

Oral History of the BBC: Mr. David Waine (Film)

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## Transcript of Film Interview

### David Waine

Key:     FG = Frank Gillard  
           DW = David Waine  
           Names, in **Bold Type**  
           ..... Denotes interviewee hesitation

FG: *It's the 20 March 1995 and to-day this is Frank Gillard interviewing Mr David Waine who recently retired from the post of Head of Broadcasting, Midlands and East. That was your title, wasn't it? But you started of course your BBC career as a staff man way down in the very early days of Local Radio at Brighton. I wonder if you would begin by telling us what the purpose of a station like Radio Brighton and give us a sort of thumbnail sketch of it. What was the objective, what was the out-put you did, what volume, what range, geographical range did the station cover, how big was the staff. All those little details.*

DW: BBC Radio Brighton was the fourth in the BBC chain of experimental local radio stations. The experiment was to last for two years and the stations which were on FM only were intended to engender, if you like, a kind of community spirit and they were to act as catalysts for discussion within the community, for a forum for people to put forward their hopes, their aspirations and a stage on which musicians and actors could play.

FG: *Interesting. And how big was the staff?*

DW: To begin with each of these stations had only 16 staff and they were responsible for putting out something like four hours a day of material and when the stations weren't originating local material they took their out-put from the National Networks, Radios 1, 2, 3, and 4. That didn't last very long because it didn't work. When the local programmes were not on the air people tended to switch away and so those sixteen staff were very soon responsible for an out-put which stretched into eight, nine, ten hours a day. Hard work.

FG: *And what ~~about~~ <sup>ORIGINAL</sup> the finance of it all?*

DW: The ~~Regional~~ eight stations were located in areas where the local Councils were willing to put in money, in some cases they paid for all the running costs, in some cases they paid for 50% as in the case of Radio Brighton. The original running costs of a BBC local radio station were about £50,000 per year, so Brighton Council would have been putting in about £25,000. Had they not done that the BBC wouldn't have gone there, I suspect.

FG: *Did the Brighton Council have the right to dictate programmes in return for the money?*

DW: The BBC held all responsibility for editorial control of these stations and there was no question at all of the Council being able to dictate, shape stories, to have any influence whatsoever. But inevitably, given that money was coming in from the Council the 'piper' occasionally tried to 'call the tune,' but it didn't work.

FG: *And how far were you journalistically inclined and where did you get your news from anyway?* ORIGINAL

DW: The ~~Regional~~ eight BBC local radio stations took their news from a variety of sources. The most common was a local newspaper, as in the Liverpool Echo for Radio Merseyside, or agencies, news agencies which had been set up for newspapers within the towns and areas concerned. and in the case of Radio Brighton the news service was provided by Robson of Brighton. It wasn't in my view a particularly sensible arrangement. It wasn't sensible really for two reasons, the first reason was that these agencies tended to use the name BBC, which had a great deal of credibility of course, in order to get stories which they subsequently sold to other newspapers, the News of the World and so on. And secondly, the BBC never really had editorial control, total control, over the most important thing that it broadcast, which was its News out-put. And it seemed to me that in the end if Local Radio was to continue the BBC had to invest in the news operation and set up staff newsrooms for its local radio stations, in exactly the same way as it already had done for its Regional Television operations.

FG: *And how did the hierarchy of the BBC receive this?*

DW: The whole growing 'child' of Local Radio was always rather difficult for the 'parent' to look after and I never forget **Sir Charles Curran**, as he became, visiting Brighton one day before he took over the Director Generalship and sitting in my office, I was twenty three years old and Programme Organiser then and perhaps a little bit arrogant and naive, and I put it to him that getting news from agencies was not a good thing for the BBC to do and what it ought to be doing is lifting its sights and providing a news service which it paid for which in the end would become the back-bone of the domestic news service - which is of course what has happened. Charles Curran wasn't too sure about this at all and he asked a number of questions about that idea but in the end he said, 'Oh no. I don't think we can do this, I mean what would we do if we got it wrong, we wouldn't have anyone to blame'.

FG: *Yes, indeed. The whole style of presentation of programmes was different wasn't it. And how did you innovate at Radio Brighton? Local Radio was such a new system, great opportunities for experimenting surely.*

DW: Each of these stations, I mean, was a voyage of discovery every day because there was no precedent to point back to and what we had to do was make it up as we went along, experiment, innovate as you say. But to begin with there was a tendency to base local radio out-put on what we knew and understood and that was the Networks of the BBC, the built programming of for instance Radio 4. But nevertheless we, I think, were extremely adventurous in the late '60's and we pioneered the original phone-in programmes on the BBC - not a huge step forward now it appears but at the time the thought of letting anybody within the Community just have the airwaves and say whatever they wanted to say was revolutionary. We pioneered cheap ways of Feature and Drama making, we pioneered new ways of the coverage of Sport by covering very small Sunday Leagues football, for instance, and also pioneered live coverage of professional football. In those days the idea of going to a ground and getting a 20 second clip didn't happen. Local Radio began to do that, partly because it wasn't allowed to do commentaries in those days.

