File: **PRM075933 - Olive Shapley - 1984.wav**
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START AUDIO

Olive Shapley: I hadn't got a job in 1934. I'd come down from university and my mother saw an advertisement in 'The Telegraph' saying, 'Organiser Northern Children's Hour needed, Manchester,' and said, "Why don't you apply?" I said, "I hate the wireless," and she said, "Your father has kept you long enough. Apply." I did, and got an interview, and got the job. The day that I had my interview was the day that Marina married the Duke of Kent. I always remember that.

0:00:25

Interviewer: Had you any connections with the North?

Olive Shapley: Only through my old friend Barbara Castle, whom I'd been at Oxford with. My first visit ever to the North of England was to Hyde in Cheshire, where her family lived. She showed me Manchester and the Peak District, [and it killed me0:00:40]. She's never changed. She's exactly the same now. It was through Barbara that I came to know that the place to live was the North of England. If I thought London was the capital of England, I was quite wrong. Manchester was.

0:00:53

Interviewer: What was the BBC like in those days? Was it as Reithian as some of us now imagine?

Olive Shapley: Possibly in the regions we were a little bit removed from Reith, but yes, it was not a casual place at all, in lots of ways. I remembered, also, that I hadn't been here more than a week or two before I had a card saying, 'Will you wait upon the Director-General?' or, 'You are asked to wait upon [him,' at a0:01:17] certain day and time. This was a command and you went. They paid your fare down to London and you went.

I found that absolutely terrifying because he had an office which I'm pretty certain had the only coal fire in Broadcasting House, and his desk was in front of it. This man unwound from it, all eight feet of him, with a great scar down his face, and not very welcoming, just terrifying.

We talked for a moment about nothing, and then he said – and I always thought this was very unfair – he said to me, "Tell me, Ms Shapley," he said, "Is Mr so-and-so drinking as much as ever?" This was a very senior member of the staff up here. Luckily, I didn't know whether he drank or not, so I was able to say, "I don't know," but he was trying me out.

0:02:06

Interviewer: So, to you, Manchester, rather than London, was the capital where everything was happening?

Olive Shapley: Yes.

0:02:11

Interviewer: What was life in Manchester like in those days? I mean artistically, politically.

Olive Shapley: Artistically, I don't know. I was so busy when I first came that I didn't even know what a microphone looked like. There were people, of course, like Geoffrey Bridson, [Jack Dillon0:02:27], writing magnificent programmes. They weren't on staff in those days.

I remember wonderful parties where all these people got together. I thought it was a very exciting life. The HalléOrchestra isa thing that most remains with me; wonderful to be in the same city as the HalléOrchestra, and also to help to put it on the air occasionally.

Our head of programmes was Archie Harding then, the famous Archie Harding. He collected people round him in an extraordinary way,a very curious thing about Archie. You see, I was at university in the '30s, when a lot of people were very left wing. I remember leaving the Labour Party and joining the 'October Club' at Oxford, which was a sort of Communist club, though we were never card-carrying Communists.

Just before I came up to Manchester to take up my job, I got a mysterious call from King Street, the headquarters of the Communist Party. They said, "If you go to the ABC in Tottenham Court Road at three o'clock on Monday and sit down at the third table on the left, someone called Jack will have news of interest to you." I did all this, and Jack was there and he said, "You are very fortunate because the head, Mr

Harding, the head of programmes in Manchester, is a comrade."

When I came up, we had a board meeting the first day. It was all very formal, and I was introduced and then Harding said, "Ms Shapley, just wait behind. I'll have a word with you," and the others went out. He put out his hand and said, "Welcome, comrade."

[They said it meant0:04:03] nothing, though, as far as I know, there was never a Communist cell in the BBC. There were quite a few people with left-wing views and gradually a lot of us dropped off, but, of course, Harding was a great friend of Claud Cockburn, who produced 'The Week', which was the, kind of, 'Private Eye' of those days, and so he was fairly exciting company.

0:04:27

Interviewer: Harding himself, of course, had been sent away from London, hadn't he?

Olive Shapley: Yes.

Interviewer: To work.

Olive Shapley: For political reasons. Never knew what they were.

0:04:35

Interviewer: How was Archie Harding regarded in London, Olive?

Olive Shapley: I always understood that they'd sent him up here to get him out of London because he was a difficult person and unpredictable, not reliable in terms of those days. He was sent up here, where they felt he couldn't do any harm. In fact, he continued to be himself always and collected around him the sort of people he'd have had anyhow, did the same kind of programmes.

0:05:04

Interviewer: You've mentioned Jack Dillon and one or two others. What was Jack's livelihood in those days? It wasn't full-time writing.

Olive Shapley: Wasn't he a tax collector? I think so. I only really met Jack at parties, where he always got very drunk and usually stood on his head,and ___[0:05:21] maiming one woman, making her deaf for life by hitting her with his boot. I can't remember who it was now, somebody's wife. I thought I was fairly sophisticated when I came up here.

0:05:34

Interviewer: Some of us wondered how Jack came to have that very high-pitched voice. Do you think a lady had hit him with a boot? (Laughter)

Olive Shapley: I don't know, but he was fun. He was great fun.

Interviewer: A marvellous man.

