Interviewed by Stephen Peet and John Taylor

8th October 1987

SIDE 1, TAPE 1

SP/JT: To start right back at the beginning where were you born and when.

RB: I was born on December 5th 1904 in London, Stanford Hill.

SP/JT: What was your family background.

RB: My father worked all his life in an insurance company in the Strand and my mother was one of 12 children and she was a very good woman, a very good housewife and in those days the housewife was the housewife and there was no question of their doing anything else. My father was a very liberal man, he voted liberal all his life and was a very kindly and gentle sort of chap. And so eventually I was produced in 1904 and my sister was produced two years later in 1906. She's still alive and so apparently am I.

SP/JT: Did you have the normal kind of schooling.

RB: The usual sort of nursery school business, but my main education was at Tottenham Grammar School until war broke out in 1914, my father was called up into the army and stationed at Sandwich in Kent. And so he moved the family down, until the end of the war we lived in Broadstairs where I went to a local school.

SP/JT: I think it was while you were at Broadstairs that saw the beginnings of your interest in films.

RB: Absolutely. There was one cinema at Broadstairs and I don't think I'd been to see a film before but I was attracted to that cinema and was lucky enough to become very friendly with the projectionist and he allowed me to go up into the projectionist room and assist in rewinding his films and this developed into a situation that at matinees in the afternoon the projectionist in between reel changes used to like to sneak into the balcony with his girl friend and I looked after the machines and he came back when it was a reel change and so on and I must say i somewhat misbehaved myself there because when I was rewinding the films, I used to sneak out a couple of frames, let us say a close up of Mary Pickford or Douglas Fairbanks, rejoin the film without telling the projectionist and then I used to sell these frames to my school chums at a penny a piece. Anyway the whole of experience of cinema during the war turned me into an enthusiastic film buff. And it was really a great experience because all the films at that time seemed to get shown at this cinema, all the Fatty Arbuckle comedies, the Mack Sennett comedies, the Fairbanks and Mary Pickford and Mary Miles Minter and all the rest, and W. S. Hart and all the film stars of the time, so that was my introduction and education into films and became my life interest subsequently. After the war we moved back to London.

SP/JT: Can I ask you about that projector, 1916, was that an electrically run projector, you didn't have a hand crank in those days.

RB: No it didn't have a handcrank.

SP/JT: From your school day introduction to films it was quite a time before you became connected with films, did you go from school straight into some kind of job.

RB: Yes but first of all I was sent to Pitman's College in Wood Green to learn shorthand and typing and then my father was rather anxious to get me into the same line of business as himself which was the insurance business and I applied for a job with an insurance company, a different one from his, and much to my surprise I got the job. It was a sort of filing clerk's job, pretty humble, but it least it was regular employment and I stayed there for many years until my interest in films had developed considerably and eventually this was known by a lot of left wing people with whom I was associated with and they came to me and asked if I would be willing to leave my job at the insurance company and set up a Workers Film Society, this I think was because the London Film Society which had been created largely by people like Ivor Montague and Adrian Brunel and others had been extremely successful in showing films, particularly the new Soviet films but it was a restricted audience in terms of class, people who could never be seen dead in an ordinary cinema were the main members of this film society and it was felt by these friends of mine that it was about time that some means was found of showing these Soviet films to ordinary working people to whom, afterall, they would have the most appeal.

And so after a little while I managed to, I set up a small distribution company and acquired the films and established the London Workers Film Society which held its first performance at a Co-op hall because we couldn't get permission from what was then the London Country Council to show films which hadn't been approved by the Censor.

SP/JT: Were they 35mm or 16mm.

RB: 35mm only at that time but eventually we managed to get permission and we took over one Sunday every month the Scala Cinema in Charlotte St.

SP/JT: What date would that be.

RB: 1929. That was my first meeting with John Grierson.

SP/JT: You moved out of quite a good moderately well paid job, did you do it fo the importance or interest of it and take a considerable drop in salary or did you get paid very well.

RB: I took it primarily because that was what I wanted to do and I was glad to get the opportunity to get into something to do with films, particularly progressive films. As far as money goes, I wasn't paid very much but I wasn't paid very much at the insurance company. I don't think there was a lot of difference in that respect, anyway there was enough to live on. Anyway we took over the Scala Cinema and at that time we'd heard about a new Soviet film called Turksib and John Grierson had heard about this film and we decided we wanted to show this film but it only had Russian titles, so Grierson decided he would like to meet the director of the film who in any case was coming to London, and between them, largely due to Grierson's energy, we got all the subtitles of the film translated into English and shot in English. And we presented this film and it was a fantastic success, the Scala Cinema was absolutely full and the London Workers Film Society was really on it's way. We had hundreds and hundreds membership flocking to join and as a result of the

success of the London Workers Film Society we received enquiries about it from all over the country and a whole number of workers film societies were set up in the provinces, in Glasgow, Manchester, Nottingham, Cardiff. So we had a federation of workers film societies which met regularly and imported all films necessary. I went to Berlin where there was a left wing progressive distribution company which acquired a lot of Soviet films and let us have them and also they were making some progressive films themselves in Germany and we acquired those films. We were sufficiently intelligent enough to make sure that we had a wide variety of films and at every performance i would go down, the day before, to a certain small distributor in Wardour St, and pick up one of the Charlie Chaplin comedies, and I think it might also have been Laurel and Hardy, I'm not sure. So we had a good variety in the programme. Then we decided it was about time we made some films ourselves and we made a number of what were called workers topical news and copies of at least two of those films are in the British film Institute.

SP/JT: I believe they say made by Ralph Bond, is that you made them yourself.

RB: No what it says is edited by Ralph Bond. What we did was find a number of members who had either personally or access to movie cameras and things like the hunger marches and unemployed marches, we'd ask them in the different towns through which the workers came to shoot 100 ft of film and send them down. Then I was responsible for editing them in the usual way.

SP/JT: These were 35mm silent, where they.

RB: 35mm and silent. Of course they were tremendously important because they were the only record made of these great events and that boosted us up quite a lot. Unfortunately after about a couple of years, sound films where now the thing and we couldn't get sound films from the Soviet Union or the sort of films we wanted from Germany or else where. So the supply ran rather short and eventually because of this lack of supply of suitable films, the film society movement virtually folded up.

SP/JT: There were two films around that time called Glimpses of Modern Russia and 1931, were you responsible for them.

RB: Yes I was responsible for both of them. Glimpses of Modern Russia there's still a copy at the BFI. We had lots of extracts, we had lots of extracts of different types of Russian films and I edited them into a comprehensive outline of what was going on in the Soviety union at that time, glimpses of industry, agriculture and things like that. 1931 which unfortunately got destroyed during the war, I very much regret that, that was a film we made of, there was a campaign on by the left wing in England at the time for a workers charter and we wanted to illustrate that what it meant in terms of policy for the working people to fight back against the government and against their employers and so we shot a lot of material which I again assembled together. We showed that and it was an enormous success. And it's that I think which lead John Grierson when the film society was fading, lead John Grierson to ask me if I'd like to join his EMB and then GPO film units.

SP/JT: Just before we get onto that part of your life, I believe in addition to everything else you were also writing under a pen name, can you tell us about this.

RB: I was film critic for the Daily Worker, I wrote under the pen name

of Arthur West.

SP/JT: How long was this for.

RB: I think a couple of years. Later on there was, when Kino had been established, a magazine put out all over the country to encourage people all over the country to start forming not just film societies but making left wing films. I made a lot of articles on that which apparently very helpful. And much later than that I was the film critic of a magazine called New Britain because Grierson urged all of us to write, to write to write, so some members of the unit were critics for the Spectator, others for the New Statesman, and I got New Britain, and for many years I wrote the film page for that paper, I did a lot of writing.

SP/JT: One more question before Grierson about the Film and Photo League or was that later.

RB: That was later, more or less after the decline of the Workers Film Society there was the Workers Film and Photo League, I had nothing to do with that, there was another story about that altogether. As you probably know they made a lot of films and they all suddenly disappeared and they were later discovered in the garden of the chap who ran the show but I had no connection with it. Because by that time I was working for John Grierson as production manager and i didn't have much spare time.

SP/JT: To get back to the Grierson period of your life, you said you met him because of these Workers Film Society things and you went to work for him, what was your first job and what was it.

RB: I think John will remember better than me probably, it was at that time before they went to Blackheath, wasn't there an office in Oxfodd St.