FG: *You had a bit of a break, didn't you, before the station was actually scheduled to open.*

DW: About two or three months before BBC Radio Brighton was scheduled to open, which incidentally was on St. Valentines Day 1968, we all repaired to the pub across the road from

the Royal Pavilion studio and while we were in there, The Volunteer Inn it was called, a snowstorm began and it was a very serious snowstorm which very very quickly cut off the coast running from roughly Newhaven through to about Chichester. And it dawned on us gradually that here was a marvellous opportunity to persuade this new audience of what Local Radio was going to offer and what we did was to set up an embryo Local Radio station to deal with this local crisis. The studio buildings were just a shell, you couldn't use those, so we opened up the un-attended studio in the Royal Pavilion, which had been used for contributions to the BBC's Networks and broadcast from there. The manager of the station, **Bob Gunnell** was the main broadcaster because he was one of the few who had much experience. And I set up a kind of embryo newsroom in the shell of the building which later became Radio Brighton and supplied him, in his make-shift studio, with news stories through the night, the following day and the following evening and it was a huge event for Brighton. It made the front page lead in some national tabloid newspapers. We found lost children, we found people who'd gone walking and nobody knew where they were, we managed to save people from gas calamities. It was the first crises broadcast of a BBC Local Radio station.

FG: *Must have put you on the map?*

DW: In a manner of speaking.

## Roll 2

FG: *We continue to talk about Radio Brighton. How much interest did the local population take in the opening of a new station, Radio station, for Brighton?*

DW: These early stations, of which Radio Brighton was one, opened with a huge handicap because they were on FM only and in those days, in 1968, very few people had FM. The signal was horizontally polarised which meant that travelled horizontal to the ground and when it hit multi-storey blocks of flats, which as you know there are many in Brighton, I mean you had a shadow in which large numbers of people couldn't hear the station. So those two problems meant that it was a pretty lonely business, broadcasting in the early days on Radio Brighton. And if you met somebody who'd actually heard you it was a fair event. So that cut the amount of initial reaction, apart obviously from opinion formers and newspapers and their reactions were wildly different. The newspapers saw us as huge competition and they wouldn't write about us unless something went wrong, and even then they often managed to miss out our name, and the opinion formers were very enthusiastic because they could see the potential and for the first time they could get on the airwaves, say what they wanted to say and not have to rely on the journalists from local newspapers interpreting their thoughts for them.

FG: *And was Radio Brighton, and did Local Radio generally, find new talent?*

DW: When we opened we were under some considerable pressure from established broadcasters in the hierarchy of the BBC who believed that if this chain were ever to grow it would in fact lower the standards of Radio because there simply wouldn't be sufficient people around to have the talent to support this large expansion of out-put. That in the end, I mean turned out to be totally untrue and we put out adverts in newspapers, we went to schools, we went to churches and what we gathered around ourselves was a huge array of people who had specialist talent in particular areas. A Methodist minister for instance who used to do a comedy phone-in programme for Radio Brighton and later became nationally known, his

name was **Frank Topping**, he wrote more than twenty books, he wrote stuff for Radio 2, he became a Television stage performer. A Teacher who's name was **Ken Blakson** who later became well known Television playwright, wrote *Coronation Street*, *September Song*, which incidentally is on the screens as we speak, and he won a number of awards of a very prestigious nature for Radio 4 Drama and perhaps the biggest find of all came as a result of an advertisement which we wrote which went in the *Evening Argos* and it said, 'If you think you could do David Coleman's job better than him, then write to'. **David Coleman** in those days was the premier sports broadcaster for Network Television in this Country and a number of people wrote in - one person who wrote in, was an insurance salesman whose name was **Desmond Lynam** (check spelling) and he did precisely that, Coleman's job better than him and he is now the premier sports broadcaster in this Country.

FG: *Let's move on a bit - you graduated shall I say from a relatively small area, Brighton, to a much larger one, Bristol. You opened as Station Manager the Bristol station which was the first of the new wave ...the second wave of Local Radio stations, isn't this so, in the early '70's. Did you .. were you able to apply your Brighton experience to Bristol. I suppose you were?*