Olive Shapley: Robin Whitworth, does that mean anything to anybody?

Interviewer: Yes, [afraid so].

Olive Shapley: Yes. One day [we were] staying in a terrible hotel and Robin said, “You can’t stay there. I know a flat in Fallowfield,” so he put me on a tram, with a piece of paper, Piccadilly, and I went. I saw this house in Fallowfield,a big cotton merchant’s house, and I got a flat.

It was an odd house because nobody spoke to anybody else, except Ms Rowbottom, who lived across the passage from me. I used to think, “She has got a lot of cousins in the Merchant Marine,” but no penny dropped. Then one night I got home and police were all round the house and they said, “You can’t go in.” I said, “Yes, I can. I live there,” and they said, “Well, then, you’d better come down to the station, too.”

I wrote to my father and said, ‘Such fun living in Manchester. Guess what? I’m living in a brothel.’ (Laughter) Robin Whitworth was never allowed to forget that. Every time – until right, I suppose, his retirement – whenever he saw me in Broadcasting House, he put a hand over his face.

0:06:41

Interviewer: When you took over ‘Children’s Hour’ broadcasts from Manchester, Olive, that must have been at a time when DG

Bridson – and Archie Harding and others – were getting to work on the feature as they saw it.

Olive Shapley: Yes,Bridson was doing things called, ‘Steel’ and ‘Wool’ – fairly high-flownliterary features. I don’t remember him absolutely when I first came, but fairly soon he was on the scene, yes.

Interviewer: Those, I believe, were all very much researched, and they were actors reading parts.

Olive Shapley: Yes, absolutely, choirs singing and all this sort of thing. Yes, they were high-flown.

Interviewer: But you had a different concept of a feature programme for radio.

Olive Shapley: I did ‘Children’s Hour’, I suppose, for about two years and then I did drama for a time, but I never wanted this. You see, a thing people don’t, probably, realise is that I think almost every programme was scripted, apart from ‘Children’s Hour’, when I joined. You stuck to that script, and it was pencilled out and you…

‘Children’s Hour’ [had its head0:07:50], and we used to be in the studio and do exactly what we liked. That was unusual, but there was no mobile recording. You couldn’t go out of the studio and record people or anything like that. Drama was all done live, on the spot.

0:08:09

Interviewer: When those enormous rambling vehicles – they look to be rambling now – the outside broadcast recording truck came into being.That must have altered one's making programmes.

Olive Shapley: Yes, it altered… Absolutely, because suddenly you could go out into the streets. The first one I did was SowerbyBridge and the Co-op, finding out how people spent their money. It was called 'LSD' in those simple days. Yes, and then suddenly you were free to move around. That was lovely.

May I say that the first live programme that went out from here, [froma 0:08:43] studio – or rather from Newcastle, actually – that was not written and edited was something that Bridson did, again. He'd got a group of miners, from a mining village near Durham, into the studio and told them they must talk freely about pit life, life in a pit village, all this sort of thing.

He had a lot of trouble getting permission for this, and did. We all went up in Harding's old open Sunbeam, I remember, up to Newcastle, and they talked so freely that after a minute or two I was sent in with a large piece of cardboard on which it said, 'Do not say, "Bloody" or, "Bugger,"' Bridson seeing his job disappearing.

You tell a lot of miners from Durham not to say that. There they sat – all live, of course, the whole programme live – thinking how to compose a sentence without one or other of them. In the end, they pulled me out and the thing went on as before. There was a terrible row. That's the first programme I remember, apart from 'Children's Hour', that wasn't scripted.

Interviewer: So, there was DG Bridson allowing people, the listeners, to come to the microphone and say in the first person what they thought, rather than actors reading what they'd said.

Olive Shapley: Exactly, yes.

Interviewer: What had been transcribed from what they'd said.

Olive Shapley: That's right.

0:10:00

Interviewer: What was the next progression?

Olive Shapley: It was really to get some recording equipment that we could take around with us. Finally, these great furniture vans appeared, with two engineers in them, making two breakable records and quite a large staff. I can't think why. This did open up an entirely new world. I had always wanted to do documentary, and suddenly you could do it. That was exciting.

0:10:29

Interviewer: What was the first documentary you did?

Olive Shapley: I did something called 'LSD'. In those days it meant 'pounds, shillings, and pence'. I took the van toSowerbyBridge, and we blocked the main street there for an hour or so while I went into

the Co-op with a microphone and recorded people spending their money on Saturday morning.

That was when I knew I wanted to live here. As a Londoner, I wanted to live in the North. There was a lady trying to buy a hat for a wedding, and every one she tried on, the girl fell about saying, “Aye, love, you look terrible.” I thought, “It was never like this in London,” and I knew then it was the North for me.

0:11:07

Interviewer: And after ‘LSD’, what?

Olive Shapley: I did a series. I did homeless people; I did lorry drivers, ‘Night Journey’. I went on canal boats, I went down coalmines. I lived in a monastery, a lot of French monks in Yorkshire. May I just say this? I was in Australia earlier this year and I met Neil Hutchinson, who was our first mobile recording manager. We had not met since the day war broke out, something like 44 years. We had lunch together and it could have been 44 hours, almost.