SP/JT: That's right

RB: I think I worked there as a sort of dogs body and when Grierson was commissioned by the BBC to make a film about the BBC that was the first feature length documentary which had been made by Grierson's unit and he asked me to be the production manager on it.

SP/JT: Was that some time in th early 30s.

RB: About that.

SP/JT: BBC the voice of Britain.

RB: Stuart Legg was the director, that was a very fine experience indeed and on the strength of that I was offered the job of studio mananger at the Blackheath Studios.

SP/JT: What were they, do they still exist.

RB: It was a girl's school, it had been a girl's school and it was vacant and empty and it was quite suitable for the sort of film studio a documentary unit wanted, ample space for cutting room and editing rooms, studio facilities and so on. And there we all were. I was installed as studio manager and money seemed to be very short because I had no where to sit and I thought it was rather ridiculous for a studio manager to have to stand around all day and I put a lot of pressure on Grierson and his accountant and eventually I was rewarded with a stool out of the petty cash.

SP/JT: Who were the other members of the staff.

RB: There was Edgar Anstey, Basil Wright, Stuart Legg, Jimmy Davidson who was the chief cameraman, two other cameramen were Jonna Jones and Chick Fowl, and John was there, John Taylor, and Arthur Elton, it was the most exhilarating assembly of people.

SP/JT: And Cavalcanti arrived about that time.

RB: Yes Cavalcanti came over to teach us how to use sound, this was something we hadn't been able to do before. And we all worked together as a team, everybody did something or other or contributed something or other and we all used to assemble regularly at the end of the day in the local pub or sometimes in the Highlander in Soho Sq when we were up in London and it was a marvellous cooperative effort. And then as you know the documentary movement expanded, it was enormously successful and various members of the GPO unit went and set up other documentary film units.

SP/JT: While you were at Blackheath Studios did you get into production work.

RB: I was gradually exalted up the the role of being a director and the first film I made as a director and writer was called simple magnetism and electricity, a subject of which I knew absolutely nothing but I was determined as this was my first chance of directing i had to do a good job. So there was an evening course going on at a technical college in Kentish Town, I was living near there, so I did a crash course in magnetism and electricity, so at least I knew something about it. Anyway, the film turned out alright. I remember we showed it to a civil servant as usual, Grierson had to show it to leading civil servants and I was there and they ran this film and the civil servants started muttering something about the artistic quality of the film and so Grierson turned on him and said you're job is to look after the money, I'll deal with the art.

SP/JT: Was this film for the general public.

RB: No it was educational purposes, younger people.

SP/JT: It had the GPO money behind it but it wasn't just for the post office, it was for everybody.

RB: Yes. It wasn't for public distribution, cinema showing.

SP/JT: Did you get a better film to make next time.

RB: Yes. On the strength of that I made films largely outside, I made one more for the GPO but then I made films subsequently outside the GPO because John Grierson had established a unit called Film Centre, himself, Arthur Elton and Basil Wright.

SP/JT: This was still before the war.

RB: Yes. The idea before that was to establish more and more companies, public bodies to utilise film as a medium for propaganda and Grierson asked me to make a film for the Workers Travel Association which was an organisation set up to make available some of these wonderful overseas holidays, not just very wealthy people, but ordinary people at reasonable

prices, and the first one I made for Film Centre was Mediterranean Journey in 1937 and the next one was for the Realist Film Unit, that was passport for Europe and another one for Realist Prelude to Pleasure in 1939. They were all made for Realist.

SP/JT: Just a question about Passport to Europe, that sounds a strange film, that was just before the war what was the subject matter.

RB: It was about the various holidays made available by the Workers Travel Association throughout Europe. We went to 4 or 5 European countries, we travelled around quite alot.

SP/JT: So that was quite an expensive production.

RB: I don't remember how much it cost in those days.

SP/JT: They were all pretty cheap.

RB: They were cheap in terms of what they would cost today.

SP/JT: Were they for general distribution, were they given away.

RB: These were shown by the Workers Travel Association at their Offices all over the country to interest people in the idea of taking their holiday through the Workers Travel Association, to show them what sort of holidays were available. The fact that they made 3 of them shows that they did have the desired effect.

SP/JT: I interrupted you telling me about the films you were making just before the war.

RB: I made several films for Realist. The one that was extremely interesting as well was made in 1938, that was The Cooperative Movement. The Cooperative Movement came to Realist, a chap called Alderman Joseph Reeves of the Royal Arsenal Coop who said it was about time the coop movement got involved in films and he wanted some films made and REalist were enthusiastic about this idea and they asked me to direct the first one which was called Advance to Democracy, that was in 1938.

SP/JT: When you say Realist, who was running Realist at the time.

RB: It was John Taylor.

SP/JT: In my recollection, can I put in a word, I think you went out and got us these films, you went out and found the sponsors and brought them to Realist.

RB: Well.

SP/JT: I think you're doing yourself a discredit.

RB: No you promotted a lot of these films especially this one. You're not doing yourself credit. They were films of the spectrum with which you were connected with much more.

SP/JT: Advance to Democracy had all sorts of interesting people connected with it, Basil Wright was connected with it and Benjamin Britten's music.

RB: I think Benjamin Britten's music was for another one, people with a

purpose, that was the second one I made for the coops in 1939 and I think that was the one which had Benjamin Britten and teh coop choir singing the red flag and then there was, the third one of the coop movement, again made in 1939, no I think that was the one with Benjamin Britten. But I didn't direct that one, I produced it and Frank Sainsbury directed. The other two I did direct myself.

SP/JT: Were you a member of any other thing before ACT.

RB: I tried to join NATKE but they didn't want to know. They weren't interested in film technicians, they were only interested in the grades they cover in film studios, not technical grades, and film projectionists.

SP/JT: You weren't anything to do with the thing before ACT, Captain Cricket.

RB: That was ACT, Captain Cope who was hopeless and eventually they got him to resign and George Elvin took over.

SP/JT: You began working with Grierson and the GPO Film Unit in 1931 and it was while you were working there, how did you hear about the ACt.

RB: I had been a member of another union before when I had been working in an insurance company. I became a member of the General and Municipal Workers Union and I was elected as Chairman of the Tottenham branch of that union, I was a keen trade unionist at a much younger age. When I joined Grierson I was keen to be a member and I heard there was a union called the Association of Cinematograph Technicians and there was a young member of Grierson's staff who was an actual member of it.

SP/JT: When would this be.

RB: 1935.

RB: So I promptly joined, invited the general secretary who was then George Elvin to come down and speak to all the members of the unit which he did and every one did, every single person who was eligible joined up. And then we had a meeting among ourselves and they decided we must seek official recognition of our shop. I was appointed to go in and see John Grierson and tell him we'd all joined the union we wanted this recognised so we could negotiate as and when necessary. So with great hesitation I went into the great man humbly and explained we'd all joined a trade union and proceeded to tell him what the purpose of a trade union was, whereupon he interrupted me and said don't tell me what trade unions are for, I'm a member of the Transport and General Workers Union which apparently he'd joined when he was on the trawler, when he was working on a trawler. That put an end to any fears about recognition.

SP/JT: Did Grierson himself join the ACT.

RB: No he didn't. He was, he didn't join the union but he was an enormous help, very sympathetic and his sympathetic attitude towards the union and the contributions he made to documentary movements and the British film industry as a whole lead many years later to the union making him an honorary member.

SP/JT: The conditions at work in the comparatively small documentary unit were obviously different from conditions in the film studios. Did you yourselves have friends who worked in the studios at the time and in

any way persuade them to become union members too or wasn't this your business.

RB: No it wasn't, we had very little contact as a unit we had very little contact with the commercial studio world.

SP/JT: You were connected with the union for the rest of your working life and on committees and things, can you tell us about this now or is it going ahead too far.

RB: Of course, when I joined it it was a small union in terms of numbers but it very rapidly developed and I was very active on its various committees and was elected to the executive committee of the union and later on to be a vice president of the union and I was an executive member or a vice president of the ACTT for 30 years until I retired from the vice presidency and was made an honorary member of the union.

SP/JT: You were a signatory to an important agreement, can you tell us about that.

