for the Professor of Design Education at the Royal College of Art, and I used to go and see her and have a chat and things and I met all the people there, and they were explaining their sort of philosophy of design, which was it wasn't one of these really new sort of things that everybody, you know, they made this great mystery out of it and the designers who are a great elite, who had these wonderful theories. And they believed that everybody had a design capacity and designed automatically, I mean whatever they wore, whatever their house was like, and he was all part of design, but they really needed insights into how design worked in order to be able to do anything to influence what went on about them

and the environment and all that sort of thing, and I thought it was rather interesting, refreshing. So I suggested to them that we put up an idea to Channel 4, which was just starting, and asked them, Channel 4, to make commitment to design rather than just doing the occasional programme about a designer, to make a commitment to the design philosophy, so to speak. So we set up a committee and we worked out a concept and not at that time a very detailed one, but just what we would like to do. And the professor, I mean she was a professor at the Open University and she'd become one of Jeremy Isaac's commissioning editors, Naomi McIntosh and then Naomi Sargant, she changed her name when her husband became ennobled and Naomi thought it was better not to have a Lady McIntosh about the place. And she was the commissioning editor for education. So we put up this idea to her and of course, I mean I didn't actually write to her and say, look, but my name was on the document and I'd worked with her a bit at university and obviously she felt well, might be worth talking to them. So we were summoned to Channel 4 and there was Michael Kustow, the commissioning editor for arts, and Naomi herself, and we had a long talk to them and they liked the idea and they said look, we'd like to commission you to do a series. And they looked at me and said would you go ahead, and I thought 'hm', I was still freelance and I didn't fancy myself as a company and all that, what that entailed and I went to a colleague of mine who was also in Channel 4 in those days, who'd been at the Open University, called Carol Haslam, and I said to Carol, what am I going to do, we've got this offer of a commission and they want a proper proposal, budgeting and all that, what do I do? And she said well, go and see Charles Mapleston at Malachite, because he's just directed a programme, the first fully commissioned commission at Channel 4, about the National Jazz Youth Orchestra in Turkey, and he's got a little company and he's interested in your sort of thing, so go and see him. And so I then had a rendezvous with Charles, who used to be at the BBC, started as a sound recordist and sound editor and then went on and became a dubbing assistant and then was also, did one of these attachments as a director in *Yesterday's Witness*.

[end of side]

[00:00]

…Thomas, side three. Right, carry on.

Charles then, after he'd become a… he'd done this work for *Yesterday's Witness* and then he was told that his attachment was at an end, he'd have to go back to being a dubbing assistant, so he resigned and set himself up as a small independent company doing mostly promotion and commercials and that kind of thing. And so we met and got on very well and I told him what had happened and he was frightfully keen. So between us we then got our proposal together, budgeting and all that, and put it up to Naomi, where it was accepted and we called it *Design Matters* and we did ten in the first year, this was almost before it had started, and thereafter the series lasted for nearly five years. We had, they re-commissioned us every year, that is to say they repeated five and they re-commissioned five new ones, and then they repeated those five and re-commissioned five new ones. So we've done something like twenty-three *Design Matters*, all in all. And the last series we called *Cities with a Future*, came under the sort of *Design Matters* banner but it was called *Cities with a Future?* We rather unwisely had all our titles with question marks, which meant that we were constantly having to think of snappy titles which had a question mark, but *Cities with a Future?*, and we looked at Belfast, Glasgow, Southampton and Newcastle, all of whom were ports, and they were tackling their problems in very different ways. And we worked with Ken Baines who'd resigned from the Royal College when Stevens took over because he didn't like their policy, and became himself a freelance design consultant. And I think the series was surprisingly successful, considering it was a minority series to some extent. We sometimes got over a million, very late at night sometimes, because first of all they put us out at six thirty, then they put us out at eight, which wasn't a very good time, and then they put us out at about half past ten, eleven, and that was a good time. Sometimes of course it was pushed till midnight and we still got a very considerable audience. And we actually beat Julian Bream with his music series which went out on a Sunday mid evening, we got double the amount of audience, so I think it met a need and a lot of people liked it and talked about it and it had a very, I mean we had a very sort of eclectic approach to design, we took anything, I mean we looked at the environment, we looked at sort of professional design, we looked at things like transport and we looked at cookers, we looked at a whole lot of things. And I think it probably would have gone on because there were all sorts of other ideas in the pipeline, but Naomi left when Jeremy left and there was a sort of change of regime of course, and that sort of programme didn't… In fact Naomi's successor announced that he wasn't really interested in visual any more because they'd done enough about that and he was going to concentrate on literature, which was a slightly depressing outlook for us to some extent. I