We talked about these programmes and the businessmen at the next table finally gave up any pretence of not listening to us and just listened. He was saying things like, “What was that wonderful workhouse we spent a week in?” or, “Do you remember when we lived with the French monks?” I don’t know what they made of it, but, you see, it said something about the BBC and what life was like in those days that these memories were absolutely vivid – both of us.

0:12:08

Interviewer: From the point of view with the BBC's interest in London – and I think certainly the press, from what I've read – one of the first landmarks in the feature side, the radio feature, that I recall to mind of yours was 'The Classic Soil'. Tell me something about that.

Olive Shapley: Yes. We took it from, and I can't remember the quote exactly, but it came in the Engels book that Manchester was classic soil from which capitalism grew. We got a grandson of Engels to introduce the programme, I remember, and Joan Littlewood and I worked on this together.

We went round, most unfairly, trying to show that Manchester had not changed since 1848 or whatever it was, and we recorded people in Ancoatsliving, a family living in a derelict mill. We went to the flea market in Salford, where people were paying a penny for clothes.

If you looked around hard and ignored Wythenshawe and all the housing developments, you could show that really Manchester had hardly changed. We did it and sent it to London, and I remember Laurence Gilliam ringing me up and saying, "This is a wicked programme, wickedly unfair, but we're going to put it out," and they did. The Town Hall were not amused.

0:13:26

Interviewer: That was the purpose [of the radio feature] to you: to show life as it really was?

Olive Shapley: Yes. That was unfair, but on the whole I've wanted to get real people talking about their lives. You can never get that in a studio, because this was an unnatural environment. You had to go into people's homes – well, cabs of their lorries or wherever it was.

0:13:47

Interviewer: It may have been a slightly unfair, an unbiased look at conditions for Mancunians in the '30s, but, apart from the Mancunians struggling for their existence, I believe you also did a feature about Mancunians away on holiday.

Olive Shapley: Yes, I did, and this started because I was standing on a station platform one day – I can't remember which station – and there was a great advertisement for Cleethorpes, a great, big, colourful advertisement of a laughing, happy family with their buckets and spades. There they were, having the time of their lives, looking well fed and tanned, and on the other platform opposite were the real Mancunians, who might never get to Cleethorpes.

It was a time of great distress up here, much more than it was in the South, and I felt I wanted to reflect this in some way. I remember going to County Durham for the first time and seeing miners sitting on their hunkers on the corners of streets, and thinking, "BBC should be doing something about this."

0:14:52

Interviewer: There were quite a few pressures, though, from the government of the day complaining to John Reith that the BBC

were showing too much of one side of life and that it wasn't of the establishment.

Olive Shapley: Yes. You see, I wouldn't have been aware of that.

Interviewer: Presumably, this was allowed to happen in the North because it was 186 miles from London.

Olive Shapley: Yes, I think it was. Harding, of course, had his own way [in a lot of things we did0:15:19]. He certainly did a great many programmes like this. The North was different, you see.

0:15:25

Interviewer: In concert, of course, with the radio feature, I suppose the film feature was coming along.

Olive Shapley: Yes, it was, and I think they got a lot of ideas from us. I mean Humphrey Jennings, and Paul Rotha, and people like this. I remember I worked, I was seconded quite a long time to work with [Cavalcanti0:15:42] at the GPO Film Unit and do the soundtracks of two of his films – Laurence Gilliam did this – becauseCavalcanti liked my programme 'Homeless People' because he was hearing the voice of real people, probably for the first time. I think we possibly helped to open up that world a bit.

0:16:04

Interviewer: Whilst I was working here in Manchester myself, when Denis Mitchell first joined us and Dennis had great success with what have come to be known as ‘think tapes’, I believe you to be the architect of the original ‘think tape’ and that you went out and you recorded people saying what they wanted to say. Then you wove it into your programme.

Olive Shapley: I certainly did. This was the basis of all my programmes, and I always felt I was so lucky to have come in at a time when this could be done technically – probably not very good. If you heard them now, you might not feel they were very good, but it was something new, and it was people that you got to know. You lived in their houses for a bit, you sat around with them, talking in pubs and things, and you got them relaxed enough to talk freely.

0:16:50

Interviewer: Was this one of the techniques that you brought to the GPO films thatCavalcanti was doing?

Olive Shapley: Yes, that’s right.

0:16:57

Interviewer: What other sort of techniques – radio techniques – were used in the film side, the [presentations]?

Olive Shapley: I don’t know. There was a commentary, and there were pictures, of course, and then there were people speaking over

the pictures. We did a thing called ‘Health for the Nation’, and Sir Ralph Richardson did a commentary – Ralph Richardson in those days. Yes, ___[0:17:18] I went out and recorded masses of people in hospitals, and homes and things. They took what they wanted. They edited [it] and took what they wanted, but they did have the voice of real people and not actors.

0:17:32

Interviewer: Talking of real people, you had quite an early connection with, as it were – and I use the word ‘early’ advisedly – with the Brontë family.

Olive Shapley: Yes, that was exciting. I went to do a programme aboutHaworthparsonage. This was not recorded, of course, but a live programme. We found in the village of Howarth an old lady who must have been in her 90s, who remembered Mr Brontë. She was very fragile, but her doctor brought her down to the parsonage. We were very worried about her.