RB: I was a signatory to the first laboratory agreement, the union had always felt that it was essential for us to have a good working class base and that working class base was to be found in the laboratories and we set about organising the chaps who worked in the labs. I went down to one or two of the big labs and spoke. Others did the same thing in other labs and eventually we recruited hundreds and hundreds of members who were really the rock bottom base for the union and when we'd recruited enough members we went to meet the laboratory employers and demanded recognition and also demanded certain improvements in wages and laboratory conditions. And there was opposition at first from one or two of the laboratories but in the end they caved in and we were able to sign the first agreement and i and George and Elvin were among the signatories of that.

SP/JT: What year was it,

RB: I can't remember off hand.

SP/JT: Because there was another big agreement in 1943 with the BFPA

RB: Yes I was on the negotiating committee for most of the discussions on that and we also thanks to I think it was John taylor, the first union agreement we had with a documentary company was with the Realist Film Unit. After that of course they all signed up.

They both came in, he came in with George, and twisted my arm.

SP/JT: In those days before the war when the union was very small, presumably it was very small in every way with very few paid members of staff, was it in Soho Sq then.

RB: No, there was an office, the first office was in a rather dingy room somewhere in Piccadilly Circus. And we had so few members that at one stage George Elvin hadn't got enough members to pay the rent and Thorold Dickinson who was one of the founder members of the union came to the rescue and advanced the money for the rent. But the staff in the early days was only two. There was George Elvin the general secretary and another chap who acted as treasurer and general dogsbody. After we left Piccadilly Circus, no we had our meetings even while we were at Piccadilly Circus in a room somewhere in Wardour St and these were the

first executive committee meetings and they were very free and easy meetings because half way through there would be an adjournment and one of the members, usually Sidney Cole I think used to pop down to the nearest pub in Wardour St and bring back a few drinks so we could refresh ourselves and continue the meeting.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

SP/JT: You were talking just now about Charlie Wheeler going out and getting drinks.

RB: No Sidney Cole

SP/JT: Sorry I'm getting mixed up. That was the very first office.

RB: No that was after the office in Piccadilly, we moved to 145 Wardour St. Now we stayed there till the war broke out and then we had to vacate that office and move the headquarters of the union to Stanmore where George Elvin the general secretary lived. By the way I should mention that George Elvin's father H. H. Elvin was the general secretary of the National Union of Clerks and was for one year President of the TUC so everything changed when war broke out.

SP/JT: And there was a social side to the ACT as well as an office side.

RB: And there was a political side. The executive decided to take a ballot vote of the members as to whether we should affiliate to the Labour Party and I remember that because the ballot papers were returned to Stanmore and an independent arbitrator was called up to Stanmore to count the papers which he did while George and I went upstairs where he had a miniature billiard table, incidentally George and I were great snooker fans, the ballot turned out to show a substantial majority for affiliation to the Labour Party to which the union has been with ever since. We also had a very good social side because all the union members at that time were concentrated in London. So at least once every year we used to have a grand social. I remember one year we took over the Astoria Ballroom in Tottenham Court Rd with Joe Loss and his band and this social activity was enormously helpful in cementing the friendship between the members and different sections of the industry and the members of the units both in the labs and in documentary had darts clubs and we used to meet up, I remember Realist had a very good darts club and we used to meet up with teams from Technicolor and Denham Labs at the Highlander in Dean St and have our competitions there, so there was an enormously friendly atmosphere about the whole thing. And there's no doubt those social occasions grew and grew until we had a very good one on the South Bank, what's the big hall there. At least once a year we had these big social events. Oh and the laboratories had a social event, we hired a train to take us down at Margate and places like that, enormously friendly, it cemented not only union relations but relations between those of us who worked in film production and those of us who worked in processing, it was extremely valuable.

SP/JT: The social side of the ACT, did they used to have film shows, like my own memory, the GPO, they used to have regularly film shows on Thursday, Friday. Did it have a film side or was it away from films.

RB: It was away from films.

SP/JT: They used to have them in the Crown Theatre.

RB: I don't recall it.

SP/JT: There was a period later where they used to show films which ACT was part of.

RB: That was the short films, Short Film Society,

SP/JT: That was 10 years after the War.

Back to your period first with the GPO Film Unit and then working for other companies like Realist. There was one you made with Ruby Grierson for the National Council of Social Services, was that a Realist film as well.

RB: No that was for Strand Films and it was called Today We Live. As you say that was made for the National Council of Social Services. It was in two parts. This council provided money to communities to set up community centres, and they set up one in a country district and one in a mining town in Wales, so I was responsible for directing the section of the mining town in Wales and Ruby Grierson directed the section in I think South Serney. She was John Grierson's sister and a very fine director and there's a terrible tragedy associated with her. During some period during early stage of the war she was to escort a large number of young children who were being sent for safety to Canada and the ship was torpedoed.

SP/JT: She was making a film of it.

RB: She was making a film of the evacuation, the ship was torpedoed and she among many others was drowned.

SP/JT: You must have made two or three films for Strand.

RB: I made a lot, Post 23, Bridge Demolition, Oxford, When we Build Again.

SP/JT: That sounds like wartime ones.

RB: They were all wartime ones except for Today We LIve which was 1937.

SP/JT: Was that the only one you made at Strand.

RB: What before the War. It's the only one I've got down.

SP/JT: Here's the thing, before the war you were making what you described as films with a purpose, which struck me as a very good phrase, referring to the word documenatary. When the war started through these various companies you were making films for the Ministry of Information is that right, presumably you didn't chose your own subjects, they were dictated to you, did you have to compromise your own feelings, did you ever refuse to make a story because you didn't agree with the ideas.

RB: During the war I did take an attitude that I was not going to make any films which could be counted as war propaganda but i would make films about aspects of the war which affected ordinary people, but I wouldn't make war propaganda films, I was quite firm about that.

SP/JT: Did that run you up against difficulties.

RB: No because there were other subjects which needed to be made and I

had the chance of making and I was quite happy working on those.

SP/JT: What kind of subjects were those.

RB: Well let me mention one or two.

SP/JT: By this time you were at Worldwide

RB: No I was at Strand. I'm talking about between 1940 and 41. I went to Strand in 1941, I went to Worldwide in 1944. Coming back

SP/JT: Whichever company you were working for they were for the MOI

RB: Yes. There was Neighbours under Fire which was a record of what happened in parts of London during an airraid. When the bombings started on London there were loud demands from the public for adequate shelters and they wanted the London Underground stations and Herbert Morrison, I think was the cabinet minister, adamantly refused. So this created such a storm that eventually he was forced to change his mind and underground stations were opened for people to shelter in during the airraids. So I made a film about that in some East London community. Eating at Work, the question of providing adequate food in factories for the workers, I made a film about that. I made an agricultural film about the art of thatching. Then I made a film called The Big City which was all about how the Bank of England functioned and what was happening in the Stock exchange, and other strange things like that. I made another film about rationing.

SP/JT: To continue with the extraordinary mixture of MOI films.

RB: They weren't all MOI. For instance one of the films I made for Strand in 1942 was when we build again. This was sponsored by Cadbury's, Roundtrees. They wanted a film made about how wonderful they were in providing good housing for their employees. They forgot to mention they didn't approve of trade unions. But more importantly they wanted to indicate the type of good housing which ought to be promotted throughout England when the war was over, so that was quite an interesting one to make. So then I made, we're talking about during the war period, I made a whole series when I was with Worldwide Pictures for the Ministry of Information on subjects like winter milk and The Burning Question which was about the importance of the supply of power to industry and I also made several other films, I can't remember all the titles but I was constantly in work as were all the rest of us in documentary at the time. For instance I made a film about A1 at Lloyds and this will surprise you as a title, Keeping Rabbits for Extra Milk which was apparently an important thing because it was an important source of supply during the rationing period

SP/JT: For Meat.

RB: Did I say milk, no meat, that's right. And one or two other strange films indeed. There was one called for Dennis which Ralph Keen and I directed. I forget the details. I remember we shot the whole film at a certain film near Marble Arch and in order to get an audience for staging the sort of meetings that they held there or the services they held there we sent the assistant director to round up anyone he could find and he came back with 20 or 30 vagrants, drunks, who crowded into the pews to make up the congregation. And when we shot all this at enormous length of time and money, the chap at the MOI saw it, he said this is no good at all, you'll have to scrap the whole thing. This was shot in a Catholic

church and we wanted it shot in a protestant church, so we had to do the whole thing over again. Who took over, John Bechemin, he was an amazing character, it didn't bother him about the money,

SP/JT: What was the story.

