

Sir David Attenborough  
Personal Histories, 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2009

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Speakers: Sir David Attenborough, David Collison, Anna Benson Gyles, Ray Sutcliffe.

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Laughter and applause has been edited out of the first section but some of it remains in the question and answer segment.

## Transcription

**Sam Wakeford** (undergraduate Cambridge University Students' Union representative and Personal-Histories volunteer). It's quite amazing to see so many people here at an event that four years ago Pamela thought would fit in the front half of the McDonald Institute seminar room. It is a real pleasure on behalf of the entire Personal-Histories team to welcome David Attenborough. Thanks very much.

**David Attenborough.** This is a bit of a surprise to me. I had thought that I had been invited to talk in a reminiscent way to half a dozen people about the early days of television and archaeology. However, I am very flattered that so many of you should be here.

I joined BBC Television in October 1952. I cannot say that I did so as a consequence of a lifetime ambition because the plain fact of the matter was that I had never at that time seen television. Mind you, I was not in the minority. The bulk of the British public hadn't seen television in 1952. All the programmes were live and they all came from two small studios up in North London at Alexandra Palace. They were, in fact, the studios from which the first public television service in the world was transmitted.

I hadn't applied to join television. I had applied for a post in BBC Radio. But Radio did not want me. However, someone in this infant television service happened to see my application and had written to me asking if I would be interested in joining them. So, I went up to Alexandra Palace and there I met the man who is the hero of this afternoon, Paul Johnstone.

Paul was an astonishing man. He was three years older than me, having been born in 1923. He had won an Open Scholarship to Oxford in 1939 but had then volunteered to join the Royal Navy as an Able Seaman. During four and half years of war, he rose to become a Lieutenant in command of a motor gunboat and took part in the D-Day landing. So he was an experienced seaman. He was also, I do not doubt, a brave man. And you can't command a motor gunboat in battle without having some ideas about how to lead people. It was a privilege for me to join him.

Now Paul ranked, at that time, as one of the great experts at producing non-fiction television programmes because he had been doing so for three whole weeks. Actually, that is not exactly true. His first programme had gone out only the week before I joined him. But, obviously he had 100% more experience than I had. He explained to me the basis of his current programme. It was called "Animal Vegetable Mineral?". I gather that some aged recordings of some of its editions were shown earlier on this afternoon.

In those days, the BBC was avowedly and unashamedly interested in spreading information and in doing so in such a way that people who were not necessarily interested in imbibing information would nonetheless watch. The Head of our department, Mary Adams, who bizarrely was called the Head of Talks, had cooked up this programme basing it largely on a programme that was being shown in the United States. It assembled three experts, primarily archaeologists but also anthropologists, and presented them with objects. It was supposed to be a challenge by the museum that had supplied the objects to see if the experts could identify them. The chairman would give them three points if they got it right. The points, of course, were quite irrelevant. The object of the exercise was to allow an expert archaeologist or scholar to go through the intellectual processes that would enable him to identify an object - a logical process that would not be familiar to many viewers. So, for example, the expert would look at something and say, first that it was made of stone. Then, perhaps, he or she would identify the kind of stone and say where it had come from. He would examine the way in which it was made and that would give him a clue about its possible date and then perhaps he or she might hazard a guess as to its function. The chairman would then say 'very good' or 'not' and allocate points.

The chairman was an archaeologist from this university, Dr Glyn Daniel, who eventually became a professor here. Glyn played the game marvellously and had a varied group of experts to whom he presented the objects. Prominent among them was Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Archaeologists among you will know his name very well. He was one of the great pioneering archaeologists of the twentieth century having excavated at Maiden Castle and many other places. Sir Mortimer got hold of the idea very quickly. He was - I must be careful what I say for his granddaughter is here . . .

**Mrs. Carol Pettman :** It's all right. Say what you like

He was an extrovert! He had a moustache - very useful for an expert because you can do a certain amount of twiddling with it - and he played the game to absolute perfection. Presented with an object he would say 'My goodness, what on earth can that be?' Then he would go through the whole process. Eventually it would turn out, of course, that he himself had actually excavated it and that he knew it backwards. Glyn Daniel, the chairman from St John's College, Cambridge, and Sir Mortimer performed this double act with supporting cast with great success. Other people also appeared, but I hope they might have forgiven me for saying that they were, by and large, the supporting cast.

My job was to go to the challenging museum and select the objects. Paul would say to me, away you go to Salisbury or wherever it was and find fifteen, twenty objects which would be susceptible to this kind of treatment. And away I would

go. We discovered early on that the experts who were due to appear in the programme were much more sensitive about their reputation than I had supposed. When we announced that the objects were going to come from, say, Durham Museum, suddenly the great experts were seen going up to Durham and noting where an object had been temporarily removed - and making notes from the label of what it was. It was clearly not a good thing if you, as a professor of archaeology, appeared on television and failed to recognise the sort of thing your first-year undergraduates would be expected to know.