DW: All the early evidence of Local Radio was that it would be most successful where it was genuinely local and genuinely dealing with communities - and indeed that is the experience of Local Radio the world over. So when I was appointed, in 1970, as Manager of Radio Bristol I faced a completely different challenge because the area that we had to cover was a huge geographical area. It took in South Gloucestershire, it took in what is now Avon, it took in all of Somerset, parts of Wiltshire and even a little bit of Dorset. It was well over a million people, getting on for two million, in a big geographical swathe of the Country and again we were on FM only, which was an enormous handicap, and we had to really re-think how we were going to target the Station and that re-thinking had two effects. One, we had to define a primary editorial area and that primary editorial area was what is now the County of Avon and the other area of it was secondary. And secondly, we just had to do more out-put than was coming out of the original eight stations, because it was my view that in the end you couldn't be a part-time Local Radio station you had to be a full-time one. So we had to begin the long march towards 18 hours a day and although the budgets had doubled and the staff had doubled you couldn't do that kind of size of out-put, roughly 12 hours then, 6 to 6, on those staffs and that money with the kind of built programming that we'd been used to. So what we did was began to move away from built programming into live rolling sequences of three and four hours a time. Again, an innovation, outside of Radio 1 no-body had done that and it wasn't believed that one presenter could possibly sustain a three hour live talk sequence but they did.

FG: *You came under threat, did you not, from the newly elected Conservative Government - they favoured the development of commercial Local Radio rather than BBC Local Radio?*

DW: BBC Radio Bristol was scheduled to be the first of the second wave of Local Radio stations. The first of a new twelve, and we recruited our full time staff and they were taken on a five week training course at The Langham in London, and on the second day I was due to talk to these predominately young people, many of whom had given up very good jobs to come to Radio Bristol, and as I was walking up the corridor in The Langham, thinking of what I was going to say to these people, the then General Manager of Local Radio, **Hugh Pearse** (check spelling) stopped me in the corridor and said to me, 'Oh, by the way boy, (he always called me boy), be careful what you say to them'. I said, 'Well why'. He said, 'Well,

last night's General Election victory by **Edward Heath** has rather changed the ball game and we've already heard from the in-coming Government that they may not allow this new way to go ahead at all. So there was I outside the door having to walk in and talk to these newly recruited people and explain to them how wonderful the new world was going to be, if we ever got on the air.

*FG: Well at least you were able to continue, the BBC was allowed, in the end, was it not to develop its Local Radio system to a large degree. You had one big incident which really put Radio Bristol on the map in a big way, I'm talking about the Basle Air Disaster - tell us about that.*

*DW: We were sitting in Radio Bristol in Tyndals Park Road one day when news began to come in of some sort of emergency involving an Airliner which had taken off from Lulsgate bound for Basle on a day's shopping trip and on that aeroplane there were mothers and children from three Somerset villages. The news coming out of Basle about this emergency was very very confused because it was coming from three sources but I just instinctively felt that this was something rather serious, complete out of the ordinary. And we despatched the best Reporter that we had, a man called **Roger Bennet**, who took the Radio Car to the airport and just after lunch, about half past one, he called up from the Radio Car, said that he had the same feeling that there was something really serious happened and he thought that we ought to stick with it and see what happened. We took a decision which could easily have gone wrong which was without knowing absolutely what had happened to follow our instincts and turn the whole of our out-put over to the coverage of this unfolding, as it turned out, disaster story. We played serious music, we abandoned the programmes that we had and for three days we did nothing other than cover the Basle Air Disaster and it culminated in us reading a list of survivors one afternoon and in reading it we knew that it wasn't a list of survivors for most people, by literal process of elimination, they knew that their relatives, wives or children had lived or died.*

### Roll 3

*FG: Well your next move was out of Local Radio and into Regional Television - you became Regional Television Manager in Plymouth. Now tell us how many of these Regional Television stations were here?*

*DW: In England there were eight Regional Television stations, five of them were what was known as Island Sites, Plymouth was an Island Site, Norwich was an Island Site, Leeds was an Island Site. They were apart from the main production centres which were in Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham and along side those there were three Regional Television stations which were known as co-sited stations. The essential difference between the two was that the Island Sites, stations like Plymouth, had their own studios and their own resources and the co-sited stations, along side those in the Network Production Centres, didn't have their own resources and they effectively bought in to the resources of the Production Centre. The out-put from all eight of the English Regional Television stations was exactly the same.*

*FG: Now, what was the extent of the out-put of an Island station like Plymouth?*

*DW: When I went to Plymouth in 1978 the out-put was quite significant. There was a nightly News magazine, which used to go out at roughly half past six, half an hour a night, there were a number of two and three minute bulletins opting out of BBC 1, but it wasn't a*

complete service throughout the day. And there were approximately 80 Feature programmes which also opted out of BBC 1 and dealt with a broad range of local affairs, might be Music, might be Arts, might be Religion and indeed Current Affairs. Those 80 programmes, when I went to Plymouth in 1978, were due to grow to 120 - they never did.

FG: *And were talking about 80 a year?*

DW: We are talking about 80 programmes a year.

