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BECTU History Project
Interview No:
Interviewee: Sheila Collins
Interviewer: Roy Fowler
Duration: 1:33:25 & 0:28:25

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Side One, Sheila Collins interviewed by Roy Fowler.

Sheila, first of all, tell me when and where were you born?

SC: I was born in Croydon in March 1929.

Alright, and did you go to school there?

Well, being brought up during the war I had the usual chequered scholastic career due to bombs, I think I went to about eight schools, and ended up at Brighton High School.

Right. These were straightforward schools, not specialised in any way?

No. Well, you know, it started off with kindergarten and it went to the first secondary school, I was there three weeks and came the Blitz. I then was at a council school for one term because it was the only place I could get into and there I was pushed to a tech, grammar school. Well, you know, it's the usual, wherever you could get a place.

As a sideline, I've seen one of the most recent films was Hope and Glory*, John Boorman's film about the Blitz and the war – did that ring any bells for you?*

Certainly, because after all it was set basically really in Carshalton which was not very far away from where I lived, and while I was a couple of years older than he was at the time, I certainly remember a lot of the little incidents like picking up the bits of shrapnel.

You didn't know John at that time?

No, no. Well, he'd have been too young for me.

Oh indeed.

Two years younger.

Ah, yes, yes. Okay, back to what happened, so developing from your school years, what…

Well, in about 1945, '46 I was at the Brighton and Hove High School and I loved the theatre, I think this was a family interest, always a great interest in the Collins family, and I used to spend all my spare pocket money going down and queuing up for the pit or the gods at the Theatre Royal, seeing all the pre-London shows. And I had intended trying to

go on to university, but it was very difficult at that time because you'd got all the people leaving the forces, but still, I was having a go. But our headmistress had a very enlightened, well, it was only just beginning to be practical, of getting people down to talk for careers - matron of a nursing hospital and so forth - and then one day who came down but Michael Balcon and Cavalcanti, so after they'd talked to us I thought well of course, that's it. It's got all the interest in the theatre which I love, but which I knew there's no way of making a living in, well not really, you know, it's so small. So I chucked the university course, the high school's course, and went and took a shorthand typing course, because I thought well, from what it sounds, if I learn that I can start in, at least be earning and then find out what I want to do once I'm inside it. And that was really how it started.

But presumably, the prevailing thinking for a girl in those days it had to be secretarial to break into…

Because I didn't know, still wouldn't have known enough about it to know if I wanted to go into any specialised section like editing or anything like that, it just seemed the practical way, if I had that at least I could be sure of earning enough to live on.

Do you remember anything that Michael Balcon or Calvalcanti said to the girls, the way they presented the film industry?

Not really, it's such a long time ago. I think obviously Michael Balcon talked about the opportunities, the types of jobs. I think they obviously spoke about it overall. Cavalcanti probably spoke more about the artistic side, but I really can't remember in detail.

But they obviously impressed you.

Yes.

Okay. Was there any showbiz connection in your family at all?

Yes. My aunt was in musical comedy really it was, I suppose. She used to play leading lady in number one tour, about I suppose, oh, latest would have been the twenties. And my grandparents, the whole family were very interested in amateur theatricals. In fact I

believe, I seem to remember sometime in the past seeing an old newspaper which Grandma Collins, who was a formidable little five foot lady, always dressed in severe black with the high boned collars, and they laid on the opening show for the Kilburn Empire, which was such-and-such a poem recited by Mr So-and-So Collins, and this song sung by someone else, and all the local talent, really. It was just a general interest.

A vanished world.

A vanished world.

Did they tell you much as a girl?

Oh yes. I think my father, though I gather he was terrible, but even he had been interested, done a bit of amateur dramatics in his youth. Also a great interest in poetry and that sort of thing.

So with your secretarial qualifications, then what, how did you set about finding a job?

Well, one always tries to find out who knows someone who knows someone, and it was just a local, father of one of my friends happened to know Leslie Parkin, who at that time was with PFF, one of the joint managing directors, and arranged for me to go and see him.

PFF?

Production Facilities Films, which was the holding company for the Rank Organisation. I mean all the artists weren't under contract to the Rank Organisation, they were under contract to PFF, all the letters of engagement were PFF. It was the working company, in other words.

Yes, I see. Okay.

So I went to see him and he knew there was a vacancy in the Star Artists' Department, as it was called, for a junior shorthand typist, so that's how I started at £3.15 a week.

Where were they based?

South Street. David Henley was the head of the department and I worked with Olive Dodds and Ronnie Waters.

Did you live close by or did you have to…

No, I used to travel up from Hove.

And what would be the cost of travelling in those days?

I think it was a pound a week.

Really? So that was about a third almost of your income.

Yes. That was the rail fare, but the bus fares weren't much. Father of course bought my first season ticket but I paid him back by the end of the quarter.

You did, right, okay. Can you remember what South Street - was very nice – I suppose we ought to identify South Street. This was the headquarters mansion of…

Of the Rank Organisation, in Mayfair and on the first floor one had Mr Rank's office, John Davis and the boardroom and that sort of thing. I think, I can't remember whether we were on the second or the third floor.

What year was this?

This was 1947.

Right, okay. Was it a comfortable place in which to work for the staff?

Oh yes.

I'm thinking of the boss. His quarters were very elegant I believe?

Well, it was a converted mansion and all the rooms were, it was quite comfortable because after all it was their showcase. And obviously in our part, our office was no bigger than the normal sort of production office and there were four of us in it: Olive and Ronnie and Olive's secretary and myself. Nevertheless all your artists were coming in so you wouldn't be in a garret anyway. But it wasn't grand but it was perfectly practical and comfortable.

Sheila, describe what you did in those days.

Well, it was, you know, starting off as about the worst shorthand typist in the place, but one learnt as one went on and it was, well, doing all the bits and pieces, the typing and then gradually as one learnt more one arranged the appointments and so forth. But we were all in the same office so you learnt as you went along, became more useful obviously as you learnt it. In point of fact, Olive and Ronnie were dealing with the artists all the time, but particularly they had a lot to do with the younger artists, the new ones coming in. So that included all the people who went to the Company of Youth, which everyone still persists in calling the Charm School, and it was very interesting, of course you got to know all the people who are still, quite a lot of whom are still around, as they came in and played the game of spot the ones that'll last.

Was this, as it were, the heyday of the Rank Organisation or had it already gone into decline?

No, this was the heyday. It had an enormous list of contract artists going at that time, obviously from Phyllis Calvert, [Stewart] Grangers, [Margaret] Lockwoods, [James] Mason, down to the fifteen year old Di Dors and young Pet [Petula Clark] and all the others in between.

[10:01]
What exactly did the department do? Describe it in more detail.

Well, they obviously looked after, as children came out – children - they seem kids now, but as they came under contract they sort of looked after them from the point of view of

getting them down to the school – no, that's not quite right. I'll have to stop and think how one best sums it up.

Shall I stop?

[break in recording]

So you're in charge, or the department was in charge of in a sense scheduling the contract artists – is that right?

Yes, they would work out their future plans. When I say work it out, it would be according to all the various producers in the Rank Organisation if they wanted any particular artists or particular stars they might have conflicting requirements and the usual sort of thing. Also they would try and encourage the casting directors to introduce the younger ones into films and to use contract – producers and directors – to use contract artists rather than bring in people who were not under contract. In other words, to help build their people up. And one of the interesting things, again going back to this Company of Youth as distinct from charm school, of course as well as the four major studios: Ealing, Shepherd's Bush, Pinewood and Denham, there was Highbury, where John Croydon made those excellent little supporting pictures, and it was a training ground for the younger artists and younger technicians. And some very good things came out of there.

Yes, I'd forgotten all about Highbury. You're quite right.

And John Croydon of course was still around the industry for a long time, even after all that fell down I last had dealings with him when he was at Film Finances, the completion guarantors, and again, very helpful because of his knowledge.

Yes, tremendously knowledgeable, I remember him at Film Finances, yes. Right, so can you give us a sort of flavour of South Street in those days? Was it very much a well behaved, well mannered…

Oh yes. Everything was very formal, even… Mr Porter was the porter. This was always the laugh about his name, a very formidable ex-sergeant major or regimental sergeant major, I should think he was, in his navy blue suit, and he had two pages and I remember the great furore which went on when eventually they got put into proper little pages' suits, which cost a fortune. And of course they were growing like mad. Everyone thought this was a ridiculous waste of money but it was part of the image, I think at one point they thought should be built up, I don't know long it lasted. But anyway, there were, based there, there were central publicity. When I say – I don't know too much about this, but there was certainly artists' publicity, personal publicity… I'm trying to remember names now, and the general, the big bosses of the publicity anyway. I'm trying to remember his name, he wasn't a very popular man, so maybe it's just as well I forget it. Earl St John had very luxurious offices on the, well, I can't remember which floor now. Anyway, the whole atmosphere was slightly grand and of course there was, as all over the industry then, one dressed far more formally than is the way today.

Yes. And everyone was Mr, Mrs, Miss, I imagine? Or was it a first names place?

Oh, it was certainly first names in our – well, we spoke to those above us until one knew them well, quite formally. We were always called by our Christian names.