RB: I've forgotten what it was, something to do with the importance of religion during the war.

SP/JT: You say all of you were in work, were you in a reserved occupation.

RB: Yes. When the war broke out there was no such thing as a reserved occupation in the film industry, in fact in the due course of time I received the notice calling me up and went to the Camden Town Labour Exchange, duly reported myself and was asked which could I prefer to be in, the army, the navy or the airforce. Very quickly I remembered in the navy you got free does of rum so I volunteered for the navy. Shortly after that the trade unions and the film industry itself brought such pressure on the government that they recognised the important part war could play on the war effort, and don't forget in the first few days after war was declared all cinemas were closed down and it was some while before the government gave permission for the cinemas to open, so it was a very short sighted policy indeed. But then most technicians, qualified technicians and creative people in the film industry and particularly in documentary were given the status of reserved occupation during the war.

SP/JT: No it was renewed every 6 months.

RB: I don't remember that. But it continued to the end of the war.

SP/JT: During those 5 or 6 years of the war you must have other anecdotes to recall about the various films you made like gathering up the congregation. Have you any other stories like that.

RB: You sprung that on me.

SP/JT: Can I ask you one, the business of Neighbours under Fire, that extraordinary clerical gentleman in that, presumably he was a real local vicar, was that a completely staged scene.

RB: No, we made the film during the course of an airraid and I remember it vividly because we didn't have to stage anything there. Because this vicar who was very much in charge of community organisation, they immediately went to the hall where he was in charge, there it was all arranged they would march in good order down to the nearest underground station.

SP/JT: Just a minute Neighbours under Fire is in a rest centre, there were one or two shots in an underground station but the rest is the man leading some community singing, it looked like a rest centre not an underground station.

RB: Oh no. You better scrap this bit. I shan't see the film again till Sunday. What I do remember, and I don't want this to go in the final tape, when we finished shooting, Reg Groves wrote the script, Joe Jago was the cameraman, we all drove home after we finished filming to North London where we lived and while we drove home there was an airraid on London and the next day I went back to the same place where we'd been shooting and saw streets that had been bombed out, that's a personal

reminiscence, on the factual thing I thought we had shot some things in the underground.

SP/JT: Did you make any political films during the war or tried to get any made.

RB: I don't think so.

SP/JT: You said that you wanted to have the trade union view stated in some films but it wasn't till the very end of the war that you were able to persuade some trade unions to have films made, 1945, that's another subject you could talk about, the attempt to have made films made.

RB: That's right, it wasn't until 1945 when the Amalgamated Engineering Union who I approached agreed they would sponsor a film about the history of their union, it's policies and how it worked for its members. And so I was asked to direct this film which I did which was called Unity is Strength. And they were so pleased with it I think they ordered something like 40 or 50 copies to show all over the country primarily for recruiting purposes. They would call meetings in places they were organising, announce they were going to show a film and they told me this film was the most valuable help to them in recruiting new members to the union. Some years later when I was working for another country, they had another film made to bring the story up to date.

SP/JT: Tell me. When you in 1945 set about about making a film about the story of the history of a union, that sounds to me unless you were able to dramatise it in some way, a rather dry film about facts. Did you set about to make a film which was going to excite new union members, how did you go about thinking about it.

RB: My attitude to all documentary films, in the making of them and advice to students whom I sometimes teach as to how to analyse a documentary film is very simple, firstly what is the purpose of a film, secondly how well is that purpose achieved technically and artistically. So if I'm asked to make a film I say to the sponsor what do you want the film to say, what is it about, for what purpose is it going to be used. They say firstly we want to use the film for recruiting purposes in areas of the country, important factories, there's a lack of trade union membership, so we want to show in these places and to these workers that the AEU is the right union for them, that it will do the job properly, representing them and it will fight for their demands, wages and conditions and so on. So the film should show positively what the union does in its various fields of operation, so that's your brief. On the basis of that brief you go to factories, you interview officials, you talk to ordinary workers, you meet shop stewards, you find out how the union is working, what are its positive aspects and what are its negative aspects. On the basis of that information you prepare a script, you work very thoroughly on the script after you've done research and in any sort of documentary the primary first task is the research. I always advice my students to research and gather far more material than they can use in the film and then the selection process while you write the shooting scripts. And this is what I've done on the two or three trade union films we made. The first one we didn't dramatise at all. We took the ordinary situation with ordinary workers, ordinary working places, how the union operates, showing the various parts of the union, the various aspects it covers, not just solely wages and conditions, but social security, pension funds and so on and so forth, talking to leading officials and the general secretary about what their job is. In the case of the AEU it is very important to bring out their international

connections because they had very good international connections with similar unions worldwide. The second film which I made later for them, we did dramatise the early days of the union, we did reconstruct the early days when union organisation was virtually illegal, when there had to be a courier who rode a bicycle round the various places secretly picking up the union subscriptions, and then taking them back to the head office. But the rest of the film was the up to date activities. The other film I made for the trade union movement was for the Transport and General Workers Unions and it was made when Jack Jones was the general secretary, it was called One in Five, because one out of every five workers was a member of the Transport and General Workers Union and we covered aspects of their work, particularly transport, road transport as well as domestic transport. No dramatic elements were introduced into that script but the union was extremely pleased with it and I believe put it to very useful purpose. I should add on the transport and General Workers film I asked Sidney Cole to be the producer which he undertook very happily indeed.

SP/JT: From the late 40s you ceased to be directing in films and you were doing various other things, from this point looking back on the various films you made, and by made I mean directing, which ones were you most satisfied with, the one you look back with most pleasure, do you have a favourite film.

RB: I hesitate to single out any films I'm particularly pleased with or any particular ones I wasn't too pleased with. I think what documentary did, the early days of documentary, and what gave us our enthusiasm and desire to work on this type of film was that we all believed this was a new era in the history of British film making. British film production up to that time was almost exclusively, apart from newsreels, feature films, fictional feature films, 99% of the most mundane type imaginable, mundane love stories, black and white, I don't mean black and white photograficly, but in terms of characterisation, you were a hero a heroine or a villain. It was an entirely, all the films were middle class in concept, working people never appeared except as buffoons, stupid house keepers, stupid butlers, and such like, figures of fun. The tradition of class in middleclass values was predominant. In documentary Grierson, who himself had been inspired by Flaherty, Robert Flaherty, brought this new concept of showing working people with the dignity and respect they were entitled to for the work they did which alone made the community's existence possible. And it was this concept which guided all of us all the way through and which influenced the type of film we wanted to make, sometimes could make, but even if we were working on films we weren't particularly enthusiastic about it dominated our ideas and our thoughts. It was for those reasons I don't want to single out any particular film either as my favourite or non favourite.
Fair enough.

SP/JT: But the south Wales one must be very dear to your heart even after that grand speel.

RB: It was. It certainly was one of my many favourite films because the extraordinary thing about it, this is a reminiscence, a year or two ago the South Wales Television and the South Wales Arts Council decided that they would have two or three weeks showing every film which either had been made in Wales or about Wales and this was done at the Arts Centre in Cardiff, Chapter Arts, and they invited me up on one of these occasions to show Today we Live which I had made in South Wales. One of the most extraordinary thing about that visit, apart from showing the film, was that in the film, there were two leading characters, both unemployed miners of the time, and on this occasion of the visit to

Cardiff, low and behold these two characters were there, the chap who had researched the films had found them. They were of course no longer working miners, they were of course doing other things, but there they were larger than life. That was most exciting. The other thing was that I showed the film in Cardiff and I thought here is the same all over again because here again thousands and thousands of miners are unemployed, scores and scores of pits are being closed down, and this was exactly the situation in the 30s, unemployment and pit closures, in that aspect the film was almost as if it could have been made today rather than 40 or 50 years ago.

SP/JT: I haven't seen it but I understand the techniques you used of the miners feelings were the style which is used in television now with all the modern apparatus, is that so.

RB: Yes. I think one of the technical aspects, I'm told and I've every reason to believe it, that this was the first documentary film shooting sound on location. We'd been shooting sound in the studio, Blackheath and elsewhere but it was the first time we had sound on location all the way from London to South Wales with all the equipment involved. You know as well as I do the enormous van, miles of cable, the most complicated stuff, from that point of view it was very interesting.

Did that predate Housing Problems or was it about the same time.

It was later.

They have sound on location in some of the backyards of people.