FG: *Well, was there talent in a remote area like Plymouth, like Devon and Cornwall, to sustain all this? And what were the programme standards because you opting out of BBC 1 and you had to be up to that level of quality had you not?*

DW: The issue of talent, which always raises its head when anybody talks about diversified broadcasting, is not in my view a huge problem. You have to work at and you have to deal with a mixture of people who are young, new, energetic, fresh ideas, learning their trade along side a number of people who've been around for a long time. It's a bit like a football team, where you need young people coming in but you need a few old heads around as well. The talent that there was in a small place like Plymouth was considerable, for instance, we made a series of Films, under- water films, which was shot off Torquay. When we first put up the idea of this, which was put forward by two local men who never before made significant Television programmes, we were told by the Natural History Unit in Bristol that this wouldn't work, that they weren't talented enough and whilst you could shoot under-water films off the West Indies, because the water was clear, you couldn't shoot off the British Isles because it was all murky. Well, we went ahead and we made two series with these people, one of which won a national award. There was plenty of talent around there, you just had to look for it.

FG: *But you did actually produce programmes for the Networks sometimes, didn't you?*

DW: We made about 80 programmes a year out of Plymouth and in the five years that I was there we built up to a position whereby about half of those programmes were shown on the Network and there were a variety of different kinds of programmes that made the Network. We did a six part Drama series called West Country Tales, which was innovative in the way it used drama techniques and enabled us, make half-hour dramas very cheaply and it fed off the myths and legends which abound in Devon and Cornwall. We made a delightful, in some ways typical, Feature about **Isaac Foot**, the father of **Michael Foot** and all the other 'feet' and we had a little bit of luck there in that just as we made that he was elected **Leader of the Labour Party** and it became a main stream Documentary on BBC 2 in that case. I think we helped to broaden the appeal of the Networks, undoubtedly.

FG: *This wasn't local television but it was community television in a way I suppose because there is a great community spirit in the South West of England, partly because it is remote.*

DW: The regional audiences in the South West of England, ITV and BBC, are the biggest of any Region if you look at them in terms of percentage of the population who watch at any one time and that is I think because it is a genuine region. It is a genuine community of interest, it's bounded by the sea and although the Cornish and the Devonians have their little arguments, by and large they share a common life style.

FG: *Now, to whom did you answer - who was your Controller so to speak, perhaps he was a Controller wasn't he, yes?*

DW: In those days the BBC was organised differently from now and the Regional Television Manager, which I was in Plymouth, answered to the Controller of English Regions and a small Headquarters Unit which sat in Birmingham and they were responsible just for the Regional Television. The Local Radio stations answered to a Local Radio Headquarters which also had a Controller at its helm in London.

FG: *And there was no Regional Radio left - all gone?*

DW: When I went Plymouth in 1978 there was the remnants of a Regional Radio service. It was a morning programme called 'To-day in the South and West', TISW it was known as, .....do that again, jump back to Bristol.....

When I went Plymouth in 1978 there was the remnants of a Regional Radio service. There was a morning half hour opt-out of Radio 4 called 'Mornings So' West' (?) and a number of news bulletins through the day. That gave way, as it had done all over the Country, to Local Radio. Originally the BBC wanted to open three or four stations to serve Devon and Cornwall but finances got in the way and they were forced to scale down their ambitions and open two stations, one based in Truro for Cornwall and one based in Exeter for Devon.

FG: *The Radio side, Local Radio didn't come under you as RTM in Plymouth?*

DW: The Local Radio stations didn't come under me as RTM in Plymouth but it's quite interesting that because of my earlier involvement in Local Radio I was able to persuade the Local Radio Management in London to set these two stations up with electronic linking of the newsrooms. So, in very embryo form, they became a template for what later happened where all the BBC's newsrooms inside and outside London were linked up via BASIS. I'd become a great advocate of the BBC in some way organising its News operation outside of London so that it was one news machine. In Bristol, along with the Regional Television Manager, **Jimmy Dewar**, I had begun to try and persuade the BBC to build a bi-media newsroom, which subsequently became the first they had. It seemed to me that if you could harness this news machine that existed outside of London, the BBC would have more Journalists and a better news service for its international, national and local services than any other competing media.

FG: *It seems such a good idea, and in many ways such an obvious idea one, wonders why it wasn't grasped long before.*

DW: It didn't happen before because the people who set up Local Radio in my view set it up absolutely correctly, apart from the rest of the BBC and if it hadn't been apart from the rest of the BBC the traditions and ideas which had been written in the tablets of stone would have been carried on by Local Radio and none of the innovation and the excitement which has happened in Local Radio would have happened. But as with all things they evolve and there was a moment when you realised Local Radio was strong enough to protect itself but there was something it was providing which you could integrate within the Corporation as a whole without damaging the community activity which was BBC Local Radio.