Right. Do you remember any of the office politics of those days, was this the point at which John Davis was ascending?

He was very much…

He was there?

He was very much there. In fact at one point I was asked if I would become his number four secretary, and I said no way. Not quite in those terms.

So he already had a reputation for being a rather tough man.

He was not popular, no.

How about Lord Rank himself, or Sir Arthur I suppose in those days? No, he was still a J Arthur.

He was still a J Arthur. Everyone liked him. I never saw him except in the distance and naturally I would have had no contact, no reason to come in contact with him, but he was very popular. But it was mostly JD who ran everything.

Did you have any dealings with the production people at this stage?

No.

The various companies and units?

Not really, because it would be done with the casting directors, so it was Budge [Weston] Drury, Maude Spector, Margaret Harper-Nelson at Ealing and – who was the fourth one? Anyway, there was a sort of group of… one casting director at each major studio and they worked principally through them. Olive and Ronnie probably did, naturally they spoke to the directors and producers, they would, but they wouldn't come into the office, there would have been no reason for them. So, you know, my contact was purely second or third-hand. At least one began to learn what it was all about.

And you took to it as a fish to water?

Yes.

You enjoyed it. Right, okay. Well then thereafter, how did your career develop?

Well, after about a couple of years, well it was nearly a couple of years, I thought it was time to move on, and also seeing the writing on the wall that this was…

[break in recording]

We were… let's then talk about some of the artists who were under contract for the Rank Organisation in those days, the dealings that you had with them.

A large number of them, and a lot of them had done very little, or some of them were brand new talent, pretty faces and so forth, and one had the people coming straight out of the army. There was the very elegant, slightly stuffy, Christopher Lee straight out of the guards, Tony Steel who had just – I don't think he was in a guards regiment – but he again had come straight out of the army. A lot, quite a few of them had made names for themselves not going on as artists or becoming stars, you know, Philip Saville who was a very promising young actor who of course became a very distinguished television director, Peter Murray who starred in several of the Highbury films, still around as Pete Murray. And a lot of the girls now have become character ladies, you know, they were young, pretty. Some of them vanished a little for years while obviously they were bringing up families, but we have always popping up Elspeth Grey, is turning up on the television, Rona Anderson I see is in a play in the West End, Barbara Murray playing the lead in another series. Another one I think we were all very fond of and I think anyone who ever worked with her liked her enormously, the young Di Dors, and she was very young, full of life and bubbly. Often getting into slight scrapes. And I say that purely, she got told off by Olive one day I remember, for turning up in those rather pompous days having worn shorts on a very hot day on public transport and 'really shouldn't be seen like that dear'.

Was that because of the propriety of the time or because she was an incipient movie star?

A combination of both. It wasn't quite done in those days anyway.

A maternal ticking off?

It was a maternal ticking off and that was a lot of the element of the department actually, particularly to the younger ones, they sort of did look after them, helped a lot with personal problems and liaised with their families and with any personal problems that they had, it wasn't just purely the finding them jobs and getting their careers done. I remember certainly Pet Clark's father could be quite a pain in the arse; he used to come up fretting about all sorts of things, and of course everyone was taking very good care of young Pet who was quite a kid in those days.

What did he fuss over, money or conditions or…?

Oh yes, money a lot of the time. He was very much after the, well shall we just say the best interests of his daughter.

Yes.

Also of course you saw a lot of people, they also saw a lot of people who wanted to be, come under contract, so there was a lot of parade of would-be talent, and some of it would have been quite good, but there was a limit of course to the number of people who could be taken on.

Who did the selecting?

[19:58]
Well, certainly in the early stages Olive and Ronnie saw quite a lot of these people and I think if they thought it was promising, then of course it went on to David Henley who was the head of the department. I remember Ted and Barbara Andrews coming in, trying very hard to get Julie Andrews on the books. But at that time, though they thought she had great talent, they made very few musicals and they had two singing young ladies: Sally Ann Howes and Pet, so if there were any musical parts… but you know, there were probably others who would have been very good but they could only cope with so many.

Yes. A couple of things come to mind. Anything further to say about Philip Saville, because as you just mentioned, he did go on to a very important career as a director? Do you remember him as a young actor?

Yes, not terribly well, but he was quite a good young actor. I think another one who went on to directing was Peter Hammond.

That's right, yes, yes, still working.

And there are probably quite a lot that I can't think of offhand. But not so many as one would expect, really vanished completely.

Well I think that's true in any business, in any area, people come, people go, some make it, some don't, some die, some live on. Do you remember what the conditions were for the artists in those days, how much they were paid, the sort of contracts they were given?

Starting right from scratch with the very young ones, like the girls coming in straight, I think they used to get £10 a week for the first six months, and after that they got £20 a week. Obviously the ones that were further – I can't remember the exact figures – but people like Dirk Bogarde and the others would be on, well, they'd certainly be higher, they might be fifty or even a hundred, according to how far they were getting on. The basic contract was a six-month option, so they had six months to see whether someone had any talent. But most of them went on to at least a year and if they made it by the end of the year…

Were there seven-year contracts as in the States?

Seven-year contracts.

All those with six-month options, or that was just the first option to be picked up?

First one was certainly six months, I can't remember if after that they went on to yearly options.

And was there a great turnover?

Not a vast amount. Nearly all I think went on to a year.

Do you know what the criteria were for selection? Were they based on the stereotypes of the time that one could say, right, another Phyllis Calvert or another Margaret Lockwood and another Stewart Granger?

To a certain extent, that would be true. I mean you had your ones that were pure looks and then they waited to see if they had acting ability. You had your Connie Smiths, who was the young Irish girl who looked almost a lookalike for Hedy Lamarr. Anne Gunning, who'd been a model. She married well and I think did not pursue her career. One had one

or two cases of this and of course you had quite a few little matrimonial ventures, artists marrying fellow artists.

Yes. Sometimes not matrimonial.

Well yes, I was… There was the odd little… now one particular young lady had no phone in her place of residence and it was always trying to get hold of her through the neighbour, one always got given another number and we nearly always knew whose number that was.

Right. There seems perhaps also to have been a class element in it, because you see those films today and the accents are excruciating. Now whether or not they're original accents or these were imposed upon them?

No. That was the dreaded Molly Terraine, who was in charge of the school, who was not at all popular with any of the artists and Molly Terraine in her hats was a very formidable lady. But I don't think she really did any of them any favours. She would insist on this plummy RADA accent, whatever their natural accent was, and they came in all shapes and sizes. But they all had to be ironed into this flat tone. I don't know whether it was what the producers and directors always wanted, but it's what they got when she got her hands on them. And she would have her own ideas of what they could play, and there's a perfectly typical instance when they were doing Shakespeare, rehearsing Shakespeare scenes, and Di Dors was dying to play Macbeth and Molly said, 'Nonsense dear, you can't possibly'. But she insisted and apparently did it extremely well, you know, in a class performance. So I think she would have her preconceived notions of what they should do and try to drill them into it. But I think some of them broke out of it.

Yes. Well Diana Dors certainly did. Does that then cover those times, that activity, do you think?

I think so. Well, I'm sure there's far more but it's hard after this length of time to pick bits out. It was very interesting and it was a completely different world. And of course you did used to have the, naturally directors and producers did not always want to take contract artists. In fact we gained a lot of extra contract artists by them saying no, I must have someone, and then they would be put under contract, I think, so we got some character

people on the books, for example, Freddie Piper. I think Gordon Jackson probably came on that way originally, but I think he was probably already on when I went there so I wouldn't be too sure about that.

He'd been very busy at Ealing I think for some time before that hadn't he, yes.

He came through Ealing. But I think really that's probably as much as I can usefully say.

Well as you say, it's a vanished world.

It's a vanished world. And of course a lot of the producers and directors of that time were rather of the sort of gentlemanly persuasion.

Oh yes, yes. The technicians I think were, the early ACT people were all highly middle class for the most part.

Oh yes, and even when I was in production for quite a few years, it was still jackets and ties and everything on the set, no casualwear. But then that was more practical then because in point of fact there was comparatively little location shooting, it was nearly all studio work.

Yes.

Which again, it was when the practicalities of going and standing on street corners in the middle of the night in the middle of the winter that everything started getting relaxed.

Indeed. Well, all the problems of the size of the equipment, the film stocks, the cumbersome sound recording. Yes, there were some limitations in production. Did you get involved in any of the social activities of either the organisation or the department? Did you get the opportunity to go to premieres or parties, things like that?

Oh yes. I didn't go to parties. I was a bit too – today I wouldn't be – but at eighteen or so then one was rather naïve, compared to the eighteen year olds of today. And also of course I lived down on the coast. But I certainly went to premieres. In fact the first grand

one I went to was the *Hamlet* premiere, because I had a boyfriend in the organisation of course at that time and we got tickets and it was a grand day, the first one, I got an evening dress, and it was all full evening dress in those days when you went to a premiere.

Yes.

Very grand, very exciting, the first one.

Well, they were aping the American type opening weren't they?

Yes.

To a large extent. Right, how long did you spend in the contracts department?