Museums, of course, did not want really valuable things to go down to London. And quite right too. On one occasion, I went to the Salisbury Museum. It didn't have a great deal of objects that would be suitable for the programme. But it had an object called the Wilton Bowl which I expect some people here will know. I asked if they would lend it to us for the programme, but the Curator, a very nice man called Hugh Shortt, said 'I'm very sorry that is out of the question. It's far, far too valuable.' 'I promise I will look after it most carefully,' I said. 'I realise it is extremely precious. There will be commissionaires standing by it at all times.' 'Well,' he said. 'We can't lend it anyway because it doesn't actually belong to the Museum. It belongs to Lord somebody-or-other. We can't lend it without his permission and we can't contact him.' There was a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing but in the end we got the Wilton Bowl.

Now, the beginning of the programme started with a packing case, spinning with the words "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral, query" on its four sides. When it stopped, its lid lifted magically and a pair of hands appeared and took out an object. This was Paul at his best. He realised that you had to get a pair of hands into shot quickly so that the viewer would know what size an object was. A good educational point. The first was always the star object - and in this case it was the Wilton Bowl. Out it came and in due course was passed to Mortimer Wheeler. He gave a dazzling dissertation about the art of this particular period, about the clasps on the sides which were decorated with enamel in a lovely Celtic design. The programme was a great success. That night, the objects were carefully packed up and sent back to Salisbury by car. The following morning - a Sunday - I had Hugh Shortt of the phone. 'One of the clasps was missing!'. 'It can't be', I said. 'Yes, it is so,' said Hugh. 'My job is at stake. This country's historic artistic tradition has been damaged. I simply don't know what to do.' 'Don't worry', I said. 'We will find it.'

I bicycled to the studios in Lime Grove and went through the sweepings from the studio floor. Nothing. Were these all? No. Some had been sent to the incinerators. So, I go down to find the incinerator and rake out the ash hoping - or fearing - that I might find the semi-molten remains of this great Celtic treasure. Nothing! I was in despair. Then, I suddenly remembered that the bowl was the object we had put back in the crate as it spun at the end of the programme. So, I went

upstairs to the property department, found the box and there at the bottom in the straw was the missing clasp. So happily, my job was safe - as were the artistic traditions of this country.

As the programme continued, we had an idea. Sir Mortimer was being very clever. Why not put in a fake and see what he said. Museum and archaeologists here will know very well that there are well-known fake Neolithic stone axes were made during the nineteenth century by a gentleman called Flint Jack. Some of them still reside in the collections of museums of great distinction. I thought we might present Sir Mortimer with one of these and that that would be quite fun. It was a silly thing to do really. The axe was produced. The expert sitting next to Sir Mortimer looked at it and said 'Yes, a very good Neolithic axe. Very good patina and lovely pressure flaking. It has got chips in the edge so it was probably used.' And he passed it to Sir Mortimer. Wheeler looked at it and said 'Well, some people might say that this was a Neolithic hand axe. Actually of course it is a nineteenth century fake made by a gentleman called Flint Jack.' And that was that.

The next programme, however, was from York Museum. Now, I couldn't find much archaeological stuff in their collection that seemed suitable. But one of the experts in the next programme was going to be a biologist, Sir Julian Huxley, a great authority in his time. I have to say I had been against including him. Not that I had anything against Sir Julian. But, it seemed to me that natural history objects were not susceptible to the kind of explicatory conversation that Wheeler would give. You either knew it was a Bar-tailed Godwit or you didn't. You couldn't provide an interesting explanation of how you came to that conclusion. However, I went in to York Museum's basement and in the corner I saw what I immediately recognised was a stuffed Great Auk. 'Could we borrow this?' 'Certainly.' said the Curator. 'It's an absolute pain, this thing. It doesn't fit in with the Museum's archaeological collections. Of course, it's extraordinarily valuable. People will pay huge sums of money for a Great Auk. It's extinct, after all. If it appears on television we shall get an offer from a collector and the Museum will make a lot of money.'

In due course the Great Auk appeared and was presented to the experts. Now, it happened that Sir Julian had been a bit derisory about the programme when he had agreed to appear on it. He said it was not really science but he would do his best. 'Now, Sir Julian,' said Glyn Daniel, 'I think this is an object for you.' 'Well of course anyone can see it's a Great Auk,' said Sir Julian. 'And it's extinct.' I thought that he would then go on and give us some interesting stuff about when the species went extinct, why it did and why it was flightless. But, that was it. 'Sir Mortimer,' said Glyn Daniel 'Have you got anything to add.' Sir Mortimer took the bird and put it on his knee. 'Well,' he said, 'As Sir Julian says, it is a Great Auk. Or, shall we put it this way - it's a rather crude simulacrum of a Great Auk'

You see, it has a penguin's beak. These are chicken feathers rather crudely dyed. It's really a rather incompetent fake.' I looked through the window of the control gallery and saw the poor Curator of the Museum looking appalled as his vision of thousands of pounds dissolved before his eyes. And Sir Julian looking infuriated.