## Roll 4

FG: *So the BBC's ultimate decision to move into more local and regionalised really was a triple achievement, wasn't it?*

DW: The *raison d'être* Heads of Broadcasting for BBC Local Radio must be to serve the community and it is that which gets it its audience, 10 Million listeners a week. But yes it did other things, it provided a way of the BBC tapping in to talent, which comes out of these communities, and it filtering through the system and becoming a main part of the BBC's activities and it perhaps, most important from the BBC's point of view, it set up a news machine which out did something as big and established as the Press Association in its sheer size and ability to be harnessed for the good of the BBC.

FG: *Yes, which also thought in terms of broadcasting rather than in terms of the newspaper - the printed form of news reporting.*

*Well now you moved from Plymouth to the Midlands of Britain and you became Head of Network Production Centre. To me a curious organisational episode in the BBC's history - tell us about the writ and the scope of the HNPC Post.*

DW: I went to Pebble Mill in Birmingham in 1983 as Head of Network Production Centre and what that meant was that I was responsible just for the Network Programming. I had no responsibilities for Regional Television, no responsibilities for Local Radio. I was responsible for roughly 500 hours of Network television, about 150 of which was hosted, which means that it was editorially controlled from London and about 1000 hours of Network radio. But although I provided resources for Regional Television I had no responsibility for it at all.

FG: *But were you the head man in Birmingham? Were you 'Mr BBC in the Midlands'?*

DW: I was certainly the most senior man in Birmingham but I couldn't be 'Mr BBC in the Midlands' because if I went out to a function and met an MP and he complained to me about something which happened on the local radio station there was nothing I could do about it - I could hear him out and be charming, as I hope I was, but there was nothing that I could do to deliver any solution to it. So I could never be 'Mr BBC in the Midlands' in that particular job.

FG: *But you had no money at your disposal, no programme budget to spend, and no air time to give away to anybody, isn't that so?*

DW: Responsibility without power. I had 1000 staff, I was ... I had no money and by right no out-put. What happened was that each of the three Production Centres in England, Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol, had to go to the Channel Controllers, whether Radio or Television, and offer them ideas on an annual basis and if they liked those ideas they would literally buy them and with the money that they spent you kept these giant production centres going.

FG: *But your Producers must have had divided loyalties - on the one hand they were your staff presumably, in Birmingham, but in order to get their programmes on the air they had to be in the good books of the Controllers in London. I take it that every proposal from Birmingham had to go through you to the Network Controllers, is that right?*

DW: Every proposal had to go through me to the Network Controllers but in reality the producers knew that their jobs and the joy of their jobs, which is most important bit, depended upon them getting their ideas on the screen and it was in the end the Channel Controllers who had the most power and influence in that respect. So there was a kind of schizophrenic relationship with your own producers and it quickly dawned on me that what you had to do was to get along side the producers and convince them that with you along side them, they had a greater chance of persuading the Channel Controllers to get their wares on the screen or on the airwaves of radio. And if you did that they then saw you as kind of 'plus factor' and began at least to some extent to work through you. But they always had at least half an eye on the Channel Controllers.

FG: *It must have meant too that there were uncontrollable, almost uncontrollable, peaks and troughs in your out-put. And did you have difficulty in accommodating your resources to these up and downs?*

DW: When I went to Pebble Mill in 1983 the Centre which enjoyed a marvellous first ten or twelve years, it was a new building, had nevertheless come to the end of that particular generation of programmes. So it fell to me to suggest to the Channel Controllers that we needed to move into a different era here and to end programmes which were nightly, 6:55 on BBC 2. Pot Black, One of the Family, which was a programme about pets, Now Get Out of That, a peak time show on BBC 1. We had to get rid of all those programmes in order to begin the new world, if you like. It was an extremely risky operation because it's one thing to knock programmes off, it's another thing to persuade Channel Controllers that you've got good ideas to replace them and given the kind of metropolitan bias that there is in the BBC, there is a great risk that you actually do away with what you've got and you never move to the second phase which is new programming. So it was extremely difficult during that period to keep the resources fully used and in fact, we didn't. And I think it was 1986/7 there is a great drop in the volume of out-put which was coming through Pebble Mill. But it was inevitable, if we hadn't done that we would never been able to begin the second phase of the life of Pebble Mill.

FG: *Well, Pebble Mill, of course, was the BBC's first purpose built Broadcasting Centre outside London, for Television purposes anyway, how did it work out and how did you manage to put that brand name, Pebble Mill, on everything you sent out?*

DW: Pebble Mill was opened in '71 I think and the then Head of Network Centre, **Phil Sidey**, had two strokes of genius I think. The first was to realise that the way to put this operation on the map was to call it Pebble Mill and to use that in everything, credits at the end of programmes - he even got a daily programme called Pebble Mill at One on BBC 1 and to push the name Pebble Mill and make it as well known in this Country as Broadcasting House and Television Centre - he did that and it fell to me, just as it had done to him, to continue to fight for the right to do that, because there were those who thought we shouldn't. and the second stroke of genius which he had was to walk into the foyer at Pebble Mill, which was a huge place, and somebody said while he was there, 'It's almost big enough to be a television studio', to which he said, 'Let's turn it into one and do a daily show' and that was the programme which I mentioned a moment ago called Pebble Mill at One, which was the fore runner of Daytime Television in this Country.