But that was directed interviews, but it was earlier because Ruby wasn't a director on Housing Problems, she became a director later on.

RB: This is one of the stories the publicist spread around.

SP/JT: It doesn't matter because you were working separately and innovating a different style.

RB: That was one of the many reasons I was very pleased with that film because we were able to get not just the normal sound effects but we had quite a big indoor sequence in the miners club up there with all the character sitting around discussing various aspects and we, one of the scenes, one of the characters in the shot said I think we should move a vote of thanks to the National Council for Social Services for supplying the funds for this community centre and one of the other characters said they seem to have plenty of money for this sort of thing but they haven't any money to put us back to work which was very effective.

SP/JT: You say the camera panned around the man saying that

RB: Right round the table.

SP/JT: Was that unrehearsed in which case it would be extremely difficult to do with all the bulky apparatus.

RB: There's no question about it the cameraman and the camera operator had to rehearse his panning when he was told what to do but you see the interesting thing which I must bring out about this film, from the very moment I made it with the miners themselves, I went up to Penthr(?), just one little hotel, stayed there, spent a week or two walking around the place getting to know some of the chaps who were building the centre and

them getting to know me and talking to them what it was about and I would rough out the script and I would invite them round to the pub one evening and we would go through every word of the script, word by word, for their approval, I told them it was their film and not mine, and they would make their comments and say well we wouldn't say that or wouldn't do this and immediately change it. So before this big scene I've been talking about, I would talk to them about roughly speaking what they wanted but left it to them to put into their own words and that's how we cooperated all the way through and I think largely accounts for the success of the film. And I would give that advice to any young student starting on documentary films.

SP/JT: The film is also remarkable for the visuals of the people on the coal tip,

RB: Yes, that's marvellous film, Donald shot some of that, Donald Alexander, he was my assistant.

SP/JT: What about the other people at Strand, Dylan Thomas for instance.

RB: Dylan was marvellous. I was shop steward and I always boasted I was Dyland Thomas' shop steward and he could never pay his subs. What happened every Friday night somebody from National Studios who was our employers came along late on Friday evening to our London office with the wage packets. We all finished work as quickly as we could and wait around for the chap with the money including Dylan. If he was late there were great mutterings going on. As soon as the money arrived and Dylan got his pay packet I was the first one to grab his union subscription. One evening instead of the usual cashier chap turning up with wage packets, the boss of the studio turned up and Dylan absolutely lost his temper and shouted get out, get out, you filthy swine, you capitalist employer and chased him, and this was the boss, chased him down the staircase, he got his pay packet first.

RB: I'm not here to gossip about Dylan but I liked him very much and we had enormous fun together, particularly at the Gargoyle Club. He was a great character, a good union member.

SP/JT: What about the other characters like George Noble.

RB: He wasn't at Strand, he worked for GPO.

SP/JT: He worked for Strand quite a lot.

RB: I don't think I worked with George Noble

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RB: That was the only time I worked with Rotha.

He was a producer.

SP/JT: At Strand.

RB: Yes he was a producer at Strand at that time. We had a reasonable relationship.

SP/JT: He was a good producer.

RB: But Stanley Haws, I worked very closely with Stanley Haws, he was

the overal production manager with Rotha and Stanley Haws was extremely, good, very gentle, kindly, highly efficient character.

SP/JT: What about Donald how did you get on.

RB: I got on quite well with Donald.

SP/JT: Which Donald.

RB: Donald Taylor. He was the head of Strand Films. It was Donald after all who employed me and put me onto this film.

SP/JT: As a filmmaker you directed these things, did you also, apart from the early days edit your own films and were you ever a camera operator.

RB: No. I did edit, in the early days, edit my own films. But after that I didn't do much editing because.

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

RB: I go on extremely well with the cameramen of the time. I liked them all very much. You mentioned Joe Jago, a Cornish lad who was extremely helpful, extremely kindly, in the early days there was of course George Noble of the GPO, I knew him. He was a famous character. Everybody knew George Noble and his idiosyncrasies and his jokes and he really was a most lovable man. Then the two lads, Chick Fowl.

SP/JT: What was his real name or did they just call him Chick.

RB: They just called him Chick. He was an ordinary working class post office boy.

SP/JT: He was one of Grierson's cockney children.

RB: But he was a working class, post office boy before Grierson took him on, wasn't he.

SP/JT: No he lived in the Borough near Grierson before he took him on.

RB: And Jimmy Davidson, although his social views were completely opposed to mine and everybody else's on the unit, nevertheless as a senior cameraman and a disciplinarian and a teacher to these two young lads who I've mentioned he was absolutely first class.

SP/JT: There were people of all political views.

RB: Absolutely. Who was the other cameraman now, Gerald Gibbs. I worked a lot with Gerald Gibbs, he was excellent, first class in every way. So I got on extremely well with the cameramen.

SP/JT: What about editors. Was MacAlister working or you.

RB: No, when things got very busy and it was no longer possible to edit my films as well I had my eye on a young chap in Humphreys Laboratories who I knew would give anything for a chance of moving out of the labs into film productiron as an editor, that was a chap called Cox, Steve Cox. A young fellow and I recommended him, I think it was when I was with Worldwide Pictures, Jimmy Carr interviewed him and on my recommendation he immediately took him on and ever afterwards till his death, or early retirement, he worked in documentaries, he was absolutely first class. He was a name I would particularly like to record on the editing side.

SP/JT: Another cameraman, Frank Bundy.

RB: I don't think I worked with Frank Bundy but there was another cameraman, short in stature who worked a lot for all of us and then retired down to Bornemouth or somewhere

SP/JT: Wasn't John Taylor a cameraman when he started or am I mistaken.

SP/JT: I was an office boy, I never photographed.

RB: He is a well known cameraman, John Taylor.

We haven't covered Worldwide, have we got there yet.

RB: More or less. Worldwide Pictures, that was started by Jimmy Carr who had a friend who owned one or two cinemas and started Jimmy Carr off

with a small loan and a camera. So Jimmy set up offices in Shaftesbury Ave and he'd already made a name for himself with a film called Pub Games with a comentary by Tom Driberg. So Jimmy set up this company and had one or two films to start off with and eventually when I was still with Strand he asked me if I would like to come along and work full time as a director and producer. So I joined him in 1945 as a producer mainly, a bit of direction but mainly producing. I made a whole series of films for him including a film named Our Enemy Japan which was mainly a compilation job which I wasn't wholly delighted with because every day the chap from the MOI came in and wanted to see the editing stage and every day he wanted a change. In the end I got fed up with the whole thing and just edited it the way he wanted it and handed it over. It was a film of some interest.

They trained quite a lot of interesting people at Worldwide like Ken Hughes and

SP/JT: The chap who's a teacher at the National film School. It was quite a unit

RB: Hindle Edgar. He was brought in by Jimmy and produced a lot of the films that Worldwide made. And one of the films I made for Worldwide which JOhn Grierson who was back in England said he greatly admired, I produced a film for the Metropolitan Water Board called Every Drop to Drink, the title explains itself, and this was directed by Mary Francis and I produced it and that was an extremely successful one. Shortly after the war there was a chap I knew working for the film department of the navy and I had a drink with him and I said what about a film, because Worldwide was rather slack, Jimmy was away sick, and there wasn't much work going on. He said OK, we'd like to have a film about naval salutes. I said OK fine. We were duly commissioned and I got landed with the job of course because it was my initiative and I started working on the script and I thought this is going to be terrible boring, terrible dull, dull a load of chaps going round like this, what the hell do we do. So one evening for relaxation I went to a local music hall and there was a comic duo on who were doing precisely this, taking the piss out of naval salutes, I thought this is the answer to my prayer. So After the act was over I went to see them behind the scenes and I said look you blokes I'm making a film on this very subject and I want some humour in it. If we can arrange things will you agree to appear, they said sure. I said what's your itinery because I'll need you to come down to South Coast, Shearness or somewhere where we'll be filming, when will you be there. They looked up and said so and so, we've got a booking at the local music hall. I said great and wrote it into the script. When they came down to Shearness or whereever it was we took the camera in there and shot the whole act. It was hilarious. They got the film off to a start. Taking the micky out of the thing, everyone was going to watch it. And then we staged one or two sequences ourselves in the streets of this town. For instance I had two tars walking down a street and they saw coming to them an officer who they knew they would have to salute so they immediately rushed across to the other side of the road and disappeared into a pub, things like that. And then of course the main shooting took place in Malta. So we flew out to Malta. Ronnie Anscombe was the cameraman and we flew out to Malta. Arrived in a raging storm, thought we wouldn't be able to land but we did, stayed in Valette, had a wonderful time in Valetta in between shooting. And then of course we shot a lot of material aboard battleships, cruisers and things like that, going through the routines, it all turned out very well and when it was put together the navy were delighted with it. It was great fun. One member of the unit, I won't mention the name here, there was a lot of cheap duty free stuff to be jot