It was nearly two years, then it seemed time to move on. One could see the beginnings of the cracks, but it was also I'd been there nearly two years and I'd got as far as I was likely… not that I was thinking of it quite in those terms, it was just time to go. So I went and worked for, not very long, for a producer called John Corfield, I don't know if you remember him?

Yes.

But he wasn't in production at the time, but I only stayed there about three months I think, we weren't really suited to each other. And then I worked for a short time in an artists' agency who got hold of me and asked would I work for them, which was a natural development having come from that department. But not long after that I started working for Aubrey Baring and Maxwell Setton of Mayflower Pictures, and I was with them on and off, jointly or separately for about seven years, so that was when I really got involved in production.

[30:07]
Oh, that sounds really interesting.

Started working for them in 1949 and the first film I worked on was *Cairo Road*, which was almost the last film to be made at Welwyn Studios.

Was this Mayflower Productions any connection with the original Laughton Pommer company?

They had bought it from Laughton Pommer and in point of fact Max had been their solicitor, I think, or he was connected with them. He had been with the legal department at Pinewood originally when he came out of the army and then he met Aubrey and they bought the Mayflower Company from the Laughton Pommer set-up. Though I can't remember exactly what its connection with them was earlier, he had been connected with it at some point. Aubrey of course had been in the industry before the war, I think he was secretary of British National, as far as I remember, something like that. But they both came out of the forces. They had made one film before I joined them, which was *Snowbound*, which was based on a Hammond Innes book, *The Lonely Skier*, and Dennis Price was in it, I remember. That was made at Pinewood. And *Cairo Road* was their second film and I think it was one of the earlier ones that actually had a far-flung location because they did in fact go to Egypt to make part of it, which was quite a venture in those days. And that starred Eric Portman and a new young man, who'd come via South Africa, called Larry Skikne, but he changed his name at that point to Laurence Harvey, and for some reason or another – I can't imagine why – Eric Portman used to give him hell. But… that, as I say, that was my first introduction to actual production.

Right. You say it was made at Welwyn – you were based at the studio?

Yes.

And what precisely was your job on the film or in the company?

Well, I was secretary to Max and Aubrey. I and the accountant, Tom Curley, were the staff, so there were just the four: two producers and us, and we had offices in Soho Square, 27 Soho Square. They actually belonged to the NFFC which was just starting and that was a new building then and Romulus [Romulus Films] and John Woolf were on the ground floor. So that became quite a cosy little film enclave.

Yes. Were the producers creative producers, entrepreneurial producers? How did they see their role, how did they perform? I'm curious how a small production unit would have worked in those days.

Max with his legal training was more or less the executive producer and Aubrey was the more creative, technical producer. They chose the subjects and sorted out, obviously, the package between them – director, stars. When it came to getting the distribution and the finance and so forth Max of course would do all the contractual work, while Aubrey would carry on with getting the crew and that side of it. Though they overlapped and did a lot together.

This is when, 1950?

Yes, well, as I say, it was late 1949 I joined them.

And was it a time of recession in the film industry?

Well, it was certainly the beginning of the time when the Rank Organisation started breaking up and independent producers were really starting. In fact a lot of the people who had been under contract to make films at Pinewood and so forth were going out, had to go out on their own and of course a lot of technicians were no longer on permanent payroll. The whole thing was gradually changing.

Yes. Did the company have a release contract, a distributing contract?

It would be, they'd have to set it up for each film.

They did, yes. All those with the same distributor or… no?

The first one was Associated British, that was why it was Welwyn. I think the second one was probably *So Little Time*, which was also Associated British. No it wasn't, beg your pardon. That must have been with the Rank Organisation because the second one was the film which had the working title of *South African Story*, it came out as *The Adventurers*,

not to be confused with a bigger one called *The Adventurers* many years later made in South America, that was Jack Hawkins, starred in that. And that was, did have a South African location. And the next one was ABP, which was *So Little Time*. I think the next one must have been British Lion.

Do you know how they financed the films?

There was an element of the NFFC in it, I remember, and a distribution contract which they discounted. I think that was basically.

Right. And that probably was the general pattern in the industry at that time.

In the industry at that time, and then of course I imagine they carried some of the initial costs themselves.

Was it a profitable company do you think?

Not vastly. They got along, they just managed to go…

Hand to mouth?

…from picture to picture. Hand to mouth. But I would never really know how their profits went, but there was never a lot of money around, but on the other hand everything was done on a reasonable basis.

And your role was as, well the office secretary, but did you then get involved in production secretarial work, has this started for you?

Not really. Well, we worked together as should always happen on any good unit. I'd do all the work up until probably two or three weeks before the production secretary actually started, before the start of production or however long they wanted for a preparation period. But then they would start up in our offices quite often and we would swap our work, I would help out when I'd got time. And of course, well I used to be quite busy

because in those days of course even senior technicians had seven page contracts. There were no things like photocopiers.

Of course.

Or anything like that.

And they all had to be perfectly typed.

They all had to be perfectly typed.

Do you remember what they paid you?

Six pounds a week I think when I first went there.

Would that have been generous or the going rate more or less?

Going rate.

And were you still living at home or had you…

Well, what I used to… yes, I was still living at home but in the winter I used to stay with an aunt at Hendon when the travelling got impossible. So I sort of lived between my two homes. I didn't actually… it was a few years later that my family moved again to Warrington for my father's health, health reasons and that became a bit closer.

So you were commuting from south coast to Welwyn?

Ah no, that was from Hendon. No, no I couldn't possibly have done that.

That would have been quite a hike.

No, it just wouldn't have been possible.

Indeed not. Any recollections of Welwyn? Because it's a vanished studio. I don't know if the buildings are still there, but they're certainly not used as a film production lot any more.

I remember one was supposed to clock in, which always amused me enormously, because I'd always be much later than anyone else and ABP accountants couldn't – this also happened when I was at ABP in Borehamwood - they couldn't understand why I would be clocking in at ten, though often I'd been to the offices in town first and brought all the mail out. But I certainly remember at Welwyn, just because I thought well, this is ridiculous, going in and clocking in at about eleven o'clock and I had been in an hour or so before, but just on the vague principle that their accountants shouldn't query Max's and Aubrey's payroll, because I was their personal secretary.

And you were given a hard…

On overtime anyway.

You were given a hard time because...

No, it's just one of those silly things. Who's this clocking on at this time, you know.

Seeking a justifiable existence, presumably.

Seeking to justify their existence.

Right. Well, Welwyn itself, what are your memories of the studio? If any?

Well of course it was the first time I'd come across a studio so I didn't know what to expect. It was quite small, running down, there wasn't much there, as far as I remember, but I didn't know really what a studio should be like so I couldn't really tell and I can't really remember much about it, quite honestly.

[40:00]

I was out there and I can't remember it either. Yes, yes. So then, following on from there, how did it all develop?

Well, I stayed with them for quite a long time because they were both very nice characters, very nice people, and we had some lovely crews. They'd try and keep a nucleus when they could, but of course a lot of the people who are now right at the top were quite small fry then. Well naturally over that course of time.

And they would carry people between productions would they?

No, they couldn't do that, but they used to try and start them without too great a gap where they could. They'd try and get some favourites on. Though of course, still at that time, when you went to a studio you still had to take a certain number of people from the studio, so you did get a certain changeover.

Well, a small company such as Mayflower, what do you think it would hope to do? One film a year, two?

No. Well, they certainly did one film a year, but while one was in production – well this again is going back to what the two producers did – Aubrey would be seeing it through the production and Max would be working ahead on the next one. So it depended very much on circumstances how big a gap it was, you know, how difficult it was to raise the money or when artists they wanted were available, or directors. None of their films were world shattering, but on the other hand, I suppose by the standards of the time they weren't bad films either. There was *So Little Time*, there was *South of Algiers*, *Appointment in London* was probably one of the ones that lasted a bit better, that was the one about the bomber command which was written by John Wooldridge, who actually was a composer, but he was an ex-RAF man, as indeed Aubrey Baring was, and I remember we got a lot of Lincoln planes out of their cocoons – it was at the time when you could still do that – and a lot of it was shot out at Peterborough. And that had quite an interesting cast, because apart from the leads like Dirk Bogarde and Ian Hunter and Dinah Sheridan, there was a gang of young pilots and they now are all over the place. The Brat was played by Bryan Forbes, John Colicos played the Canadian one, of course he's been back in Canada for years, constantly cropping up on the Canadian films and having been in the classical

theatre over there. Don Sharp, the director. I've worked with him a lot since and we've had quite a few giggles about those things. And the second woman, who played The Brat's wife, Ann Leon, I hadn't come across from that day until *Hope and Glory*, when she turned up as Grandma.

Were these in the parlance of the time 'A' pictures or did they go out in support?

No, no, they were 'A' pictures.

Oh, were 'A' pictures, right. And they went out as part of a double bill, the top half of a double bill or…?

I think so.

It's difficult to remember those times isn't it?

Oh yes, they certainly weren't 'B' pictures or anything like that. In fact they may have gone out in some… because I can't remember the proportion of… I suppose most films then were double features weren't they, or I think had a supporting, they didn't go out with just a newsreel.