FG: *Your Programme Offers from Birmingham to the Network Controllers, were they miscellaneous or were they in some sense characteristic of the Midlands?*

DW: When I arrived at Pebble Mill and did my stock take, as everyone does when they move into a job like that, it seemed to me that the place was making almost every kind of programme that it was possible to make, some relevant to the Midlands, some not. But what we had to do, if we were to succeed and thrive in a much more competitive market in the years to come, was to garner a bit of the market and in 1984 with the help of **Brian Wenham**, who was Director of Programmes, Television, I got agreed a strategy which set up effectively four areas of specialisms for Pebble Mill - Drama, Leisure, Multi-Culture and Day-Time, and we built the whole place around those four areas of specialisms and when **John Birt** became Director General he actually re-organised the whole of England around what he called a series of 'centres of excellence', of which our four remained as I've just described. It was a very good way of accruing expertise and saying to Channel Controllers, you can rely on us on these areas. The second element of it, which we had to make sure we pulled off, was that a large percentage of the programmes that we made for Radio 4, Radio 3, Radio 2, BBC 1, BBC 2 were in some way resonant of the Midlands, because if Network programmes made from the Regions are not in some way regional, they don't deserve to be made.

## Roll 5

FG: *Television Drama of course is an advanced example of television production, requiring a great deal of technique and resources and back-up and one thing and another - tell us about how you managed it in Birmingham. What were the achievements?*

DW: When I arrived in Birmingham in '83 there was a great deal of Drama being made there but the vast majority of it was effectively 'ware house'. There were big popular series for BBC 1, like All Creatures Great and Small, Howard's Way, Juliet Bravo, which were editorially controlled in London but they were resourced in Birmingham and then along side that there was a relatively small amount of Network drama which was indigenous to the Pebble Mill production centre - the ideas thought up there, it made there, it in some way resonant of the community but not much more than 20 hours at its peak. The place had a tremendous reputation for its Drama, born out of such successes as Gangsters, in the early '70's, and Boys from the Black Stuff in the early '80's, a landmark in British television, un-questionably. But it was a very difficult thing to manage because of this balance between what we used to call 'hosted', that controlled in London, and the indigenous out-put. And as the BBC went through a rationalisation process, around the end of the '80's, the 'hosting' was withdrawn and we were left with a very very small amount of indigenous drama and we hit a rough patch in our drama production at that time and came very close I think, as the BBC had to get used to the disciplines of Producer Choice, the internal market, and had to get used to a significant portion of its drama going out to independent production, we came very close to losing the television drama operation in Birmingham. It would have been a tragedy for Birmingham and it would have been a tragedy for the BBC, because over the twenty odd years that it has been in existence there it has been very much a drama academy for the BBC but at the end of a long and difficult and torturous negotiation, what we ended up with was an agreement which was a major advance from what had gone before - to make a minimum of 20 hours of indigenous drama in Birmingham building over three years to 50 hours and it has got

off to a tremendous start with the award winning adaptation by **David Lodge** of Martin Chuzzlewit and also a hit series for BBC 1 set in Warwick called Dangerfield.

*FG: It's a great story. Now when you took over in Birmingham you inherited the Asian Broadcasting Unit, I think, tell us how you developed Pebble Mill into a Multi-cultural operation?*

DW: When I first moved from Plymouth to Birmingham, which was quite a cultural shock, I stayed in a hotel near the Hagley Road in Birmingham and in the evenings I used to walk around places like Smethwick and I saw a world which in 1983 was simply not represented on the screens. At the same time I was coming to terms with the fact that I was responsible for what was called the Asian Unit - its history was that it was original called Immigrant Unit, its programmes were all in mother tongue. They were aimed at people who'd come from other Countries to this land and no-body watched them, to speak of, at that point in time. It was perfectly clear, walking around these streets, that what we ought to be dealing with was second generation Asians particularly and black people particularly. People who were born and bred in Birmingham, it was their home. And so what we did was embark on a long and quite difficult course which moved the Asian Unit effectively forward in its programming, so that ... we persuaded the BBC to withdraw mother tongue programming from the Networks, whether Radio 4 or BBC 1 and replace it with programming aimed at the young, second generation Asian and much more in the main stream. We also persuaded the BBC to move Ebony, which was a programme made out of Bristol for African Caribbean people to Birmingham. Hence we had two Units, an African Caribbean Unit and an Asian Unit. Eventually in the early '90's that became a multi-cultural unit which by then developed the expertise and the skills of the new generation of people living in this Country to make main stream programmes such as Ruling Passions, such as Flavours of India, with Madhur Jaffry (check spelling), Network East, All Black, all of these programmes, not in some kind of ghetto slot but right in the main stream of the BBC schedules. Same thing is beginning to happen on Network Radio where more and more programmes are being scheduled, some of which are coming out of Birmingham.