I used her in the programme and she said things like, “I remember him,” and she remembered the text of some of his sermons. She said, “I think there were three girls, too. A big one,” she said, “Who had a dog, a big [one.” It was 0:18:16] Keeper, you see, Emily and Keeper.

This was an extraordinary feeling of being in touch with the past, sitting in this rather ghostly parsonage, which in those days was rather shabby. They’ve tidied it up a lot. It was an extraordinary feeling, that – and, of course, sadly, not recorded.

0:18:35

Interviewer: You don't beat your own drum very often, Olive, and you're not doing so now. You achieved, I think, in the pre-war years a lot on the features side. You also, didn't you, married the boss?

Olive Shapley: Yes. Yes, I did, John Salt, who came up here from London, where he was part of that very distinguished talks team with Mary Adams and [Seatman0:19:02]. He came here as Programme Director, I suppose he was called then, yes.

Yes, we married and he went to London two nights before war was declared, and then I followed fairly soon afterwards and then he became – he was asked to become – European Services Director. I'm sorry, I can't remember the right names, but to start up the European Broadcasting Service. This was a bit frightening because I was working, too. I was doing 'Ack-Ack, Beer-Beer', a programme for flights. What are they called?

Interviewer: Yes, the gun sites.

Olive Shapley: Anti-aircraft sites, yes. I was doing that, my only experience of doing variety, and I was sent for by, I think, Sir Benjamin Nicholls. I think he was then Director-General and he said, "Look, this is very embarrassing, but your husband is going to have this extremely important job and we've discovered that you did have Communist connections in the '30s" – yes, in the '30s, "In your younger days. We shall have to ask you to leave."

I wasn't even allowed to go back to my office to collect my possessions, I remember. I was sent home. Of course, my husband and I talked it over. It was the weekend and he said, "I must resign. I can't possibly take on the job." We were very sad about it, but by Monday it was all forgotten and we were both back. But they were worried, you see, in those days of – well, quite rightly.

Because my husband had this job, Scotland Yard was very often at our house in Hampstead because some of the people taken onto the European staff turned out to be spies of one kind or another – some very distinguished people, too. It was always said that their bulletin was the first thing that Churchill read in the morning. I don't know how true that was, but they were very nervous in those days.

I do remember that one day there was a BBC secretary worked at Bush House, coming in on the bus with her friend, and she'd talked rather indiscreetly about who was coming to Bush House, about the staff generally. She was sacked by the time she got into the office. Who heard her I don't know, but they were taking no chances.

0:21:13

Interviewer: How soon after the outbreak of war did John go to New York as our New York representative?

Olive Shapley: We went at the end of 1941, and a terrible journey over. We went over at the same time as the German submarines. I always remember that. No, he was not Director to begin with. Lindsay Wellington was, and then he came back to England

and my husband took over. That was an interesting time – and important.Broadcasting matters a lot.

0:21:47

Interviewer: At the end of the war, Olive, John Salt came back to be Head of North Regional Programmes. You returned as his wife, now with a family, and you had at least one interesting item in your baggage.

Olive Shapley: Yes, we did. We had some discs of a very, very popular American radio show called ‘The $64 Question’ or ‘The Whiz Bang Show’. It was simply a man [who had0:22:14] brought in members of the public and asked them questions about their lives, and their work, and all this sort of thing. There was an audience, and the audience applauded. The ones that were successful went on and came back the next week and this sort of thing.

My husband always said, “We could do a North regional variant of this, and I think Wilfred could handle it.” So, we brought these discs back, played them to Wilfred, who was not impressed, didn’t think it was a good idea at all but came round to it. [We’d try out and we’d have a specimen one0:22:43].

The thing was what should we call it? Wilfred came up with the title, because I remember him saying to John, “You mean people just come in and have a go?” “That’s it,” said John, “’Have a Go’,” and that’s how it started.

Interviewer: That’s really what launched Wilfred Pickles.

Olive Shapley: It really launched Wilfred, yes. He'd worked on all sorts of odd shows before that, but that was what launched him, yes.

0:23:07

Interviewer: Wasn't there a series called 'Harry Hopeful'?

Olive Shapley: Yes. I think that was earlier, wasn't it? Yes, 'Harry Hopeful', and he used to travel round the Dales and meet people. Yes, it was a delightful, quiet [series]. Yes, 'Harry Hopeful'. We had a 'Harry Hopeful' party, the Christmas dinner up in Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland. We got in all the best acts from the 'Harry Hopeful' show, like the whole Male Voice Choir from St John's or something, and we had a wonderful dinner party.

I think it was Sir Malcolm Darling; it was one of the new governors of the BBC. They'd said, rather patronisingly, in London, "Go up and have a look at the North. They do quite interesting little programmes up there," and he came up.

After the speeches and everything, we found there'd been a blizzard, so none of us could go home, so we all spent the night – I can't think how many of us – in this small pub. I remember Sir Malcolm saying to my husband, "I never knew the BBC was like this," and John saying, "Look carefully. You will never see anything like it again."

0:24:13

Interviewer: Talking of being marooned, Olive, there were times when you were the only female in that gigantic recording van.