No, it was quite a package. It was the 'A' picture, the 'B' picture, the newsreel and a short subject, usually. And forthcoming attractions. [laughter]

And forthcoming attractions.

And an organ interlude!

Oh yes.

Right, so you said you were with them for how long?

Until about 1956. A little while before that they had split up, because they both had faith in different subjects, so they very amicably agreed to split up and because I'd done more

work for Max than Aubrey, I went on with Aubrey for a change, and I think the only film actually I worked on with him was – oh no, there were a couple – a little film with Max Bygraves called *Charley Moon*, and one with Hammer, *The Abominable Snowman*, would you believe. And then after that he was trying to set up *The Key* and it was being very slow and Lee Katz, who at that time was I think with United Artists, came over and wanted someone part-time so I worked for a while suiting both of them, you know, doing half a day here and half a day there. And then Lee was working on *The Vikings* and asked me if I'd take care of the London end of it. So that was my first job as a London contact.

Right. We're just about to come to the end of this side, so I think we'll make that a break.

[break in recording]

[46:55]
On Vikings.

Yes, well that really started what became my career for a long time, which was London contact. In fact I think I was the first one who ever specialised in it.

Was it your idea or…

It started naturally and then I did it deliberately, because I worked on a lot of big films and in the end I was running virtually a production office completely on my own this end, sending out, even often engaging artists and certainly getting all the equipment and everything that was needed and shipping it out and servicing it from there. I worked on things like *The Journey*, *Longest Day*, *Sammy Going South* – oh, and that's quite an amusing tie-up, follow on, from how I came into the industry. As you may remember, Michael Balcon was the executive producer at Bryanston and I never raised my voice, in fact I was always a very calm person, but one day someone in the office heard me really losing my temper with the shippers, with Sam Weller at Northern Transport. As you know, they – well, that's another story I may go into later about the shippers and so forth. And I went out to lunch and it was the first time I'd gone out for a full lunch for ages, because it was my birthday, and I came back and this whisper went out – Sir Michael wants to see you, Sir Michael wants to see you. I thought, my goodness, what's happened.

It was purely someone had overheard this. So I went in in sort of fear and trepidation because he was still a very awe inspiring figure. And anyway he said did I want to change the shippers, so obviously this had been told him that I wasn't happy. So anyway, when that was sorted out I went to the door and said, 'Anyway, Sir Michael, you know it's all your fault that this situation has arisen?' He said, 'What? What?' I said, 'You shouldn't have come down to Brighton High School in 1940…' whenever it was. And he was so tickled and amused that something positive had actually come out of his visit.

Sheila, tell us about your job in relation to the production of a film in those days, especially maybe in comparison with how it's done now. I suppose one can start out with a much larger crew and a great deal more equipment – would you think that's true or not? Bulkier equipment, certainly.

[49:31]
No, I don't think there was a larger crew. Certainly it was a larger sound crew, you had to have more on the sound because of the cable laying, but I don't think the crew size overall on those sort of medium size pictures were any greater. I didn't notice the bigger crews until I got on to things like *Vikings* and *Longest Day* and the, well you might say the international size picture. Certainly the equipment was much bulkier and one notices obviously, particularly – well, I should one say one notices today, because one took it for granted then that you had to have this bulky equipment.

Yes.

And of course it limited where you could go and naturally the hours you could shoot outside. In fact generally it was a much shorter shooting day than there is today, because even in the studios people stuck on the whole more strictly to the given hours and didn't run hours into the evening as they do now, and certainly on location. I wasn't there so much, but I think they had to stick pretty much with the daylight hours. Of course equipment was far less flexible. A very big deal doing night shooting.

Where did the equipment come from?

Mole-Richardson's the electrics. I can't remember where the camera equipment…

It would have come out of the studios.

That almost certainly came out of the studios, and the sound equipment.

And how was it shipped? By sea for the most part, in a distant location? Or were you already using air?

I think we must have used… I think we took it by air.

Even the very bulky stuff like generators?

You would try and pick, where you could… I was just trying, of course I wasn't in the production office on *Cairo Road*, but we worked with Misr Studios in Cairo, so I suspect that we picked up quite a lot of stuff there. It may not have been of the same quality as English stuff, but I certainly don't remember, I'm sure we didn't ship out generators or anything. And of course the whole attitude to locations was very adventurous then. There were sort of none of the things, perk things, that units today take for granted.

Where no white man has ever gone before.

No question of everyone having their own bedroom and own bathroom or anything like that and meals half the time would be packed lunches or whatever the local hotel could arrange or that they could get out to people. There was no specialised catering. Well, actually the first one I think who got really into this for locations was probably Phil Hobbs.

Did you get out to the locations yourself?

The first one I got out to in point of fact was *South Algiers* when I went out to Algeria. But usually I was kept back at London to do the liaison.

What were the crews like? Were they co-operative? They were.

In point of fact it was very much a family atmosphere in a lot of instances.

Yes. That went for NATKE and ETU as well as ACT?

Well, as far as I know, but at that time I was more head office staff. I worked at the studios but I wouldn't have quite the same… be so aware of any problems in that direction as people in the production office were, unless someone came in and said, oh my God, you know, and gave forth about it.

Did you have to arrange for rushes to get back and be processed, the return, the reports…

No, you didn't usually return them in those days. At least… do you know, I can't remember. It certainly wouldn't be, as it became later, where you were rushing them back every day. They would send them back, send them to the labs and probably someone would see them here and they might have possibly sent a batch out if they could get hold of a local cinema and run a batch.

Telephoning wasn't that easy in those days either, was there a great deal of communication back and forth – how did that operate?

I think most of it was done by cable. In fact that went on for quite a long time. Telex seems comparatively recent. One used to rely on cables and little [incomp – 54:39] with twigs [?] running through the jungle. Or rather dubious radio connections between wherever the nearest capital or centre was and radio out with the unit.

What were some of the titles? You've mentioned one or two – The Vikings.

Vikings, *Journey, Tarzan's Greatest Adventure*, which I think was the first Tarzan film actually made in Africa, which amongst its supporting villains had Sean Connery. *Longest Day*, *Judith*, *Exodus*. Actually, if I'd got that, I'd be able to go on from there. All films of that type.

Yes. These are major budget films now. Any recollections in particular, any anecdotes that spring to mind? People, places?

Well, I think I'm the only one who managed to lose a Churchill tank for ten days.

Oh, tell us about that.

Well, on *Longest Day* I was the only production person in England at all and I had also with me a military adviser, a naval adviser, and Maude Spector doing the casting, and then we did everything. Anyway, we borrowed a tank from the British Army in Germany, naturally our military gentlemen arranged all the contacts. I arranged to ship it by rail from Germany to the Ile de Ré, where it was supposed to appear on the first day of the British landings. Unfortunately French railways went on strike, so it got shunted down a siding. It took them ten days to find it, which is why if you ever look at the film closely, you will see that Churchill tanks do not turn up until the second day of the landings.

Oh. Right, so you changed history?

We changed history. And of course one had all the things of getting – this happened on a lot of pictures with various things – firearms in and out of the country could be quite tricky and well, every picture had its own problems. Often one was trying to… they'd send back for something like make-up from London and one would cable back 'Have you tried Max Factor Nairobi?' Half the time you'd be getting it out, keeping your fingers crossed that it would get there in time. I think, as now, everyone found it easier to wire back and say send it out without checking out their local sources, but well, this still goes on, how much you can get locally.

The time was so often so short that people found it easier to say send it rather than go and look for it I suppose.

But they don't always take into account the logistics.

Indeed. On The Longest Day *Zanuck was working out of Paris?*

Yes.

Did you have dealings with him or with his office?

Well, he came through London. He was here a few days in which time I had small dealings with him.

Any memories of him? One of the last of the moguls.

One of the last of the moguls. Oh yes, I had to go round to one of the major hotels, I can't remember whether it was The Connaught or somewhere like that, late at night, took my typewriter just in case, but nothing else, so I found myself typing letters when all the offices were shut and the only paper I could find turned up in five different colours of copy paper, so I said I hope you don't mind, Mr Zanuck. He didn't care as long as the letters got out at least. I just treated him like any other producer and tried to get out what he wanted and that all worked there. I'm afraid I just, while we naturally with my generation treating them all with due respect, one couldn't really allow oneself to get too scared by them because they wouldn't do anything. And I found Preminger was a typical case of that.

What did you work with Preminger on?

On *Exodus*.

Yes. Well, a thumbnail sketch on Preminger might be interesting to hear.

Well, I suppose what was fairly typical, he wanted to go to Germany and travel from Germany, I think it was through to France. Anyway, it was some time when there were some exhibitions on and no way could I get him a guaranteed seat on a plane and he said, 'You've got to'. We were all working on this for Preminger but no-one would guarantee it. We thought it was quite likely when he got there. So I said, 'You'll probably get it but I'm not going to say yes'. He wanted someone to say yes, but I thought, that's doing that if it doesn't happen. So in the end I said, 'Would you consider going by train?' He said, 'If I have to go by train, I'll go by train'. Then I couldn't get a sleeper of course. So I said I'm sure you will when you tip the man. I said, I'm sure you'll go by plane. He said, 'If that is the only way that I can get there darlink, I will sit up all night, but be sure I get

there'. And of course we did get him a seat on the plane. But the thought of actually saying you could do something and not doing it with someone like Preminger, I thought it was much to stick my neck out and say, what are the alternatives, and face up up to it then.