think he's behaving now, he'll just move from that. So that was what we did mostly, but then a colleague of mine in the Open University came to me because she had an idea for what they call a short course, which was nothing to do with the degree programme, but they do a series of what they call enrichment programmes and they do them in the sort of gaps between terms and because it was a sort of… it was how you look at pictures and what you should, you know, as an ordinary person going to a gallery how you might get the best out of going, you know. And of course as it happened at the Open University, the art - not the humanities faculty as a whole – but the arts section of the humanities faculty were all Marxist to a man and they believed in the Marxist interpretation of art, and that was nothing to do with ordinary people or anything like that, and so they didn't much care for this series and they said they weren't going to give it any television and they didn't really want to be seen dead with it, so to speak. So the, what do they call them, they're called the course team leader, came to me and said, 'Look, what can I do?' And I said, 'Well, let's go to Naomi, she after all knows… see if we can persuade her to do a series with it'. I mean it may be slightly more general, but then you can always add your written stuff, you know, from a general programme, and Naomi was thrilled and it was the first time of course the Open University had worked outside the BBC. And my colleagues, because I'd been in charge of them after all for eight years, were very annoyed with me.

[05:04]
Sorry, Naomi was still the…

Naomi Sargant was still with Channel 4 then, it was before the changeover. And so we did these six programmes called *Looking into Paintings* and they were fairly general programmes and then the little short course was added to that and various things and they were highly successful programmes and they still now sell, the Open University's taken over the copyright for the tapes, and they sell as part of the course as a special sort of offer. So that was very nice because that was something a little different and more near what I was used to doing. And we had one or two other one-offs; we did a programme about the restoration of Charleston, which was the farmhouse where the Bloomsbury Group, artistic side of the Bloomsbury Group, so to speak, lived and worked. And we happened to meet one of them and they were just about to restore Charleston, so we followed the restoration of that, did a programme about that. And we did a little programme about an artist called Dennis Creffield, who had been commissioned to draw

all of the Anglican cathedrals in England, and we put it up originally to Channel 4 and they'd said no, no, and finally we had a little one-off at Anglia Television with the three East Anglia cathedrals: Ely, Peterborough and Norwich. And that went out last year and Charles has got another little programme about photography for Anglia too, which he's doing at the moment. But since *Design Matters* sort of petered out and we had this new commissioning editor at Channel 4 and a new commissioning editor, arts and everything, life has been rather difficult. I mean it's not easy to get commissions, we've put in hundreds actually, we've put in proposals all over the place. I've got one in with Yorkshire Television which hasn't actually been turned down, it hasn't been accepted either, but… We're putting one or two in to the new commissioning editor, arts and we just persevere, that's the only thing you can do actually.

And your role is producer/executive producer?

Yes. I'm really, Charles, as he does all the sort of budgeting and he does all the uncomfortable bits, dear Charles, and he's wonderful, I mean he's a computer buff as well so he has all his accounts on computers and he's very well organised and I work from my own flat and also have a word processor, which I mastered the first one but now he's made me change so it can be compatible with his and I'm still floundering with that. But I've no doubt it'll be alright in the end. So I do a lot of draft proposals and suggestions, write a lot of letters, and sort of generally I work very closely with Charles, I'm not a director, I'm not part of Malachite, I mean I call myself an independent freelance. But I don't work with anybody else and never would, I don't think, because I get on very well with Charles and we get on very well and it's a very… I enjoy it, you know, it's a very satisfactory sort of partnership. But the interesting thing was, when I first started, the realisation, and I'm sure all independents feel this, of how cushioned one was at the BBC, how wonderful their support services are: their library, their news information, their copyright, their… everything that you have to worry about now, or I have to worry about and Charles worries about, particularly the sort of library services, which are totally unique.