*FG: Very interesting story that is. In 1986 the BBC brought in a big regional revolution in a way, certainly re-organisation, and you became Head of Broadcasting, Midlands and East Anglia .. Midlands and East. What were your range of responsibilities now? Greatly advanced from HNPC I take it?*

DW: The BBC in '86 came to the conclusion that you couldn't go on with separate strands of Management, one managing Local Radio, one Regional Television, one Network Programmes. You had to bring the whole thing together under what became jokingly called a Mr Big who could be the Mr BBC in any one Region. And in England they set up five Regions which within a couple of years or so collapsed to three Regions of which ours was one. Originally I was Head of Broadcasting for the Midlands, which involved nine Local Radio stations and two Regional Television stations, one for the East Midlands out of Nottingham and one for the West Midlands out of Birmingham and as the five Regions collapsed I also became responsible for another Regional Television station in East Anglia and six Local Radio stations in the same part of the Country and my title changed to Head of Broadcasting, BBC Midlands and East.

FG: *And on top of the operations you mentioned of course you were in charge of the whole of the Network broadcasting out-put.*

DW: Yes, it was a huge responsibility, there's no question of that. And whilst all these changes were going on the BBC itself was re-organising outside of London in order to have a cohesive case to put to the Government for the renewal of its Royal Charter in 1996 and it embarked on a devolution of more Network programming and probably Birmingham did better out of that than most Regions did, and we virtually doubled the out-put of Network television to about 800 hours. We took on board all of Day Time for BBC Television and increased Drama responsibilities. And we increased by about a third the amount of out-put which we were selling to the national Radio Networks. So it was fifteen Local Radio stations, three Regional; Television stations, about 2000 hours of Network radio, about 800 hours of Network television. Budget about £100 Million.

FG: *But all that responsibility isn't realistic unless you also have the budget to go with it. Did you have a budget?*

DW: The budgets for Regional Television and Local Radio were fairly constant because the out-put was fairly constant.

FG: *Under your control?*

DW: Under my control devolved from London. The budgets for Network Television had to be fought for each year out of, what had then become, four 'centres of excellence', and that tended to ebb and flow a bit but the overall out-put from Pebble Mill was much more stable by this time, so although the amount of money tended to change a little bit the volume of out-put didn't change very much and it was much easier to balance that with the available resources.

You asked interestingly, 'under my control'. Answer, yes, broadly speaking but the centralist tendencies of the BBC meant that by then it had been decreed in London that Regional Television should be News and Current Affairs only and Local Radio should move much more towards all speech shoulders.

Roll 6

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FG: *In 1986 the BBC instituted a Managing Directorship for Regional Broadcasting - did this give Regional Broadcasting in Television and Radio more clout?*

DW: The coming of a Managing Director for Regional Broadcasting unquestionably gave it more clout. He sat astride quite a large empire which roughly a quarter of the BBC's income and for the first, time in England at least, there was a very senior figure who sat as a member of the Board of Management along side Managing Director, Network Television and Managing Director, Network Radio putting the case for Regional Broadcasting, fighting for resources, making sure that it was there where it counted.

FG: *Was it a disadvantage that he came between you and the Director General?*

DW: I think with the benefit of hindsight, yes it was a disadvantage in a way. Up until that point each Head of Broadcasting .... can I start again

Up until that point the Heads of Broadcasting met the Director General once every six months over lunch and there was a face to face conversation. That disappeared for Heads of Broadcasting although the Controllers in the National Regions still met the Director General on a monthly basis so they had a colossal advantage, along side the fact that their Broadcasting Councils were executive, headed by a Governor, whereas the English Regions were advisory. But the BBC itself was changing and **John Birt** instituted a system of 'performance management' whereby he met every senior executive once a year and went through in many cases the minutiae of what was happening in each of the Regions. So there was still an opportunity to discuss with the Director General your problems and hopes and fears.

*FG: How far were you in Regional Centres affected by the internal BBC revolutions of those years. I mean, let's take Producer Choice and the setting up of the Internal Market - how far did that hit you in Birmingham?*

DW: The economies which began in earnest in the mid '80's and are still continuing, hit Regional broadcasting very seriously indeed. I mean in my view, the so called 10% Local Radio cuts actually blew apart what the whole concept of regionalism and devolution of management, because on the one hand we had all been appointed and told you are Mr BBC, you decide how the money is spent and what's the best service for the communities that you are responsible for serving. On the other hand, and only you know a year later at the most we were told you've got to take 10% out of Local Radio and when we said but can't we take that from somewhere else if we so choose, the answer was, no it must come out of Local Radio. So effectively the decision was taken in London and the operation was segmented.