[1:00:21]
But I'm sure someone like he would always look for a weakness or an opening.

He did, he pounced on weaknesses and one or two people had a very difficult time.

Planes seem to have been his moment of truth. I remember once – this is quite incidental, a digression – but he threw such a scene in the airport in Venice once because the plane was delayed and he insisted on being driven out separately to get on first, it was so unseemly. But anyway, the measure of the man.

He wasn't a particularly easy man, I don't think the crew found him particularly easy. But, on the other hand, they didn't say anything too bad about him.

No, he worked didn't he? And provided work. What then, what next? How did your life develop?

Well, I kept doing things like that. *Last Safari* was another one I did, *Blue Max*, *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, *Living Free*. These are probably all out of sequence. But I was more or less doing the same job, though now I tend quite often to go and clear out a picture, send the equipment back, because I'd become quite an expert on shipping by then. If they wanted to move on or something I'd go over and take over from the point, from the production office. In fact on *Judith*, I ended up having at least two or three months, a couple of months out in Israel, because I went out and they kept putting back the end of shooting, it kept going over and over schedule till it all finished with a glorious storm and one was trying to get all the crew out with no planes going and routing everyone all round the world on Shabbat and I ended up getting the equipment, it took at least another month to get all the equipment out. I'd try loading the canteen on to every boat that was sailing from the docks and it was always being taken off because there were oranges to go, until eventually unfortunately got broken into and everything stolen out of it before I eventually got it back.

Was there continuity of work for you in those days or were there gaps?

Well, I went five years with just only managing to grab an odd week. In fact I got so overtired that I just had to make a break myself.

Could these be counted as British pictures or were they essentially American pictures based on England?

A mixture. The bigger ones of course were American based, but then I think they were more American financed even if they were made over in Europe, like *Lion in Winter* and things like that.

There are some fascinating titles there. Would you like to talk about any of them in particular? Lion in Winter*, for example?*

Well that, one of the most amazing things about that was that it was thrown together in six weeks. Martin Poll who was the producer came over to make a film called *Ski Fun* with Peter O'Toole and it was all being set up and I even had a cast list, which I didn't include in there because it never got made. And something went wrong that it couldn't be made then, and so he came in, put a script down on the desk and said, 'We're making that instead. We've got six weeks'. So it was six weeks to prepare a big period picture, have every costume made, every prop made, engage every artist. Of course he'd got Hepburn and O'Toole, but they were looking round finding four youngsters to play… trying out lots of young actors and they took a theatre and they were trying them out on stage and then they used it for rehearsals. So that's how Anthony Hopkins, Philip Castle – no, John Castle – and Philip Dalton [Timothy Dalton]. Nigel Terry, all got their original screen breaks, their first noticeable part.

It doesn't show as a hurried production, I'll say. It's, I think, I find an interesting film.

No, it was amazing. I mean we built that enormous castle in Ireland beforehand, six weeks, Maggie Furse had every costume designed and made, and again, the casting was coming through as they went. You can imagine the art department problems, and having

every hand prop made, and I think that was one of my horrific shipping things. In that case of course it wasn't by air, one was sending trailer after trailer over by road. And because a driver had a very early start to make the boat he'd taken the van and trailer home and it was stolen during the night. It wasn't found for several days. You can imagine the panic because it could not be made again in the time, but eventually it turned up, obviously they'd opened it and found it was completely useless, the contents were useless from their point of view. For several days we were really in a tizz because you can imagine the tight schedule, a film as elaborate as that as far as period went.

Suicidal, one would feel, I imagine.

Yes. It was hard work, but it was absolutely fascinating.

You are operating as a freelance or do you have a company? Have you set yourself up?

No, I've always operated as a freelance.

Yes.

I've just gone from job to job.

I see, okay. Then again, more films of that time – anything that comes to mind, or other sidelines in production in the fifties and sixties?

Oh, *Blue Max* again was very interesting. That was the first time one had to get involved with making period aircraft which would fly. Of course I'd come across this – not aircraft necessarily – but doing the research or finding out where original things were made and getting, like for *Longest Day* I think getting on to Schermuly and making them dig out their original designs for the grapnels that could be… I think it was for *The Longest Day*.

So you were doing that rather than the art department?

Well, if you were the only one in England there was no such thing as an art department. This is why I got involved in every department. Because anything they wanted they'd

have to do through me, because they were all miles away. Whether it was sort of bits of military equipment or trotting along to the Admiralty and doing research on exact, meeting people who actually were on the boats that stopped the refugees going to Palestine and talking to the guys who did it and finding out exactly what their procedure was and sending that out to…

How long would you be on a film, a major film like that? And how much of that would be pre-production?

Quite a fair whack. And of course the clearing up. Not through the editing stages, but until everything was back to base. Or sometimes one would be involved in editing periods, but not so much on those type of films, quite often it wouldn't be done in England.

Did you work consistently with one company or…?

No, I was constantly changing from one to the other, because after a while I got known for doing this.

Were you getting screen credits?

No. No, I wasn't even a member of the ACT, they wouldn't let me in doing that.

Oh, would they not?

No, because I wasn't a production secretary as such, there was no such grade.

Yes, that's still a crime, there's no such grade.

I worked in the business about, nearly twenty years before I got a ticket.

Okay. Let's talk about ACT and ACTT then since it's come up. You tried to join for the first time when, do you remember?

Oh, I suppose it must have been about *Blue Max* time, which would be… oh crikey. Could tell from my dates on that. Anyway. It was just because…

Middle sixties was it?

[09:43]
Middle sixties, yes. Because I happened to be talking to George Elvin, through whatever I was doing, I was talking to him about some crew problem over in Ireland and I said to him, well, doing this job and doing this production work… he said, well you should be a member of ACT, the work you've done and you've always done, but we can't let you in, not unless you work as a production secretary. I said, but there's already a production secretary on most pictures I work on and it's slightly different. So it went on like that for years and how the deadlock got broken, and this was on a film called *The Bells of Hell Go Ting-a-Ling-a-Ling*, which the Mirisch were making, and I was taken on to that to be London contact, it was to be made in Switzerland, David Miller was directing it who directed *Judith*, who I knew. Bob McNaught was the production supervisor. And they were going to have two units in Switzerland and there was a great shortage of production secretaries, they couldn't find a soul, full employment. By that time I didn't want to be a production secretary, I'd got, well doing this job and I liked this job. But Bob McNaught said, you'll have to join, and Monica Rogers, who was the producer's secretary, will have to do the second unit. So I said I don't particularly want to, oh alright. So we got our tickets because there was no-one on the books. But I thought, you know, on this one, it's quite a funny thing, I'd still sooner do my job. So I sent a cable to a boat in mid-ocean to Rhonda Groven [ph] coming back from Australia, got her on the picture, but in point of fact it packed up after seven weeks' shooting.

So you were lucky.

So I was lucky.

It does seem extraordinary that they weren't flexible enough to recognise that you were doing work deeply completely involved in production and yet say there was no grade that covers it.

I'm afraid they still tend to do it today.

I'm afraid they do. Some do, some don't.

We tried to, when there was a lot of work around – but it's a bit difficult at the moment to say, there are several people who've put in for tickets over the last little while who should have them, from their experience, they're certainly perfectly capable of doing it. But the trouble is then when an awful lot of people are on the books, you have to tend to stick a little bit to the rulebooks and not…

Yes, I think there are what, you know, closer views and larger views, longer views.

But I think this will break down. What we're trying to do now, if the BFPA don't block us completely which they may do, we're trying to create not necessarily a formal grade, but take people in as assistant production co-ordinators. That is they cannot work on their own unless they've done so long. As soon as they get offered a job as a production co-ordinator when things become a bit healthier, they don't have to go through the whole motions, they can then just be up-moted into it, in other words, sort of put them on a closer waiting list. But the BFPA probably won't accept it and we may come to grief. But unfortunately at the moment we still have to say, well unless there's a positive job, and there is a job and there's so many people out of work, we have to say to the producers, why don't you use these people. But frankly, I've always thought we shouldn't be afraid of competition, we should – particularly if they're people who've been around a long time and know it and deserve to be in it.

Indeed, well yes.

We're trying to do something.

And it's especially going to be difficult to maintain when the closed shop is no longer legal. It will cause problems. Sheila, you joined the union then at the time of Blue Max*?*

Well, this was *Bells of Hell*.

Bells of Hell, *sorry, yes.* The Bells of Hell.

I can't remember it now, which film I actually first did it on.

So you were finally in. Was that a great moment of truth when you were in the union, did you suddenly start to take an interest in ACTT?

Well, not vastly. I went along to the first sort of section meeting and said I'd serve as a reserve on the committee, but never got called, which could easily happen. But I didn't really get heavily involved until come our own mini revolution when I was working at Euston Films on *The Sweeney* and it was the time when we still had a freelance shop and everything went through there and it was in the control, or seemed to be in the control of a certain group of people who were… it was a bad time when the studios were all closing, remember, and dangers of them selling up and there was this policy of the union, ownership of the film industry under workers' control and no four wallers, and I think they were telling us we'd have to stop work because they regarded Colet Court as a four waller and we thought this is ridiculous and started our own movement, which we called the Action Committee, getting all the members of the ACT Films Branch, as it was then, to come to meetings. I don't know if you remember that?