It's all there on a plate.

All there on a plate. And of course, you know, and I found myself actually typing all the Ps as Bs [Programmes as Broadcast], very good for me, because I had no idea what I used

to put my poor old assistants through. But I do them myself, you know, and it's very good discipline, I have to say.

Yes. What do you say for the present situation in general, I don't mean your own work, or even your own area, which is mainly the arts, whatever that might mean, you know, I mean in general, British television in general as a viewer, as a producer, as somebody who's worked in it for so long.

[09:22]
I mean I think it is still wonderful, I mean I still find on evening after evening that I want to see several programmes, most of which clash, so I have to record them and I then find it very difficult to find time to watch them. But I think still the standard and the variety is amazingly high. I find, I mean I watch mostly, I suppose, BBC2 and Channel 4, but of course there's a lot of stuff that I watch on the others as well, I mean I watch mostly current affairs, I mean I don't suppose that anybody who's been in the media is a very typical sort of viewer and I'm selective in my… But there is an awful lot that I quite really want to watch, partly professionally, partly out of just sheer interest. And of course there's been a sudden, tremendous increase in the amount of opera and I'm mad about opera and I find opera on television great, with the subtitles and everything. I mean I learn things that I have no idea about when I – I mean I'll always go to the opera, but after all, they bellow away and even if it's in English you don't hear anything and you've really not much idea of what they're saying, you may have an idea of the plot. But the recent two cycles of *The Ring* have been absolutely sensational, I thought. I'm a terrific Wagner fan, so I've had a ball really and I still think that there's sufficient of the old guard left and the old sort of standards and values for there to be a lot of very good stuff. My anxiety is that there is a constant pressure on producers to try and go for a very big audience when potentially there isn't probably a very big audience there and they ought to realise that. They've got a new series on Channel 4 called *Without Walls* and that is their sort of arts flagship, but it's very 'commercial', in inverted commas. You know, they do a lot about money and what everything is worth, and I just think that's a pity. I mean I think you can interest people if you're sufficiently committed and interested yourself, if you don't, as Huw Wheldon always used to say, you know, don't name drop, don't make assumptions because you know it, that everybody will know it and you needn't be condescending because it's not a crime not to know what it is. What is pathetic is if people made no

attempt to learn or no attempt even to grapple with something that is difficult. I mean people don't, they think oh no, I'm not going to listen to modern music. I mean there's a very interesting correspondence in *The Times* at the moment about Radio 3, because some fearful woman wrote and said, you know, that Radio 3 was just a critics' and a musicologists' playground and they talked to themselves and they didn't make any attempt to communicate and therefore one of these classical music stations that they have in America where you just, you know, where music becomes a sort of muzak even if it's Beethoven, and there's no attempt to put in any sort of context or anything, I think is a great pity. Okay, have it as well if you wish, but don't try and pretend that people cannot extend themselves if helped to do so. And of course it's somewhat hard work, I mean that is something that people will not accept, that looking at art, reading books, listening to music, is quite hard work if you wish to extend yourself beyond the banal, if you like, or just the well-known. It's a pity. And I think television has that… there is a tendency that I notice to try and pretend that everything is accessible and available without bothering even to, you know, to attend. And then the other thing of course is that the new technologies of zapping and all that, which has had a disastrous effect in America. I stay with friends in America, in Los Angeles, now they have twenty-four stations I think, and he's a filmmaker and a very erudite, intelligent man, but does he stay with anything with his little zapper? He does not, and we always finish up when I'm staying with him, looking at basketball. Now I find basketball a singularly unrewarding viewing experience. But no, no, they get very excited about it and okay, but there's a lot of stuff that is worth watching in America but people don't bother, because they can't be bothered.

The big problems we're all talking about aren't we, for example, obviously, if the next ITV franchises go to the highest bidder, secondly if the BBC loses its licence fee system. In any case we'll probably have more sponsorship. I mean these are the kind of things which might very well affect the kind of programmes that you've been making all your career.