Olive Shapley: Yes, very often. Yes, because there still weren't many women producers around. Yes, and again I got into trouble because one of the engineers had a caravan and we all slept in it to save our expenses – myself and five men. I thought, "This is pretty safe," but, oh, no. Somehow it got back to Mr Fitch's ears and I was told: "Find a hotel bedroom."

Interviewer: Mr Fitch being the Head of Administration.

Olive Shapley: Mr Fitch, yes. He was very upright. He'd been in the Royal Navy, I think, hadn't he?

Interviewer: Yes.

Olive Shapley: Yes, commander. I know a lovely story when war just started and the BBC Drama people came up here originally.Ralph Truman – remember Ralph Truman? – came in one day, and Fitch and I were finishing this boardroom tea. He was doing the Battle of Jutland on the table, as he very often did, and Ralph said, "Oh, I say, sir, can you give me the name of a solicitor?" Fitch was casting around [and0:25:21] someone from his golf club, and Ralph said, "A shady one." (Laughter) A lot of people felt getting these drama people up at the beginning of the war, the standards were going to drop sharply.

Interviewer: That was the thin end of the wedge.

Olive Shapley: The thin end of the wedge.

0:25:39

Interviewer: Each of us has our own impression of Old Broadcasting House in Piccadilly. What is yours?

Olive Shapley: It was seedy, and shabby, and very inconvenient, and we all loved it. It was the second and third floors above a bank, wasn't it? We came up in a creaking lift, and there were a lot of stone floors and awkward steps. It couldn't have been more inconvenient. The studios were very small. The orchestra were all crammed into Studio One, which wasn't nearly big enough for them, but there was a great feeling about that place. You'll still find people saying, "Ah, [but that was great 0:26:13]."

We had a farewell party there not so long ago and it was a very sad occasion. Harry Whewell, who is the Northern Editor of the Guardian at the moment, said not so long ago that he'd loved that building. He said, "When you came up in that lift and you drew the clanking doors back, it was like being in a second- or third-class French hotel, and you all thought you might be asked for your passport." It had that feeling about it, didn't it?

0:26:38

Interviewer: Do you remember the smell of that lift, Olive?

Olive Shapley: Yes, it smelt of castor oil, didn't it?

Interviewer: Yes.

Olive Shapley: Terrible smell, and everybody commented on that, yes.

Interviewer: Because it took I don't know how many gallons of castor oil to keep the thing running. It was the lubricant, as well as the counterweight mechanism in that lift.

Olive Shapley: Yes, [terrible]. That's right; that's right.

0:26:56

Interviewer: We've talked about the early days of features – features as we know them today as they've grown into what we take as the radio feature today. That apart, you mentioned the orchestra. There was quite a lot of light entertainment going on, wasn't there – particularly pre-war, with people like David Porter?

Olive Shapley: Yes, David and I joined almost on the same day. I knew him very well. Yes, he did some very interesting and amusing programmes, and he did the first musical – radio musical – ever, called 'Gallery Goddess', written by Edgar Lustgarten, music by Henry Reed.

I worked the panel. I ask you. That was my only part of it, and it was very… Yes, and Giles Playfair was somehow involved in it, and Derrick Sington, 'Smasher Sington'. It was a brilliant script. I don't think it ever went any further than being a radio musical, but it was the first one, and we had a cast from London. Yes, it worked.Edgar Lustgarten, of course, did quite a

lot of work for us in those days, because he lived in Manchester.

0:28:00

Interviewer: He gave some rather super parties, didn't he?

Olive Shapley: He gave marvellous parties. They were very…Lustgarten had a lot more money than the rest of us, and they were very generous about taking us out and giving parties. Yes, it was a great party place, Manchester. I thought so when I came here.

0:28:15

Interviewer: I get the impression you worked pretty hard and played fairly hard.

Olive Shapley: We did work hard, and all hours, all sorts of odd hours, always on Christmas Day and awkward times like that. When my family were growing up, it was very inconvenient working for the BBC, in some ways, because you were working Saturdays and Sundays and you could never go to speech days, but my children loved it as much as I did. I brought them in in carry cots, and when they were a bit older they used to go up and down in the lift with commissionaires all day and have cups of tea in their cubbyholes. They loved the BBC.

0:28:49

Interviewer: After your husband, John Salt, died, you left Manchester and where did you go then?

Olive Shapley: I went to London with my children. I was presenting ‘Woman’s Hour’ then – did that for about two years, I think, which I loved. Then I stayed on for about five years and did other programmes.

One of the people that I met again – and I had known her since I was a child – was Freda Lindstrom. My husband, John Salt, had helped her at the beginning of the war. She was working in a jam factory somewhere north of London, and she was a very, very talented artist, but there was nothing for her to do.

He introduced her to Mary Somerville, and that was how she came into the BBC. She came into schools broadcasting, I think. Then, of course, she became Head of Children’s Television later and did a magnificent job. I think everyone would agree there.

When they had a flat in my house in Hampstead when I came down at this time, she and Maria Bird, and between them they produced ‘Andy Pandy’ and ‘The Flowerpot Men’. ‘Andy Pandy’ was born in that old house in Hampstead, and I can hear now Maria Bird picking [out 0:29:57] the signature tune on an old piano and seeing if it would go. My children and their friends were the first people that he was tried out on, and they gave their very forthright comments on it.