in Malta, one member of the unit bought himself a very handsome wristwatch, he was worried all the time before we came home. He said if I wear this wrist watch the custom boys wont lag it, I know what I'll do, I'll get a razer blade and scrape off all the hair around that part of the wrist so I can tell them I've had it for years. We go through customs and I've got loads of booze, no questions asked, the cameraman in addition to his magazines in his large cameracase has got certain other articles of liquidity, he goes through no problems. Then comes this other chap. Oh this is a very nice watch you've got there, where did you get that, Malta, no Dollands in King's Cross, I've had it for years, really, that's interesting, do you mind coming into the next room, I waited at the bottom of the staircase for an hour and he still hadn't come out so I went home. Eventually I heard later he got out alright but they not only seized the watch but they made him pay about £25 quid, only because he was stupid enough to shave his wrist, it was so obvious.

SP/JT: You must have trained a lot of people at Worldwide like Mary Francis and Ken Hughes.

RB: Yes I suppose so in the sense that any film director who has a good assistant will do anything they can to help him. It wasn't too difficult to climb the ladder if you had the ability and competence and determination in those days. You didn't have to go through a long apprenticeship of three years before you could move up say as second assistant director to first assistant director because we didn't have different grades, we just had director, and if an assistant director showed ability and an opportunity came for him to direct and his producer or the company he was working for had confidence in him then he would get the job. And we'd all help each other. We were a fairly close knit community although we were in different units.

SP/JT: Was Ted Willis there then.

RB: Ted Willis did write some scripts for Worldwide.

SP/JT: He was very closely connected with documentary in those days.

RB: Yes I think he almost became a director or partner of Worldwide Pictures in Jimmy Carr's day, they worked very closely in

SP/JT: He was another young man you brought on.

RB: Except that Ted was a writer, in his own right, he didn't need anyone to tell him how to write.

SP/JT: But he was at the beginning of his career, that must have been his first work on films.

RB: On films yes, but he'd been a regular writer particularly of theatre.

SP/JT: He'd written one play before but he was helped on his way by Worldwide.

RB: He was, as I say he was a close associate of Worldwide.

SP/JT: But this was one of the things about documentary, the training of people was part of the whole process. Expand on it.

Can you say something about some of the people you trained or the difficulties of training or the ackward characters, is that it.

RB: No just the general attitude, that training was part of the whole process. Ken Hughes went almost straight onto features.

SP/JT: He worked on documentaries, he started as an assistant, he was my assistant on a few films and then he became a director in his own right for Worldwide Pictures and all this eventually lead him to becoming a feature film director, didn't he make Cromwell.

He made Cromwell but one of his best films was the film about Oscar Wilde which was a splendid film. And he made some indifferent pictures, pot boilers, but he made Oscar Wilde for Irving Allen who was responsible for starting the James Bond series. And you can take Harry Watt as an example of someone who moved into features as a result of his experience and training at the GPO and elsewhere. There's no need to talk about Cavalcanti but his story is a wonderful one. The help that he gave us all in making our documentaries at the GPO and when the war came his shift to Ealing Studios and the films he directed and produced there was marvellous

SP/JT: And the influence he had on all the young men there.

RB: Indeed.

Sidney Cole, he worked for a time making documentaries and became the senior editor at Ealing Studios and then producer at Ealing Studios. Oh yes there are quite a lot of those who had early training and experience in the documentary field and were able to move on sucessfully into the feature film world. The whole documentary film thing lead not only to a new concept of film and the use of film in, for educational and propaganda and information and social purposes, not only all that which was important in itself but what it did do was to have an important impact on British filmmaking as a whole once the war had started. This may be old hat, you already know, but one of the most extraordinary things which happened early after the war was when an Errol Flynn film arrived at the Odeon Empire in which Errol Flynn virtually single handedly won the war in Borneo and was so stupid it was booed off the screen and all the critics derided it and it was quite clear that this sort of film was not going down with the British public. They wanted something not only closer to home, but was more realistic in terms of what was really happening and it was the documentary movement which influenced the whole structure of British feature film making. You had people like Launder and Gilliat and the films they made and the films Harry Watt made, Target for Tonight and films like that, and Cavalcanti, what was that film he made with Tommy Trinder,

SP/JT: The Foreman Went to France.

RB: Films which were basically entertainment but had some relationship to the reality of life in the war as we understood it and the documentary influence was to its credit 95% responsible for that change of concept.

SP/JT: Can we just get ahead chronologically to late in the 40s when you stopped producing films and set up a small distribution company of some sort. Why this change of tactic, was it difficult to get a job then.

What happened to you after this continuous employment making films during the war, what happened after the war.

RB: After the war things eased off quite a lot and I had some periods of

umemployments, and a group of friends with an interest in progressive films came to me and suggested that we try and acquire a cinema for the purpose of showing good progressive films from all over the world, from whereever they came from, particularly foreign films from Europe, and they were prepared to advance the money and wanted me to take charge. I said we must also set up a distribution company to acquire these films not only for any cinema we own ourselves but other cinemas interested in specialised films. So we set up a company which for want of a better name was called Bond Films in 1951, December 1951, and in May 1952 we acquired a cinema called the New Classic in Hendon. This was a cinema which had been slowly running down and had been faced with so much competition from nearby circuit cinemas that it could only get cheap B pictures and the proprietor was anxious to call it a day and sell the cinema which we got for in those days a very reasonable price. By then I'd acquired a number of films both for our own company but other companies such as Conoisseur Films and so on and we opened the cinema as a specialised cinema. This was a considerable undertaking to launch an entirely new concept and so we went in specially for what I call individual approaches. For instance if we had a film dealing with some aspect of the medical profession I would look up in a directory every doctor in the neighbourhood and we'd send him a letter, this sort of specialised thing worked very well, this was in addition to advertising in the papers. Anyway we got off to a very good start indeed. We showed a whole number of film from Poland, Czechoslovakia, France and elsewhere. We had to show our obliged quota of British films and we selected the best of the British films for that purpose and the cinema was a considerable success.

SP/JT: Did you have double bills or separate one features.

RB: It depended on the length of the feature film.

If the feature film was less than one and a half hours we'd have a double feature. If it was over 90 minutes we would have some carefully selected short films and cartoons, made up a proper programme. We had some wonderful films. We had for instance Bicycle Thieves, we had a film, a Polish film about the conentration camps in which the Jews and others were tortured to death, we had every type of good Soviet film and many of them we were able to distribute to other cinemas in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, where there were specialised cinemas. So we kept an even keel.

SP/JT: Did you work in collaboration or were you in rivalry with Charlie Cooper at Contemporary and Stanley Forman at ETV.

RB: No, we weren't in rivalry at them, they supplied us often with short films, and sometimes feature films, what we were up against were still the 3 circuit cinemas around. We had to work bloody, I kept the old staff on that the old cinema had, they were very good, the manager and his wife who was an assistant. Sometimes we had a very good week and made a profit. Sometimes we had a bad week but just about broke even through sales. I never realised until then how important sales are, because you buy icecream and sweets and things at rock bottom prices and sell them at rather inflated prices and that contributed a hell of a lot.

It was still called Bond Films. Bond Films was the distribution company. The cinema was the New Classic Hendon. Well we kept that going, kept the cinema going for a couple of years or so and then my partners who put up the money were getting a bit nervous. They said look we've done a good job here, we've launched something but I think perhaps the time has come to see if we can pass the same tradition on to someone else, which is a way of saying see what you can do about selling it.

SP/JT: Are your partners remaining anonymous.