*FG: But you had all these cost cutting reviews to face. You had Phillips and you had then John Birt doing his Resources Study and that must have shaken your situation quite seriously and had some effect on confidence.*

DW: In Birmingham alone we made ... we lost more than 300 posts - that's about 20%, over 20% of the total staff and we were involved in a series of 'contracting out' exercises which in my view were difficult to defend morally. We were dealing with the weakest of the people on the staff, the caterers, the cleaners, the engineers who mended the bogs and boilers - many of them had worked for the BBC for ten, twelve or fifteen years and we, for purely economic reasons made them redundant such that they left the employment of the BBC on a Friday night and came in again on a Monday, doing precisely the same job, but for about 30% less wages and with most of their rights having disappeared. So that sort of exercise together with the introduction of an internal market, which meant a slimming down exercise, in Birmingham the Outside Broadcast base for Television disappeared, our ability to handle Film disappeared - it was a very difficult period through which to manage because morale was pretty low a lot of the time.

*FG: But you managed to hang on to your main Television Studio?*

DW: During the early '90's there was a rationalisation of resources in the Television Service led by **John Birt** before he became Director General and one of the proposals was that the main Television Studios in Manchester and Birmingham should be closed on the grounds that they weren't necessary. I resisted this through many months of argument and negotiation because I felt that if we were going to lose our Outside Broadcast base, we were going to lose our Film, if we were to lose this Television Studio as well, the place would have fundamentally altered and would be on the borders of whether or not it was going to be viable. And secondly, there was a massive contradiction in what was being proposed. On the

one hand it was being suggested that we should take on all of the morning on BBC 1, two large, live, magazine programmes and on the other we wouldn't have a proper Television Studio from which you could do sophisticated television programmes. So I resisted this very strongly indeed and I'm glad to say won and at the end of the first year of Producer Choice it was in fact the most economic television studio in the Television Service.

FG: *Of course the BBC has also been proclaiming accountability over these recent years to the public. Now you in a regional setting are much closer to the audience of course than people in London, did you have to step your accountability to the public at large - how did you make yourself accountable?*

DW: I'd always believed in accountability and was involved in the first public meetings that the BBC ever ran going right back to the '70's. I'd always when I was a Local Radio manager made myself available to the audience regularly for them to question me about policies - it's something I believe in deeply but as we approached the argument for the renewal for the Charter in '96 a large number of meetings were set up within the Regions in order to pursue the Licence Payers, opinion formers, politicians, the worth of our case. In the Midlands alone we had nineteen public meetings and about seven or eight lobbies of Members of Parliament and they were very interesting, supportive occasions. But there emerged for the first time in my experience in the Regions a feeling that the BBC was much too South East biased, a wish for more broad based regional television and a wish for more money to be spent on Local Radio. Yet when we reported this back to the 'centre' those things didn't happen, the cuts continued. So the accountability was one thing, reacting to it was slightly more difficult.

FG: *And yet the BBC's now saying that it's going to increase its Network production across the board to 30% from outside London. Is that achievable do you think?*

DW: The BBC has embarked upon an increase in Network television outside of London. The targets which they've set for themselves are achievable but of course you have to bear in mind that what they've actually said is that most of the new programming will be done by independent producers - so it won't necessarily come through these Production Centres, although it might.

FG: *And what did you feel at the time of your retirement was the state of the BBC ...the status, the standing of the BBC in your area? Was it still regarded highly by people at large?*

DW: According to audience research the standing of the BBC for its services to local audiences was very high indeed. In fact people preferred the service from the BBC to that which came from the commercial sector, whether Television or Radio. But if you analyse those figures it is very interesting. They preferred the BBC because of the success of Local Radio, not because of the Regional Television services and the other thing we've tried to do in Birmingham was to make sure that our Network programmes were a part of the city from which we came, I mean for instance by reflecting the great revival of the Arts and Events from Birmingham. There was a great pride and support from the Civic Fathers too.

FG: *I've left the last minute for you just to say how you feel now about the BBC - your years, your career on departing from it*

DW: Well I've been privileged to work for the BBC. I mean it's a fine organisation, still making some of the best programmes anywhere in the world, with a staff which overall is among the most motivated that I've ever seen. But it is going through very difficult transitional period possibly approaching a mixture of public and private money. It has gone

through a period of low morale and the seeds of its own destruction may have been sown there. It's the job of subsequent Managements to make sure that they don't grow.

*FG: Well, let's hope the situation is stabilised - I agree with you. Thank you very much, fascinating interview.*

INTERVIEW ENDS