It was a funny house because at the same time I had a theatrical designer on the top floor. I remember my next-door neighbour saying to me, “It’s nice coming to your house. You brush past Diana Dors on the stairs, and you can hear Andy Pandy’s signature tune down below

0:30:24

Interviewer: Those turned out to be successes. It's often, of course, [when] in retrospect you look back and think, "Gosh, why didn't I accept that idea?" One young aspiring writer put up a rather splendid idea to you which wasn't entirely accepted, was it?

Olive Shapley: Yes. I was doing the television course then, sometime in early '50s, I think, or quite soon after it started. We had to do an exercise at the end of it, and you had £30 to do a half-hour thing on. I asked Tony Warren of 'Coronation Street'– based on an idea by Tony Warren, goes out twice a week – and I asked Tony to come down because I knew he'd come down for two guineas to do this thing. I adapted a short story of Dorothy Parker's and he came.

It was the weekend and we travelled back to Manchester together. Neither of us could afford a sleeper, so we sat up all night, and all the time he was trying to sell me the idea of 'Coronation Street'. He had an aunt who lived in a similar street, and all I could say was, "Tony, it sounds so boring." You see? I think I was the first person ever in the BBC to turn it down.

0:31:33

Interviewer: In your time at Oxford, Olive, you and Barbara Castle, together, not only did you make up a formidable duo but there was a third member that made up a pretty formidable trio, as I recall.

Olive Shapley: Yes, that's right. She was called Freda Houlstonand she came from Derby. She was a beautiful girl. She was known as the Mona Lisa to the young men in Oxford. She married an Indian at the end of our time there, which was an extremely brave thing to do in those days because her family – everyone – was against it. Incidentally, one of their sons is quite a famous film star, KabirBedi.

She had a breakdown because of all the opposition, and I always remember Barbara Castle in the middle of the night saying, "We cannot handle this any longer. We'll get the bursar." Of course,Freda, to get herself fit again, had to tell everything that Barbara and I had done, all the rules we'd broken: going to Paris in the middle of term, climbing over gates.

Anyhow, but I saw Freda Bedi again years later in a Tibetan monastery in Sikkim. She was a nun, Tibetan Buddhist nun. My sons and I went to visit her, and I made a recording at that time of this long, interesting life that she had had, and that went out as a programme.

The Dalai Lama was particularly fond of her. She was made aGelongma, which is a very high ordination. When I met the Dalai Lama himself, I remember him saying to me, "What do you call KhechogPalmo?" and I said, "Freda." He said, "I call her Mummy." She was very much loved by Tibetans, and she ran a school for younglamas. Sadly, she's now dead, but I did do a programme about that.

0:33:20

Interviewer: The fact that you had come, as it were, representing the BBC, did that help?

Olive Shapley: Yes. You see, I've done quite a lot of travel because I had the sense to steer a son into British Airways. I have to say that. I've travelled a good many parts of the world, and just to have 'BBC producer' in your passport gets you in anywhere, particularly India, where the formalities are so endless, and complicated, and pointless very often, but BBC – "Ah, BBC" – gets you through. Yes, that helped a lot.

I was also impressed by the influence we had had on remote broadcasting systems because the hand of Reith was still there. Even the Solomon Islands, when all the news went out in Pidgin English, which I couldn't understand, but it could have been Richard Baker reading it because obviously the man had been trained in London.

This is interesting: the only place… In 1977 I was in Afghanistan, and the only place where British BBC's influence was not so obvious was there, because all the notices were in Pashto and Russian, and they'd all been trained in Moscow. It was a year or two before one realised that if you're going to invade a country and take it over, you make sure of the broadcasting station.

There was another curious thing about Kabul. I saw this place Radio Afghanistan, and I thought, "I'll go there." It was a terribly cheap and rough journey. I went the next morning, not knowing anyPashto. I said to one of the soldiers outside the radio station, "Me BBC," and they went into instant shock. They ran around, they telephoned; they put their hands to their heads. Finally, a man came and said, "The minister is coming," and the minister came. The minister of what, I don't know.

It turned out that some very important person from the BBC was coming in three days' time, all arranged through the

Foreign Office. I always wanted to know who it was. Suddenly, this elderly, grubby woman appears on foot, saying, “Me BBC,” but, as soon as they realised that I’d worked for the corporation for a long time, they laid it all on. We had their version of ‘These You Have Loved’ and phone-ins. It was just like being at home – so international. A studio is the same wherever you go.

0:35:35

Interviewer: You had quite an interesting experience I remember hearing about, I think in a ‘Woman’s Hour’ programme, about Delhi Old Station and Delhi New Station.

Olive Shapley: Yes. We were on this peculiar trip. I went off. We were in Delhi, our train. We were on a train then and it was ___[0:35:53] in a siding, and I went off to see old friends in Delhi. When I came back, I couldn’t remember whether it was Delhi New Station or Delhi Old Station, so I went to Delhi New, couldn’t find our train anywhere – enormous, teeming station.