[14:44]
Oh, I don't think there's any doubt about it. I think that it's simply bound to, because the pressures will be to maximise the audience in order… I mean I think the BBC probably won't lose its licence in the next… at any rate in '96 when the next debate comes up, I think it probably won't, but it'll be constantly eroded and that's just as dangerous really, because it'll have more and more of a struggle keeping up. On the other hand, I mean

with recessions and things, advertising revenue fall, also that you're in a slightly more advantageous position than you might be otherwise. I think that at the moment, I think people in this country, because they've been used to a certain sort of philosophy of the media, I don't think they're sort of flocking to pick up Sky now that there's no, any BSB, now that's gone to the wall. I don't think they are. I think that some people obviously always will, because it'll be the sort of smart thing to do and they like to have it, but I don't think they watch it much. And I still think that the four channels that we have give a most amazing range of programmes and very different approaches, I mean you can get any kind of approach that you want on them and I think people realise that. So I think the British public are much more sensible than people perhaps give them credit for. And okay, they like to be entertained, amused and relaxed and perhaps they don't always make an effort, I mean the arts have always been a minority subject and always will be, but at least minorities are majorities in terms of other ways of purveying the arts. I mean they're certainly majorities if you think of concert halls or theatres, even films. I mean the majority audience for the arts watches television and a lot of them get a lot out of it. I think that it is, I'm just hoping that it'll all come back. Somebody told me the other day in publishing that the age of the autodidact was over, but I don't actually believe that. I think that there's been a swing perhaps of the pendulum but I think it'll come back, I think people do realise that there are other things in life than making money and the commercialisation of everything and I think that there's a slight change already of attitudes. And I'm just optimistic.

What about the position of women in television? Have you yourself, for example, felt any prejudice against yourself?

No. I mean I personally have never felt any prejudice whatsoever and I never, I mean I never sort of thought that there might be, so I suppose in a way my… I mean I just assumed that I was a television producer or television production assistant. I did once hear, but this is a long time ago, when I first started with Paul Johnstone who was my first mentor, and I joined him, as I said earlier, in 1955 when he was producing *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* and when he was also doing *Buried Treasure* and he wanted some… he wanted a sort of rough cut made of some archive film or something and he asked me if I'd do it, so I said yes. Well apparently, the first – I can't even remember his name, fortunately – but the first editor that he approached said he had no intention of working

with a woman, specially one who hadn't had much experience. I didn't know this, you see.
Then?

Then, yes. And I said… and apparently he said no, he wasn't going to do it. And Paul was somewhat taken aback, you see, and then I was put on to Robertson – what was his Christian name?

Leslie. Leslie Robertson.

Leslie Robertson. And I worked very happily with him and he reported to Paul, which was very nice of him, that I had an absolute instinct for this kind of film. Well, it wasn't, it… well it was, it was a sort of montage that I'd done. And he said it's amazing, she sort of has a feeling for these things and I was very pleased to work with her. But all this, I mean Paul sensibly didn't tell me this, but I was not aware of it and I've never been aware of it, actually. I've never been aware of prejudice and I had, you know, endless cameramen who had reputations of being… But I don't cry easily and I was [laughter] certainly not going to cry if I was crossed or worried or anything, you know, I'm a fighter by temperament so that if anybody looked as if they were going to be nasty, I started first, you see. But I've never felt, I was never actually put to this, I was never made to feel that I wanted to cry, actually.

No, Len Front [?] was notorious actually, he was anti-woman.

[19:36]
Well, I mean it was amazing really, it was only years afterwards… actually I got on very well with Len later…

Later, yes.

…because he edited for me for various things and we got on extremely well. He'd obviously accepted that I could do it and wasn't going to be difficult. I mean I think it's largely a matter of, I mean I can say quite truthfully that I was endlessly grateful for the camera people who worked with me, the editors, the people in the studio, you know, the