RB: I think so. They had nothing to do with the film industry, they were outside the industry, but they were keen on getting an outlet for this kind of film. Fortunately I'd make very good friends with Kenneth Rive who ran those two cinemas then in Tottenham Court Rd, those two specialised cinemas and he booked a lot of the films I had and I booked some of the films he had. So I dropped a hint one day, I said I suppose you wouldn't be interested in acquiring a third cinema Ken, he said what are you thinking of, he said well, what about the New Classic, Hendon, I said well, we're doing very nicely Ken, I don't know about that but if you're seriously interested and not just having a laugh I'll mention it to my partners. He said go ahead and talk to them. I went ahead and said well Ken, providing the price is right we might be interested. By that time I knew that Ken wanted it. I waited until we had a very successful film on and were packing the house out every night, so I phoned up Ken and said why don't you come over one evening and there's a pub next door where we can go and have a glass of beer and see how far we can go. Fortunately Ken who lived not far away came long that night and saw a queue, I said let's go upstairs to the balcony, we go upstairs to the balcony and not a single seat vacant, he said for Christ's sake how do you do it, I said we worked hard at it Ken, it's respected as a specialised cinema. I'm sure you could do a bloody sight better than we can and we've done alright. This lead to a good position to get the price my partners wanted plus a little bit more. I don't think Ken is going to like this when he hears it, nevertheless we're still good friends, Ken and I. Anyway Ken bought the cinema and that left us with the distribution company which didn't take up a lot of time although we still got quite a few bookings for films. So I wasn't very busy. And then it so happened that the chap in charge of ACT Films resigned and the union was looking around for a replacement. So I thought a job which would interest me and I put in an application.

SP/JT: Just for the benefit of future historians, what was ACT Films.

RB: ACT Films was formed on the initiative of a now very famous cameraman called Walter Lassally who at an annual general meeting of the union got up and said look you're all sitting around here or standing around here moaning about unemployment and lack of work, why don't we do something about it ourselves, why don't we set up a film company and make some British films and give some work. Applause all round. So this was taken very serious by the union executive and at that time Harold Wilson was in the Board of Trade, so George Elvin and one or two others went to see Harold Wilson and said that you know, and Harold said it's a very good idea, what can I do about it, what you can do about it Harold is to tip off the National Film Finance Corporation to see if they would be prepared to advance us money, at least for our first feature film. So Harold did that and the first feature film made by ACT Films was Green Grow the Rushes. Now the three main aims of ACT Films right through from the inception, right through to the end, was a) to make more British films, b) to give employment to unemployed British technicians and creative people and c) to make them of reasonable budgets while fulfilling every union agreement, they were the three major points, the purpose of ACT Films. For a year or two other people were in charge of it as production superviser

SP/JT: It started in 1950 I believe,

RB: 1950, that's right.

I was asked in 1954, I applied and after various interviews and discussions the directors of ACT Films, Board of Governors so to speak decided to give me the job of general manager and production superviser which I was until 1965 when virtually, it was very difficult for the company, for any independent film company to raise finance, inbetween those years we made a very large number of films including half a dozen first features and the rest second features. There was a great demand for second features in those days, every cinema had a double bill. And the second features were the training ground for the future makers of first features. In other words, aspiring directors cut their teeth on two or three b pictures and then made their way up to the A first feature division. So we made and enormous number of films, all to budget, all to complete union agreement and we gave lots of work to young directors, their first films which enabled them to proceed with very successful films indeed. We only took onto the crews ACT members who were registered as unemployed, so we gave I reckon over the period of ACT Films, we must have given work to at least 1,000 unemployed ACT members.

RB: Was there a danger, talking quite objectively, that only giving jobs to those registered as unemployed, that you didn't get the top people or was it people who were unemployed through no fault of their own and were just resting between jobs.

RB: There was a mixture. I think on a couple of films we had Maurice Elvey, one of the great old timers who had fallen on relatively bad times but was still a very skilful director for a certain type of film, in other case, i really should have down the history, i've got upstairs a complete list of all the ACT films, would you like me to get it and I can give you names.

SP/JT: You were talking about ACT Films and when you were general manager, can you remember any of the more outstanding films or some of the people who worked on them.

RB: Yes indeed, for instance Don Chaffey directed the film The Man Upstairs. Now Don had made one rather miserable B picture and he was anxious to get onto a good subject and we had this wonderful script, I asked Don if he'd be interested and he jumped at the chance and his career really in the big time started from there onwards. The Man Upstairs featured Dicky Attenborough as the main character and it was a highly successful film. Then among the directors who also we started off their careers was Dan Birt, Terry Fisher, he made 2 or 3 B pictures for us and then as you know he made a great career with Hammer horror pictures. Then Alfred Shaughnessy, he was another director we had and Montgomery Tully, and Jimmy Hill, James Hill, he directed the Arnold Wesker film we made, The Kitchen, with Sidney Cole producing, the film for the Children's Film Foundation, directed by Muriel Box, Sidney Box's wife, produced by Robert Dunbar and at the top of the scale The Final Test, directed by Anthony Asquith and produced by R. J. Minney. So you can see a great variety of directors, most of whom, as I said earlier, were glad to make a start on the films we were making and helped them greatly in their future years.

SP/JT: Was Anthony Asquith on the unemployment list.

RB: Yes he was. He was what you say resting at the time.

SP/JT: When you produced the film you had to hire the studios, you didn't have any studios of your own.

RB: No we hired studio space, frequently at Shepperton, often at Nettlefold, and one or two other, Twickenham, smaller studios, depending on the size of the studios and the budget we had.

SP/JT: Of course for the general public the fact that it was ACT Films was neither here nor there, they went to see it because of the quality of the film.

RB: We didn't distribute the films ourselves, a lot of the second features were distributed by Monarch Films and the film that Anthony made, The Final Test was distributed by the Rank Organisation, it was the only one they did commission from us, and which ever company we made the film for was the distributor, so it went out in the normal course of theatrical bookings.

SP/JT: Was there much opposition from the trade to the union making feature films.

RB: At the beginning there was total opposition. Green Grow the Rushes, the very first film we made met with a complete boycott by the cinema exhibitors on the ground that the ACT the union was hostile to the exhibitors association. We had to get round that difficulty, I think there was a special measure passed by the government that they couldn't do this kind of thing and so the film was eventually released but it didn't get a very fair share of the distribution, exhibition market. The other films, all the second features with one exception made a profit, a small profit, perhaps I should add, we were not a profit making company.We ran ACT Films on the basis that any profits made would be ploughed back into preparing future productions or commissioning scripts, things like that.

RB: What eventually happened to ACT Films.

SP/JT: Eventually things grew more and more difficult to get finance or commissions, it was a bad period all round for independent producers or independent production companies. We weren't the only ones to suffer. We prepared or had in mind a number of subjects, for instance, I had in mind to do one on the Tolpuddle Martyrs and had a provisional script prepared but we could never get the money for it. I wanted to make a co-production with Yugoslavia about the contribution the British made to the Tito partisans during the war. I went out to Belgrade and discussed it with the film company there, LR Films, they were keen and enthusiastic, came back to London and one of the directors from LR Films came to see us when we were shooting The Man Upstairs, was highly impressed, very keen to go ahead, we went to the National Film Finance Corporation and they wouldn't listen to me, nobody else would listen and we had to abandon it. Many attempts were made, we had some good ideas, and good draft outlines but we got no where. So I'm afraid the production work of the company gradually faded away. In fact as long as I was there, and towards the end I was working on a voluntary basis just to make sure the company was still kept alive, made one of the films I was extremely proud of, The People's March for Jobs, the documentary of the great unemployed march from

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SP/JT: You were saying about People's March for Jobs, can you say just

again how everyone worked voluntary.

RB: Everyone on the film and I mean everyone worked on the film voluntary. We had cameramen who went out to the different towns as the march came along to shoot the stuff, it was all shot in sync sound the whole thing. We had an enormous roster of voluntary cameramen and camera assistants and at the great rally when the march appeared in Hyde Park and the great meeting in Trafalga Sq everyone on the film worked voluntary and we decided to give no individual credits but to thank everyone who participated. But it was a splendid film and it got very wide distribution. We had dozens of copies circulating through Contemporary Films all over the country. That was the last film which was made while I was in charge of ACT Films. After that, as you know, my colleague Richard Gates volunteered to take over and a number of minor films have been made, particularly for the peace movement, it's still very difficult to get independent commissions.

SP/JT: On the previous film, People's March for Jobs, everybody worked voluntarily. Were film stock and laboratory charges donated as well.