So, I went to a thing which said, ‘Can I help you?’ over it in large letters, and told the man my plight. He said, “It must be the other station. I will go and enquire, but will you please sit here with the microphone?” So, I sat there and my BBC experience came in. I was besieged by Indians asking, waving things at me, and I sat there for about a quarter of an hour while he found out, and I directed thetraffic of Delhi New Station. (Laughter)

0:36:38

Interviewer: What sort of things were you broadcasting in pre-war 'Children's Hour' from the North?

Olive Shapley: Of course, there was the famous Romany, the walks in the country. He used to take the two aunts out, and they were brilliant. I heard one of those, which had somehow survived, a few years ago, and it was the timing that was so marvellous. You did think – everybody thought – they were in the country. I realised it was all a thing of timing: that they didn't rush it when they were finding a bird's nest. They took their time and they held those pauses.

Another thing I remember, Romany had a dog calledRaq, which everybody seems to remember, and we recordedRaq's barking because we felt he might not bark to order, though he was always there. If we ever wanted a gamekeeper or a farmer, we got [Sergeant Brenagh0:37:24] off the front door, the commissionaire. He rather fancied himself as an actor.

You see, [this, probably] you'd have an Equity strike on your hands, wouldn't you, now? (Laughter) He did quite a lot of ___. [That and, of course], I found two people started really serious broadcasting, Wilfred Pickles and Vi Carson in 'Children's Hour'. They were marvellous. Wilfred could do absolutely anything. He'd play six parts and do the effects, and you'd give him two guineas. He was so pleased to be on the edge of show business. Wilfred had this wonderful enthusiasm.

One play I particularly remember. One moment he was the aristocrat, dying on the guillotine, and then the next second he was leading the mob from down below. You see, he could do anything, Wilfred. He was so dead keen. I loved working with him.

Another thing we did very much were competitions. We had one month. If you did well, you got a certificate. When you got three certificates, you had a silver pencil presented to you at the microphone, by an aunt or uncle. That's when I know I'm getting old, when a silver-haired bank manager says to me, "I know you. You're Auntie Olive. You gave me my silver pencil."

Once, I couldn't think what to tell them to do. On the spur of the moment I said, "Draw us, the aunts and uncles, as you imagine us." Of course, we'd asked for it and we got it, but one thing I kept for years, one child had drawn all the aunts and uncles sitting bolt upright in a large bed. We thought that was the way we sounded, and I think it sounded as though we liked each other. (Laughter)

They were very relaxed programmes for those days, and we never bothered about time. Ten seconds is a long time now, isn't it, in a programme? We would look at the clock and say, "Ten minutes to go. We've finished. Auntie Vi can play the piano, and Auntie something can do something else." You just didn't bother – beautifully relaxed.

0:39:18

Interviewer: You've spent quite a lot of your broadcasting time abroad. You had one quite interesting trip to France with two other people.

Olive Shapley: Yes. Just before war, a year before war broke out, I went to France with Joan Littlewood and her husband, now known as… Her then husband, Ewan MacColl, then known as Jimmy Miller, the folksinger. I had the car, battered old car, and they had the tent.

I think it was sort of their honeymoon, but we – all three of us – slept in a minute tent. We had no money. We had a magnificent holiday. We got to Paris, finally, on 14th July, and Jimmy sang in Gaelic, in a café, with his hand behind his ear – a well-known thing. Joan and I washed up, and we got enough money to come home with.

I used them a lot in programmes. He was a very good presenter of a programme. Joan, of course, could do anything. The day after war broke out I was told, inevitably, to do a programme, 'Women at War'. I started ringing round, trying to think what we could do, and I said to Joan, "We ought to have a pregnant woman, to see what she feels like about bringing a baby into this world."

Joan went out to Ardwick Green, which is not far from Broadcasting House in Manchester, and found eight pregnant women. Because she was soft-hearted, she brought them all back. I can see them now, all swaying into the studio, and we recorded all of them and used one. Joan was lovely.

0:40:54

Interviewer: To use some modern type of terminology, what was the Manchester scene in the 1930s, Olive?

Olive Shapley: It was very different from the London scene, but, because Manchester is so small compared to London, you knew what was going on. This was a thing that always impressed me about Manchester: that you can drive in a bus from one side to the other. It was manageable.

The scene was pretty lively, and certainly inside the BBC. We had people like David Porter, who was a light entertainment

producer. He joined, I think, the same day that I joined. He was a madman, a mad Irishman, and brought a lot of gaiety to our lives. There was Foster Clark, who was the conductor of the orchestra. [I don't think what he] [Crosstalk]-

0:41:38

Interviewer: The Northern Orchestra?

Olive Shapley: The Northern Orchestra. Yes, of course, our orchestra was part of the Halléfor a long time. We didn't have a separate orchestra. They were sorting it out, I think, at that time. There were people like Edgar Lustgarten, who was a writer, as well as being a lawyer, and Giles Playfair, Derrick Sington, Henry Reed, who'd been Henry Hall's manager and a marvellous jazz pianist. They were all around. I can remember ___[0:42:08] succession of wonderful parties, Jack Dillon, [mad]. There were a lot of crazy people around in those days.

0:42:17

Interviewer: Was Jack Dillon on staff?