Yes, yes I do.

So that was when I became involved, sort of getting the people to the meeting. There were about ten of us who said well, this is something everyone should know about because I don't think people realise what we're supposed to do and we're all supposed to work in a different way and we don't think this is the answer, let's all get together and get everyone together. It's important enough that all the people who had been, like us, sitting around on their backsides never going to meetings and just getting on with working and not noticing what's happening elsewhere. So after that I became active because I became on the branch committee as either assistant secretary or secretary for several years, so I was quite a while doing that. Then I thought I'd done it long enough, four or five years I think, doing one or the other, and just then became just stayed with section committees, not every year, I used to give it a break every now and again, particularly if I knew I'd had a busy year. Been on the General Council several, well, I was earlier and I have been for the

last two or three years. Seen quite a few changes, obviously, I mean part arising out of the fact that those meetings, as you probably remember, we structured the film branch, so it went back to the sections which seems to have worked very well.

Yes.

It has generated more – although there's still too much of lack of interest, lack of going to meetings, but it still seems to work better than it did before, at least, in many areas. You get some very useful things coming out like the safety regulations and the special effects, improved quite a lot of things there. Well, various sections have done their own, brought their own bits forward. I think ours had quite a lot to do with getting the pension fund going again. They've also introduced, or tried to get through things about increasing insurance and, you know, things that you wouldn't actually expect from a production department section.

People of our generation can't imagine I suppose the film business without ACTT. It's interesting to talk to those who were there at the beginning, who worked, you know, before there was a union and the conditions in which they did work. What are the benefits of the union? I suppose they're fairly obvious to us now aren't they?

Well, I think we'd be in a sad way without it. Whatever people rant on about, they never do anything for us, they never stop and think what it would be like if the ACTT didn't exist. They may not get everything that they want, but we all know, we've all worked on pictures and we know what certain producers and directors would do if there weren't the union restraints. And the fact that someone could turn round, production manager, and say you know how much that's going to cost if you do work them like that. The fact that there are the break times, there is the overtime, which again, I think people are mad when they keep doing these all-in deals without any safeguard. I mean I know it's a great temptation, particularly when there isn't much work, and some are quite genuine and not abused, but I think we've all worked for the directors who will want to go on and on and on into the night and without the union there would be no protection against this. All you could do is either do it or leave the picture.

[1:19:52]

It's very worrying that at a time when unions generally are under attack and ACTT I think in particular is on the hit list, it's a matter of great concern what is going to happen in the future.

I think so. And I'm definitely in two minds, I can't make up my mind whether its amalgamation with BETA is a good idea or whether it isn't. I can see two distinct views on this, one that losing our independence and the big say that we do have in the running of our affairs here, which I think is one of the things that has been, kept it really alive.

Absolutely. Our somewhat individualistic attitude toward running a union, yes.

The fact that we don't all agree and if someone objects they can get up and object, even if they're a minority, it can affect other people's thinking. Whereas being part of a monolith like that… But on the other hand, is that necessary to protect ourselves. I don't know. And I don't anyone really knows anyway.

No, I do think you're right, it comes down to opinion and I suppose opinion will finally decide which is the lesser of two evils.

Two evils, and they both seem unfortunate.

They're dire, aren't they? They are indeed. Yes, it's interesting that people really are agonising over this and find it almost impossible to come to a decision. I think in that fashion the decision well may be made for us by the events, by the way…

I think so.

Yes, events proceeding.

That it will come to a point where the whole thing may be… all these talks of shall we amalgamate or shall we not or go through the motions, which should take two or three years before they could possibly get a formula really acceptable. In that time political events may have overtaken us and the whole thing may completely change, with all the different changes in technology and the… Once again, the film industry is having to face

a complete change. It happens every few years. Other people don't notice it, but it happens gradually; the whole way of life, the whole format changes.

I was wondering this morning, listening to the radio and the accounts of on this day the fact the stock markets of the world are collapsing, I did wonder if you could see it as a watershed, if we're too close to it to perceive it immediately, but if this now is going to be a turning point that the quite extraordinarily ignorant government administration to which both the United States and this country have been subjected to in the last few years, whether now they were going to decline. But out of that what will come and one would like to see, to see them all sort of trotting roughly down the middle of the road, but there is one path over to the right and another path over to the left and I suspect that we'll be taking the extreme rightward one even more so, and in which case just out of sheer self-defence we might have to amalgamate no matter what.

It doesn't help the film industry, this, because at the moment with the financial crises throughout the world and particularly in America, it's meant a virtual drying up of the dollar and it certainly hasn't been helped by our government's measures in taxing visiting stars, technicians, directors and…

Dismantling all the aid, giving no tax relief whatsoever.

All the aid, taking off the ceilings on the insurance, which makes a big difference to any budget of any film. May seem a small thing compared to the others, but you take that ceiling on National Insurance and with a hardworking crew with a location picture and a lot of overtime and your top technicians now earning quite considerable sums of money, particularly when you're working those hours, it can make hundreds of thousands of pounds difference on a picture and that can make the difference between make and break. So all these things.

Tremendous adding to it, I imagine.

Yes. So once again, I think the film industry is having to face change again, but it keeps the best and probably get used to the idea of more and more – yet again – more and more for television.

Yes, for television and the so-called ancillary methods of distribution.

Yes, video.

Video, satellite, yes, cable, yeah. Which is fine if somehow out of that comes what we would I think incline to call worthwhile production, but if it is just filling screen time for morons then it's an industry that…

Well, I'm sure, I'm sure that somehow, because there'll be enough people who still want it, I say that, who want to make it, but somehow even if it's only a few showcase pictures that there will always be room for the showcase picture. And I don't necessarily mean the enormous budget picture which half the time ends up as no better than any other, it can be a disaster even if you spend fifty million dollars, as you know, but also for the, well, like the [David] Puttnam type of picture which is made on, were made on a reasonable budget, but with people determined to make their pictures.

Yes, I think that's the civilised way of looking at it, it might be… but I think you're right, I think that there will be a survival of production, but on what scale…

There won't be… I'm sure there won't be so many big pictures, for example.

And although there's [incomp - 1:26:14] such as Channel 4 and Film Four International that have done so much for the British film industry in the last few years, already they're under attack, partly in terms of sponsorship, but more especially in terms of a public asset to be grabbed and to be privatised and used for profit rather than for…

That would be the most appalling thing.

Yes, yes, but we live in an era of philistinism.

Yeah.

But all those things are in the future, now in terms of the past is there anything else before we finish that we should touch on?

I think a small pause actually.

[break in recording]

[1:26:58]
Well we were talking, flipping back a little bit, about locations in the early days. Of course the development of location caterers, I can't remember exactly when it came, but the first one that I had contact with who handled overseas locations was Bill Hopps [ph] who came out of the airborne actually, and was the first one I remember getting himself organised to cover really distant locations and going into such things – I remember being impressed at the time because no-one had obviously thought of it before – checking up on the local water supplies, whether we could actually drink the water and therefore give the crew from the wagon water and soft drinks as distinct from all fizzy drinks, which believe you me, the amount they were drinking in these hot climates, made quite a difference. And then another early favourite, I never came across them because I was always back at base, was the famous two elderly ladies, Lewis and Clark [ph], who were famed for their home cooking and particularly the splendid teas with all the homemade cakes. And of course quite a few other caterers started out. Now there are so many it's not true because everyone's on the move and so much is shot on location and the sort of things that were accepted by units in the early days, as I said, the sort of permanent packed lunches, are no longer the least bit acceptable. But this is perfectly right, because when you think the hours the crew is out, an army feeds on its stomach, and I think they're right to be fairly demanding, though it still produces problems. But certainly in the early days that was all a new venture and pioneering it involved certainly very new concepts. And of course there were no such things like trailers and artists' caravans. Caterers started off with tents and all the facilities were whatever you could get locally, whether it was artists' facilities – make-up, hair – it was a completely more adventure, well, make do and mend, and it was amazing how effective some of these were. The shipping again became a very specialised thing. There was originally one company, principally Northern Transport, who were the first ones I remember in 1949 handling, beginning to specialise in film work, because it became a separate thing from their normal shipping, because of course we always wanted

to move in a hurry, whereas normal shipping at that time were used to taking so long over certain jobs and it became quite an art getting special permits into countries, getting bonds set up in the countries, and I think also getting to know the local ways as to where the baksheesh went if you were ever going to get your stuff out of the customs.
[1:30:14]
And from the original people in Northern Transport there were three who particularly spring to mind on the shipping side. There was Sam Weller who was in charge of it, Danny Danziger [ph], who originally did all the rail stuff, and Geoff Kelly [ph]. There were also the people who were much better known then who handled all the people travel and they became sort of fairly well known through the industry. Anyway, going back to the freight, which of course I was more concerned with most of my life, they split up: Danny Danziger [ph], Geoff Kelly [ph], each went to two big agencies, and so for a long time there was a certain rivalry but one could rely on really expert knowledge and they became very involved and very much part of the film industry. And it spread, a lot of other people thought it was a good idea after this and all sorts of companies sprang up. But of course, again, with the trials of the last few years, more and more of these have dropped out. They'll take it up for a short time because they think it's easy and there's a quick profit and then they find it's not quite as simple as all that. But there are still people, you might say, that have come through this chain starting from the people from Northern Transport, trained by them, and they train new people and a lot of this derives from there even though the conditions have changed a lot in those early years. And not all the changes have been for the better. You've got far more choice of aircraft now, but far more regulations. You used to be able to get your rushes out of an airport in about two hours, maximum, that is from the time the plane touched down to the time it was in your hands, and sometimes you'd get them out in an hour because you could just go…

[1:32:17 end of tape]

[00:00:08]
Pick it up when you like, Sheila. You were saying about the change in the shipping, how much more relaxed and freer, easier it used to be.