TOMs, the, everybody. I was endlessly grateful for them and they were always co-operative, you know. They'd say look, don't do that, or you can't do that. And sometimes I'd say, but I'd like to, can't you help them to do it, because I'm sure we can do it, etc, etc. Because there was one darling man who had a very badly cleft palate, Tommy Holmes, he used to say, 'You can't do it, you can't do it Nancy', and I'd say, 'Yes you can, Tommy, you can help me to do it'. And Tommy of course always did. And they managed to do it always, you know, there's nothing like the BBC, that side of the BBC, the so-called technical side, because it's not only that, I mean they were partners in the whole business. But they were quite wonderful and, you know, their standards were very high and they were… I mean if you didn't pretend to know it all, you know, they would help you out with anything, you know, bail you out of any situation that you got yourself into [laughter], which one frequently did, getting my cables knitted on the floor. And they just used to say, 'Ah, that's a nice knitting pattern you've got there', he'd say. I'd say, 'Oh, how do I unknit it all?' 'Well, if you plug it in there' or whatever, you know. I mean I loved my time in the BBC, I had the most wonderful, thirty-three years I was there, and I can't think of any time that I was unhappy or that I felt discriminated against or anything. I had a lot of, I mean I had a lot of women bosses actually. I had Joanna Spicer, I had Grace Wyndham Goldie, there was Beryl Radley in Continuing Education after Don Grattan. And the Open University was rather a male enclave, but even so, I mean I didn't feel I was discriminated against. I was very annoyed when I heard they'd re-graded the post after I'd left, but… and I said so in no uncertain terms. [laughter] But perhaps they would have done it anyway, perhaps.

Are there any real disappointments in your professional life? You sound as though there probably weren't any at all.

No, none. Absolutely none. I consider myself, I mean I did have, one of the things I have… I mean I have various philosophies that I've sort of developed over the years and for people coming into the profession, first of all, you've got to have a certain instinct for where your luck lies and push it, because life is full of breaks that a lot of people don't recognise and then they complain because they haven't had any breaks, but if you recognise that there's a potential break, a potential… and you push your luck, then that's, you know, and that's what I tell all my godchildren, of which I have many, I tell them, look, life isn't, I mean you have a lot of boring moments in your life, everybody does, but

you have to be aware of opportunities and then push them. And a lot of people aren't. That's one of my philosophies. Now, what was the other one? I may have to ask you to stop while I think about it, but, disappointments you were talking about.

Well, the other thing is there's so much luck in a way – that's not right, that sounds a silly thing…

It is luck.

Yeah, but I mean okay, you owe a lot to the fact that by chance or genius or whatever, you, after the advertisement in The Times *which got you the job in Broadcasting House.*

Yes.

And from then on you…

That is known as pushing your luck, isn't it?

Yes, but…

The other thing I have never had, for whatever reason, I have never had any expectations. I mean I was never very well educated and therefore I've never sort of expected to do anything extraordinary and I haven't really done anything extraordinary, but I've had a very happy and fulfilled life, and therefore, anything that happened to me seemed to me to be a bonus.

Talking on that actually, when you left Clark to go to the Beeb, did you meet up with him again at the Beeb when he was doing Civilisation*?*

No. I mean by which time I'd moved to Education and so there was no question – yes, I went to see him and I talked to him about it all and he said, 'Why aren't you working with me?' and I said, 'Well, I'm in another department now and you know what the BBC's like, it's very departmentalised'. And he just… and I used to see him of course, and I used to write to him and he remained a great friend and… as sort of most of my bosses did, you

know, I used to write to them, keep in touch and see them and they were always very… It was a great sort of support, they always were, you know. I was lucky, as I say, I've been very lucky.

[25:02]
Thank you. Thank you very much. That's super.

It's true. It's absolutely, it's true.

Lovely, thank you.

[end of recording]

Queries

p.3 Mrs Hoster – spelling? Employment agency?
p.3 [incomp] talking about meeting Kenneth Clark, going into his office
p.12/13 Benjie x 2 – spelling? On BBC Board of Management
p.18 [incomp] describing cookery section of Elizabeth transmission
p.21 TOM? Job title abbreviation? Technical Operations Manager?
p.21 Siefky? Remark by interviewer – name?
p.21/p.23 James McClure – spelling? Colleague of NT at BBC in 1950s
p.28 Michael Rattan – spelling? Artist, did work on *Monitor*
p.32 Michael Kitchen Smith – spelling? In BBC Personnel dept
p.43 Len Front?