Olive Shapley: No, Jack Dillon wasn't on the staff. I think he was a tax collector, which seemed very unlikely, but he did the Hans Andersen fairy stories, didn't he, magnificently? That was how he established himself as a radio writer. Bridson, of course, was doing his 'Steel' and 'Wool', and then 'The March of the 45,' [and a] great programme, 'Aaron's Field'.

There were a lot of interesting people around, and we met in each other's houses very often in those days, because it was such a small community. Of course, and members of the orchestra [and0:42:54] musicians around.

I'm trying to think. There was a woman called [Margo Ingham] who had a dance studio. There was the 'Unnamed Theatre Company'. There was the 'Russian Rep', which was very lively in those days, and I used the Rep actors a lot in 'Children's Hour' because they weren't usually working in the afternoons – people like Mary Hayley Mills, then Mary Hayley Bell, who married John Mills. Some became quite well known.

0:43:22

Interviewer: Robert Donat?

Olive Shapley: I don't remember him, no. He was before my time; Wendy Hiller. It was in a, sort of, car shed, wasn't it, the Rep? But they put on some magnificent performances, and they were very much part of Manchester life and BBC life.

You see, the BBC [ORS 0:43:40] has had so many different disciplines coming into it – unlike, say, the theatre, in a way. You've got writers, and artists, and novelists, and actors, and singers, and musicians. This is what has always been, to me, so wonderful about the BBC. In a smallish place like a regional station, you're very aware of this. You spend a lot of your life together.

0:44:04

Interviewer: I imagine one of the places that the Manchester radio types went to was just round the corner. It was either – well, two places, Olive. As I recall, there was Mrs Mac's, [the pub].

Olive Shapley: No, not in those days.

Interviewer: Not in those days?

Olive Shapley: No. There was the Haunch of Venison – lovely title – run by Harry[Minshull0:44:21] and his wife, ex-policeman. One of the announcers actually lived there, behind the lace curtains up above, and we all used to go to this tiny, tiny pub – because there was no bar in those days – and do our work there. If we stayed long enough, Mrs Minshull would cook kippers for us in the kitchen afterwards. It was a great friendliness there.

The very first day, almost, I was here, Wilfred took me out, Wilfred Pickles, for a drink. We went to theHaunch of Venison, and we ordered our rinks, and there were two men sitting next to us. One was trying to sell the idea of a certain woman to the other, and he said, "Aye, but I don't like her face." The other man said, "Aye, but we don't fuck faces in Lancashire." Wilfred looked at me to see how I reacted. It was not the day of four-letter words. I passed the test.

0:45:11

Interviewer: A slight contrast, I imagine, Olive, when some years later you started to contribute to 'Woman's Hour'.

Olive Shapley: Yes, because again it was live when I was there [and it was very]… Is it live now? Sorry, I don't know. Anyhow, when I went, they were live programmes with very few recorded inserts, so you were busy all the time and always worried about timing. You knew ___[0:45:33] at the end, you knew the good people who could hurry up if they were given a signal, and read a death scene at high speed and still make it sound good.

One met so many people through 'Woman's Hour', like Edith Evans and all the actresses. I enjoyed that very much, I think, really, but I enjoyed it more when I came back to Manchester and produced, I think, a monthly one from here. In those days, we knew our audience because men hadn't got car radios and so it was women ironing – you knew – who were going to put their iron down the moment you'd finished, and write you a letter, telling you what you'd done wrong.

One of the problems was people came in in the morning and rehearsed, and then you had a light lunch. I think [they still do0:46:16] this. Then you went on the air almost immediately, and we always had to watch the sherry because people didn't drink in those days, you see. If you'd got a lady who had to read from the script and she'd had two sherries and was not used to them, things could happen, so we always had to watch that one.

It was very near the ground, 'Woman's Hour'. It dealt with things. One day we had a script in on warts from a woman in Leeds, whose husband had terrible warts, and she thought our audience might have ideas about how to get rid of them. It was such a ___[0:46:46] script and I put it at the bottom of the pile.

Then, finally, I did it in despair and we had hundreds of letters. There's a wart charmer in every city in this country if you only knew. The cures are unbelievable for warts, like arsenic tablets

and letting snails walk over them. That was one of the most successful items I ever did, which is sad in a way. I remember accepting a script on nits just before I left, and I suppose that's gone out by now.

But it was the ordinary people, again, I always liked better than the famous ones. Somebody once said to me, "In your broadcasting life, who are the two people you've most enjoyed meeting?" I'm sad to say, in some ways, they're both Americans. One was Mrs Roosevelt. I did recordings with her when I was in the States. The other was Danny Kaye, who was lovely –unpompous and lovely. ___[0:47:38] splendid people, but on the whole the great and the famous didn't appeal to me. They switched it on and switched it off when they were off the air.

0:47:45

Interviewer: I think your grandson had rather a nice story.

Olive Shapley: Yes, I was reminded of the happiness I've always had from the [BBC]. There must have been terrible moments, but on the whole I've been extraordinarily happy here. My grandson, aged nine, said to me the other day, "I know now, Olive, what I'm going to be: a deep-sea diver, but the only thing I'm not quite clear about, do they pay me or do I pay them?" My son said, "Olive has always been slightly bothered about that in the BBC." (Laughter)

END AUDIO