RB: The laboratory labs at Technicolor rallied round and stayed on late, night shifts, to process our material. Stock, we got a lot of stock second hand or sources so we didn't have to pay very much. processing we were OK. We raised quite a lot of money in donations from members of the union and grants from London and regional TUCs which covered all the expenses of people travelling and food and the rest of it so we just about scrapped through. We ended up with a film and didn't owe anything.

SP/JT: What's the length of it.

RB: 32 minutes.

SP/JT: Made rather the same way as that hurriedly made film on the first Alderston march.

RB: Yes Lindsay Anderson, Derek Knight and co.

SP/JT: From ACT Films and all this time you'd been doing a lot of union work, all voluntary I suppose

RB: Oh yes, you don't get paid for that.

SP/JT: You began to go into teaching. Could you tell us some of the teaching jobs you had.

RB: I'd been unemployed for quite some while and suddenly I heard through the vacancy list there was a job going for a tutor at the Portsmouth College of ARt and Design. So I wrote to them and gave the usual outline of my experiences and abilities and they asked me down for an interview and appointed me, I got the job.

SP/JT: When was this.

RB: About 62, 63, 64.

1967. I got the job in 1967 and had to retire because of age limits imposed in April 1970 so that was very interesting because I had to start the department completely from new. There was no equipment at all, I had to get everything in from light meters and cameras and sound equipment and the lot. But it was extremely interesting experience. After that I

was again unemployed for a bit and after that I was offered a job at the London College of Printing as a tutor. And I think I was there for about a year. That was similarly an interesting experience.

SP/JT: Were you teaching filmmaking in both places.

RB: Yes. Filmmaking, not just theory, a bit of each but mainly filmmaking. Students had to make films and I had to prepare everything for them and supervise them and advise them and so on. And take the rushes up to London to Humphreys and bring them back again.

SP/JT: What did it feel like training people rather than supervising people who were doing a professional job.

RB: I dont know. Put it this way. I'd been in practically everything, film production, I'd been in film distribution, I'd been in exhibition, that was the cinema in Hendon, I'd been active in Hendon, mixing with laboratory people, documentary people and feature film people. So I was adjustable to change and I found that although the first few days in Portsmouth were a bit nerve racking with virtually no equipment and consult with people and go to the nearest shop and order the equipment, but I soon got into the feel of the thing and enjoyed working with the students, a process which continued at the London College of Printing where they already had an ample supply of equipment so I didn't have to worry about that but encourage the students to make films and help films and supervise them. Later on when I went to the London International Film School, that was in 19, this was an even more interesting experience because of the international character of the school. Because it lived up to its name, it was a multinational school, a multiculture school, so mixing with the students, so many, the vast majority, at least 70 if not 80% came from overseas, many from third world countries, it was very interesting mixing with them and finding varying degrees of culture and culture and approaches to filmmaking. So it was stimulating.

SP/JT: It was a privately run school unlike the other ones you were talking about.

RB: Unfortunately it receives no assistance whatsoever from the government or the film finance people, but what it has had help from is from a number of companies, television companies particularly have donated valuable equipment free of charge. The other thing which has helped enormously is that the film is recognised as a training school by the ACTT and all the students of the school who get their diploma at the end of their two year course are entitled to register with ACTT for employment so that helps enormously.

SP/JT: That's only recently.

RB: No I think we've been recognised for at least 3 years by ACTT.

SP/JT: That was some time bacak you began working there and you worked there till this year.

RB: I joined the London International Film School in 1971, as you know it had to close down in 1974 but it reopened again in 1975 so literally I was with the school from 1971 until I retired in 1987.

SP/JT: While you were there what was your particular job.

RB: I was the course director for the third term. That is known as the

documentary term when the students in units of 5 or 6 make one documentary film of 10 or 11 minutes and so I was responsible for helping them or supervising their scripts and making sure they prepared their scripts properly and their schedules properly and see the rushes every day and follow the editing process right through from assembly to final cut.

SP/JT: So that was a 3rd term of 6 terms.

RB: Yes. I have also looked after the 6th term which is the diploma term and the 2nd term which I looked after once or twice but mainly I've been with the 3rd documentary term.

SP/JT: That was a long period of teaching at the end of a long life of working, or the continuation of a long life of working. You haven't quite reached the extraordinary age that George Pearson was still teaching, I think it was 86 or something, it wasn't as long as that but nearly as long as that, did you work with George Pearson.

RB: I knew him well because his secretary was George Elvin's secretary for many many years at ACT. And I think it was George Pearson's school which eventually merged into Bob Dunbar's London School of Film Technique.

SP/JT: It was the Colonial Unit. They'd moved into Soho Sq where the GPO unit had been after the war.

Getting back to the London Film School, I'm sure you had a very satisfying time particularly with all those students who've made it as a result of everybody's training there. Are there people who've made it big, done well in the film world, who you helped train.

RB: I can't single out.

SP/JT: They've gone all over the world. One of the things you would have taught them is not to put their hand over a microphone, it's a neck mike, the sort you're not used to.

RB: Thank you. My respect for you sound recordists increases every day. I used to curse them, now I admire them.

SP/JT: Did you get any feedback from the people who went abroad, what they were doing abroad.

RB: Oh yes. A lot of the students who when they leave the school and get jobs in their home territories do write and tell us what they're doing. In fact the school publishes, the students publish a school magazine which has these accounts and interviews in.

SP/JT: The school must have had an effect all over the world.

RB: I think so. There's been. They don't all as soon as they leave the school become producers and directors of million dollar films, they start as the school expects them to as assistant editors and assistant directors and operators and so forth, and some in television. But many go on to be very successful indeed. It's wonderful when you get a letter from one of the students from Iceland saying what he's doing, from all over the place. We have students from South America, several from south America who have done really well. We had a lot of students at one time from Israel but at the beginning of the 6 Day War many of them were

summoned back and had to join the services. We've had students from Japan one of whom made a highly successful full length deploma film. You name the country and we've had students from it and of course we've had a lot of students from the United Kingdom, most of whom do get jobs, maybe not immediately but they get work, some of them have started up workshop units of their own for instance which are authorised by the trade union. I should say that the majority of students do get work in the industry, in the third world probably more in television than in film and what is more is a lot of the third world countries, or some of them, are establishing their own film schools, doing their own training on their own grounds. We thought this would mean probably a drop in the number of students coming to the school but actually the last two terms the numbers have increased.

SP/JT: Are your students teaching in the schools they've started up.

RB: Some of them are.

SP/JT: That must be fairly satisfying to have done that.

RB: It's well worth while. In fact if I can say a personal word. I've been one of the few fortunate people who have apart from one short period when I was a youngster of 16 have always worked in a job that pleases me and gives me satisfaction as well as earning enough to just about live on. There's no great money in documentary filmmaking or teaching as you well know but it's very satisfying work and that's worth everything else.

SP/JT: You, to switch to ACTT, played a considerable part in the history of the union, how do you see it's future, or is that not a fair question.

RB: How do I see the future of the union. The union is going through a period of total change in the industry, or industries which it represents. It is up against the deregulation of the television industry where everything is at risk now, the quota act has already gone, the Eady levy has already gone, that was for films of course, but with television, the BBC is under threat, the license see is inadequate for the BBC to do the job properly which it was set up to do. There are rumours for the commercial companies when their license comes up for renewal that the highest bidder can get it which will open the door to the Murdochs and people like that, there is the goverenment insistence that a big proportion of production must be given to independents, a lot of independents with good ideas, small companies, little money and great artistic ambition, who think they're going to make their fortune are going to find themselves very much unlucky, because the tendency is for the stronger groups of so called independents, largely with people like Murdoch and the other chap who owns the Daily Mirror behind them, they'll be inclined to get the so called independent product. Which means that there'll be a lowering of standards. As far as British films are concerned it will be the old old story of slump, of dfficulties in getting money, of independent producers and directors of outstanding ability probably taking 3 or 4 years getting the money together to even make a film and then finding that they're totally dependent on American money in the end in anyway with American supervision, so the whole outlook is totally different from what was happening in the early days of ACTT and the union has to adjust itself to this new situation, it has to be aware of the possiblities of danger in all the directions I've mentioned, of warming the members of the danger and preparing the best way of fighting back to preserve what they can for an independent British film industry, for an independent British television industry and for freedom and regular employment for its members which is going to be a

colossal task. And I think the leadership of the union has woken up to this fact and knows about it and is trying to do something.