Well, shipping and planes generally. Of course, as you know, it's a long time that there's been this first class travel in our union agreements. Well this started because of course it

was rather necessary in those days. Planes were held together with sealing wax and string and of course they used to take a very long time to get anywhere. So, because the crew would need to work reasonably soon after they got to the other end, I think in those days you tended to allow a little more time till they started shooting it and at least time to get themselves together instead of sort of going virtually off the plane to the location, which can happen these days. Well not quite as drastic as that, but nevertheless. But the whole thing, while in many ways it appears to have speeded up because planes are faster, you can now lose all the time you've gained through hold-ups, regulations, waiting times, and of course all the security problems that arise now.

Yes, it's very difficult to remember times when one just walked on to a plane.

And we were not going into places like London Heathrow Airport with all the problems there, you were going into Blackbushe because Heathrow wasn't open then. There was one plane coming down and everyone was concentrating on that, so they'd walk off, get the equipment off, there'd be a customs man there to deal with it immediately, because that's all he had to deal with. Much simpler. So it might appear much slower and, as I say, the smaller planes, you would have more problems with getting your equipment on one plane or apparently you would. But then there were also planes, freighters in existence, which you could – maybe there still are – with the great big drop-down backs that you could get big equipment on.

Yes, I think they still fly.

They still fly. Because I remember having a great argument on, must have been *Last Safari*, they wanted a Chapman crane out in Africa and I could have chartered one of those fellows for a thousand pounds, but they thought it was too much, so they insisted on sending it by sea. I said, 'Alright, if you insist, but it'll only go on this boat which goes all round Africa'. So they got it six weeks into shooting because the captain picked up other cargo. But I had so many battles about what I thought false economies. I expect everyone has, but mine was always on the shipping and on the shipping of the rushes, it was cheaper to pay… I was only saying a few pounds more in most cases, but it only got through afterwards and only the accountant would admit it.

It's a sad fact of life

I'm sure the same goes on today.

The accountants are always wrong, it seems. Right. Any other things that changed for better or for worse? First class travel you mentioned a moment ago.

Yes, well of course it's really not so necessary. People still would like it, obviously, it's more comfortable, but they are not spending the same time in rattling under-pressured – well, I don't know about under-pressured – but the journeys are shorter and the difference it makes to the budgets the accountants are quite justified in saying – and producers – we can't afford to pay first class airfares for seventy people on a long run when if anyone were travelling on their own they would, with today's conditions, travel economy or certainly coach. Well of course coach has come more or less to replace first, in many cases. But that was the basic reason for that insistence on first class travel and really now in many instances it really is one of the extravagances we should do without, because it may be our rights, but it makes a big, big difference to the budget and I think it's one of the areas we could help instead of saying want, want, want all the time, because there is this danger of us pricing – there always has been – over-pricing ourselves. I always think people should be paid fairly, particularly no-one should make, cut deals, but one does, can reach the point one adds on so much that we cut off our noses to spite our faces in the classic old cliché.

Yes, if there is lots and lots of money then I suppose it's fair that people don't live worse than normally they would if they were at home, but…

Well, I think…

…technicians are inclined to adopt a lifestyle which ordinarily they don't treat themselves to.

This is really what I'm saying. Not that they should be in any grotty conditions. I mean the time…

No. It shouldn't be unsafe…

…for rough conditions should be if they're a small lot in some location which they know about the conditions before where it is just not possible to eat anything but, shall we say simple? But then, if that's known before, that's fair enough, people still do accept that, particularly in documentaries, I'm sure. But on the big pictures people have got very used to a standard.

Yes, travel, hotels, food.

Meals at the highest rate, not the target.

That's very true.

And if you give a lot of them the choice between taking money or staying in… a lot of them want to move out of the first class hotels and take the money and of course they're quite happy to live somewhere else as long as they're paid the money, which is not, well, not really the object of the exercise.

No, it's odd we're creating a situation in which films don't get made or at least it is detracting from whatever ends up on the screen.

Yes, well this is really it. But I certainly don't think that they should be stinted on all the vital…

No. No, I don't think many people would suggest that.

But it's a hard thing, it's a hard life…

Yes.

…on location. It's tough physically.

The crews work very hard and very long hours, but indeed they're extremely generously rewarded. No, I agree with you, there is a kind of fair balance to be struck.

Every now and again they get too greedy.

Yes, yes, well pendulums swing.

The pendulums swing, so then, unfortunately then they complain when it catches them up the other side. Never mind. Yes, because even in those days, I remember those first locations, there was no case like there is today, every crew member gets picked up at home with all his luggage and all that bit. There was a coach leaving from Marble Arch and everyone made their way to the coach. Mark you, I can't remember if they had to take taxis they were given their taxi fare. Quite likely that could happen, I can't remember. I can't think of any more on that bit at the moment.

Okay. What about personalities? Who would you say is the most unforgettable character you've met in this industry?

Oh crikey. I think we'd better have a pause for that.

[break in recording?]

Well, who comes to mind as someone who's given you a lot of pleasure, a lot of aggro, a lot of professional satisfaction?

I worked, because I've worked for a long time so much on my own and all my contacts would be… the personalities you mentioned were rather remote. In fact, more than anyone possibly, and I've always regarded myself as a background character with a very open door and most of the production managers I've worked with have had the same thing, open door attitude in the production office, I sort of deal… I'm always sort of chatty enough to the producers and so forth, particularly when I get to know them very well, deal just as much with the NATKE – well, NATKE, can't say NATKE any more – but all the unit, from bottom to top, and the drivers, who very much come under my wing, and people

like that. So I suppose they are just as much a part to me as the big names, the big personalities, I think they in many ways have affected my life more than the characters.

Well they're the ones who make it possible for the characters to be characters.

Yes. And they've been the ones that I've concentrated on, because all the assistant directors are looking after the directors, they're coming in saying, 'He must have…' and we're saying, 'Hmmm', you know, all the things that go on, what is practical and what… anyway, all the usual production office. So really, though I've worked with, on pictures, with and met and done work for, you know, as we mentioned, Zanuck, Preminger, Litvak, well, all these people, only by secondary impact have they affected me. How they've worked on the picture of course has affected the way I've worked, but they're not the ones I remember first. I would be hard put to pick any person or people, because I've worked with so many lovely people, really nice people and great crews. In fact I loved it all.

[0:10:49]
Have you worked with foreign crews to any extent?

Yes. Not completely foreign crews. Obviously foreign crews…

A mixture. Foreign personnel on a British picture?

On a British picture or an American picture. I've never worked on a completely foreign picture. I've worked with French, Belgian, Kenyan.

Is there a difference, do you think? Or is there an international freemasonry of production people?

There is a… answer to that both is yes, really. There is a difference in the approach I think, say between the French and our own crews, they do work in a slightly different way, but at the same time there is that international bringing our own things to it. But they of course have as good a tradition of making films as we have and some very fine ones, but they are used to more pinch hitting than we do, I think, and have on the whole worked with smaller budgets and less facilities than we have. I haven't worked enough in France

to know if this is overall true, but the feeling I did go… when I worked there and worked with, obviously on things like *Darling Lili*, one was working… I worked in Belgium and France for some time so we were working with some quite good people on a film like this, but I think they probably had more flexibility in their crews. I'm not sure. You'd have to really talk to a technician about this. I always enjoy working with foreign crews, even if they're just local people, not necessarily foreign technicians, because you certainly understand far more of the problems and of their life than if you're just sort of drifting through a place. But I think I was always working at such a pace that I didn't have time at the time to analyse differences and things, it was just a case of getting oneself working with them and making it work rather than analysing or saying now why is this different. Somehow you were just getting on and muddling it together and making it work. I suppose that's probably true all the way through. Very jumbly, that sounded.

Changes? Any other market changes that one discerns between the way things were, the way things are now, the way things might be? Changes very often happen so slowly that they're not that perceptible.

Well, it obviously is changing once again, with all this new technology.

I suppose the two major changes have been, one, the move out of the studios and the loss of the studios, and the other the increasing importance of television and not cinema exhibition?

Yes, and making it for television. One wonders how long they will continue appreciating the higher technical quality of film, which is more expensive, [incomp – 14:32], going on to more and more video.

Well, high definition video presumably will take care of that.

Yes, so I think that could affect things in the future and the employment prospects, but I don't really know too much about that.

Of your later career, Sheila, anything that stands out there? Your last picture before your retirement was Hope and Glory, *John Boorman's film. Anything to… were you with unit or again you were in the office?*

I was in the office. Well, as you know, there's so much in a production office you barely get out of it the moment you get in, because someone has to be there tying all the ends up and coping with, well, you know, all the usual production office things. Before that I'd really worked quite a bit for television things. There was a small series, not very significant, called *Worlds Beyond*, and before that I did thirteen Hammer films for television in a row, so that was quite heavy going. Over the last few years I suppose I like so many other people have worked on an increasing amount of film for television and fewer and fewer features, as such.

Is the major difference a budgetary one, or is it also a state of mind?

Major diff… to me it would be a budgetary one.

Compromises, more compromises than one would encounter on a nice feature.

Well, it's speed all the time, it's the fact that you're changing your subject every week or every fortnight, it's pressure, you're constantly recasting, finding new locations. The attitude of the crews I find much the same, well, they all have different… in fact I think it's a little bit harder on a series, people seem to think the better people should do films, they're grander. In point of fact you almost need your best people on the series because of the pace and the turnover.

Well crews usually deliver miracles. How about…

When you think the original… you would reckon to get, a good average, if you got two minutes a day it was good and you'd try and schedule that. Now, you reckon five minutes you should get. And that's another of the differences, but mark you, a lot of this is more possible because of up-to-date equipment. But even so, the amount of time it takes to direct, to work out set-ups for a director to get performances out of his artists, that doesn't change.

Do you think overall there's a greater level of competence on the part of production people, crews, producers?

I think so. I think there has to be because there are far more, it's far more demanding now. After the war - there are a lot of people in the industry who had pre-war experience and some had continued working through – I think there was still a sort of cosy thing. There seemed to be more time. There seemed to be a slightly different attitude, not quite so cutthroat. Mark you, everyone still, there was still time, no-one was hanging about. But somehow there seemed to be a slightly more relaxed feeling about it.

The end of the golden ages as we look back on them don't we?

I don't think that's just me saying I was young and so it all seemed like that.

No, I think you're right, I think there were different social priorities.

[both speaking together]

A lot of stuff was silly things, stupid things which, letting off steam things, which I suppose still happen today but maybe one doesn't come into personal contact with them. I only remember with *Appointment in London* there was a scene in the film where they ran bicycles over the ceilings. So of course we had one day appeared in Aubrey's office, I certainly knew about it, Don Ashton, the art director's, feet on the ceiling inked over. We tried to get Connie's up there as well but she was wearing a skirt that day and wouldn't play. And they remained on the ceiling even when the decorators redecorated, without being told they just drew a circle round it, I wonder if they're still there today. And people used to go off, I remember when the Battersea Funfair started in 19… Festival of Britain.

Festival of Britain, yes, '51.

[0:19:38]
A whole bunch of us went off and were going on all the things. We used to, you know, we weren't on location, it wasn't a question of we're all on location, we'll go somewhere

together like frequently happens now, but this would have been the studios. I think there's far more different sets, different groups mixing together and doing things together, whereas now it tends to be the sound, the camera, the sparks. They don't socialise to the same, cross-mix, to the same extent. I don't say they don't at all, but…

I suppose one reason for that is again, so much activity was studio based and therefore people would meet each other every day and around the lot, in the canteens. One thing that's important, required I think, is the changing role, if indeed it has changed, are women in the film industry. What's your perception of that?

I think now that there are far more doing jobs which there was just the odd one doing beforehand. It was remarked that Betty Box was a producer, it was remarked that Wendy Toye directed. So you can go through. It was remarked… and I forget who the first woman production manager was, but you know, oh it's a woman. Whereas today we still have to be much better than men, mark you, to get the jobs, I think that's still true, but there are far more now and they have gradually been pushing their way through, quite rightly.

Yes. It would have been inconceivable a quarter of a century ago, a woman lighting cameraman, exactly, my example, yes.

That would be… editors, yes, I mean there was the odd, one or two editors then and certainly assistant editors. Some in the art department. I don't know if there were any… I can't… yes, there were one or two art directors weren't there? Carmen Dillon.

Carmen Dillon. [inaud – 22:05], Judy Colthorpe [ph]. Well, she really came from the theatre, but nevertheless, she…

But then people did come from then. It wasn't a case of coming from television, if they came from anywhere it was the theatre.

Judith Furse.

Judith Furse.

Yes, it's true, though I suppose that was perceived as a legitimate woman's activity, women might do that.

Yes. [incomp – 22:26]. I don't know how many there are now, but I certainly met them in the lower echelons because… but I haven't, I suppose because the sort of pictures I've been working on, haven't yet come across a woman lighting cameraman, though I believe they are obviously in documentaries and things like that.

Yes, and in features, yes, yes, yes.

I just haven't personally come across one but…

How do you think that's come about, because are they a feminist movement…

I think some of them.

And then have given up I would have thought, reluctantly and with resistance.

Well, many of them come out of the film schools that women could get a training there, whereas not just as it happened to be, go on as a loader or as a trainee and start that way, and let's face it, so many of the loaders and trainee, camera trainees are relations. We're getting now into the third generation of some film families aren't we? That's quite another interesting thing isn't it, about how many film families on every side, how many continuing generations, in the NATKE grade just as much as in… you've got your people like your Ford camera family – how many of those are there around now? You've got your Fennells [ph] spread all over the place.

Right, yes, yes. The Samuelsons now are third, if not fourth, about to be fourth generation I would have thought.

Every area you go. I mean if I stop and think I could probably name off about ten, twelve, fourteen families.

Yes. I've got a twelve year old grandson who's absolutely marvellous with a video camera, a superb operator, and I don't say that with any family pride, but he's quite extraordinary. And he's already working with the Children's Film Unit and has the determination to go on to.

And I think the girls get a follow through too. Oh, going back to - diverted, I'm always doing this mentally, butterfly – I think by going to film schools girls were able to train in things like camera and sound, which before when it was just on floor training they would have found it very hard to get that initial step to become a loader or a number three sound or number four sound, so I think that's helped break them into the technical side of it.

Yes, yes.

When it came to handling equipment. Editors I think have been accepted as long as I can remember. There are far more now than there were originally, but there were, I think [inaudible – 25:20] was one of the first ones.

Thelma Myers. Do I mean her? Launder and Gilliat had a woman editor. Thelma Myers, I thought it was. There was Dora Wright who ran the Crown Film Unit with [25:40 - incomp].

She was wonderful.

And, well you talked about the two Box ladies: Muriel and Betty, but that really is a form of nepotism, one a wife, one a sister. One doubts if they would have…

Yes, that's how they got their opportunity.

Yes. I think people on a camera crew, a woman on a camera crew would have had a very rough time.

Very difficult.

Given the machoism of the studio floor in those days.

Absolutely. And also, to a certain extent there would have been this thing, that there is, particularly in the lower grades, a lot of humping and physical… and that would, at that time, certainly they would not have thought that that was a women's job.

Right. And sharing facilities, yeah, things like, yeah, true. Yeah, it would have caused some inconvenience and probably additional cost on budgets. But again, it is a slow revolution there, so it's…

Yes, I think it will gradually…

It will cease to be a topic of remark.

A topic of remark, yes.

Yes, I think so. It still is. I mean I look up and I see a woman bus driver still…

Well, it's bound to be for some time, but I think certainly it has improved the situation as there are so many who are very good. Like everything else, also some who've started doing it now who possibly aren't any better than anyone else.

Well I think our union is certainly one of the freer and fairer, more perceptive organisations in this respect. I would like to think so anyway. I do think we do have a great acceptance of all kinds of democracy internally in the union. Well, is there any other area that we've omitted to talk about? I think we've covered it pretty well.

Could give it a break now, quite frankly.

Yes, okay.

I think one needs to stop and think what one's covered and what one hasn't.

Okay, we'll do that. We'll conclude for the day then and we'll pick it up again.

Did you want to do it this afternoon?

Oh, if you'd like to, yes, alright. Okay.

[0:28:25 - end of recording]

Queries

p.26 – [incomp] talking about early communication on foreign film locations
p.33 – Rhonda Groven – spelling? Production secretary
p.39 – [incomp] talking about future of British film industry
p.39 – Bill Hopps – spelling? Location caterer
p.39 – Lewis and Clark – spelling? Location caterers, elderly ladies
p.40 – Danny Danziger x 2 – spelling? Worked in shipping (rail) at Northern Transport 1950s
p.40 – Geoff Kelly x 2 – spelling? Worked in shipping at Northern Transport 1950s
p.47 – [incomp] talking about superior quality of film over video
p 50 – [incomp] talking about women in film industry
p.50 – inaudible name – Norah ? [incomp] name - Judy/Jeannie/Jilly? Colthorpe? Females working in film industry in early years.
p.51 – Fennells – spelling? Family working in film industry
p.51 – [incomp] talking about Dora Wright at Crown Film Unit
p.51 – [inaudible] name of early female film editor