That was the beginning of a somewhat uneasy relationship between Glyn and Sir Julian. Sir Julian was pretty dismissive about the educational ambitions that Paul and I and everyone else producing the programme had. He didn't think it was very scientific. We used to have a dinner before each programme so that members of the panel would get to know one another and there would be 'mutual warmth' before we got into the studio. But, the next time Sir Julian took part, things did not go so well. Sir Julian started to complain that there was no chance to speak properly scientific about an object. "Well, all we want," said Glyn, 'is informed chat.' "That," said Sir Julian, 'is exactly the problem. You are an archaeologist, not a hard scientist.' Mutual warmth was not spreading as widely or as warmly as one might have wished. By the time we got into the taxi for the studio there was a slight edge between Sir Julian and the Chairman. I, once again, had been responsible for selecting the objects. Up came one of them that I had particularly chosen for Sir Julian's benefit. It was an egg. I knew it from the time that I done my Zoology practical here in the Department. It was the egg of a mollusc, a giant West African snail called *Achatina*. Sir Julian would know immediately what it was but at least it would give him a chance to talk about how some molluscs lay eggs with hard shells.

Up it came. 'Now' says Glyn Daniel,' Sir Julian, what about this?' 'Well,' says Sir Julian, 'everyone knows that there are only two classes of animals in the world that lay hard-shelled eggs - reptiles and birds. This is not a bird's egg because the shape is wrong. So it is a reptile egg. From the size of it, it must be that of some kind of lizard but one cannot possibly say which.' 'I hoped you might be more precise,' said Glyn. 'That,' said Sir Julian, 'is because, if I may say so, you do not understand zoological science. You cannot be precise about the species of this sort of thing. But it's a lizard egg.' 'That's not what it says on the card' says Glyn. 'Well I think that you probably don't recognise its scientific name. I think you will find that it is a reptile.' 'I don't think so,' says Glyn. 'I will bet you five pounds,' said Sir Julian. 'that when you tell me its Latin name you will discover that it is a lizard.' 'It says on the card,' said Glyn 'the egg of *Achatina*, the Giant West African Snail. I think you owe me five pounds'.

I was directing the cameras in the control gallery. Should I show Sir Julian looking apoplectic? Should I show Glyn Daniel who was looking like a cat that had just swallowed the cream? In fact I cut hastily to the next object. When we got to the end of the programme press photographers from all over London were there asking to take pictures of a five pound note being handed over by Sir Julian

to Glyn Daniel. They never got it.

"Animal Vegetable Mineral?" went from success to success. It may come as a surprise to many here that in 1956 Sir Mortimer - an archaeologist not a pop singer - became Television Personality of the Year. And he deserved it. Librarians around the country told us that shelves on which archaeological books had sat untouched for decades were suddenly emptied. Archaeology had become a huge popular success. It was of interest to anyone with any degree of intellectual curiosity. It was a sensation.

Now in fairness, I should say that, at this time, the BBC was the only television service in the country. There was no competition. If you watched television at all, you watched BBC. It wasn't even BBC 1. It was just BBC. There was only one network. Under those circumstances, it wasn't difficult for the BBC to persuade people to sample something and then for them to discover, rather to their surprise, that it was rather interesting. Today, the situation is rather different, with so many other networks available.

After the success of 'Animal Vegetable Mineral?', Paul, being Paul, realised that we now had to progress to something archaeologically more serious. He together with Glyn and Sir Mortimer decided that they would start a series of programmes one of which - about Tollund Man - I think you may have just seen. They would call it "Buried Treasure" and it would be a serious examination of some aspect of archaeological knowledge. It would not be simply a slide lecture, animated by personal appearances here and there. It had to be better than that. And then he then he invented something that really was new. He invented experimental archaeology.

I stand to be corrected, but it is my belief that no experimental archaeology was staged before the 1950's. If it was, I don't think it could possibly have been conducted in front of such a huge audience. Paul used one of the first such experiments to investigate one aspect of Stonehenge. As everyone here will know, Stonehenge contains, between the huge sarsen monoliths, small blue stones that come from the Preseli Hills. But how were they transported? There were a number of theories. They could have been carried round the coast on ships. Or they could have been dragged overland. Paul decided to find out if the second way was possible. He recruited a team of schoolboys and constructed sledges. Then he cast stones in concrete that were about the same size and weight of the blue stones and discovered by experiment how many people it took to drag it how far in a day.

That was only the first of a number of archaeological experiments that "Buried Treasure" pioneered. I myself strayed from the golden path of archaeology after "Animal Vegetable Mineral?" and pursued my own line because I was a biologist

and not an archaeologist. I then became side-tracked into administration and became responsible for the programmes on BBC2 which was then the BBC's new second network. It was then that I thought we might build on this huge success that we had had with archaeological programmes and have a special unit which would be responsible for not only archaeology but more recent history. It would be headed, of course, by Paul Johnstone. It produced a new series called "Chronicle", regular fifty minute programmes that took a serious look at archaeological digs and reported on archaeological happenings around the world. My hope - and Paul's ambition - was that the BBC would then have a unit which was so well known and respected in archaeological circles that, when an important discovery was made, as for example the three and half tons of gold or whatever it was that was discovered recently, the first people archaeologists would contact would be the BBC. And that would happen whether the find was in Wessex or Guatemala. The BBC would become the place where archaeologists world wide could contact knowledgeable producers and skilled cameramen to come and document the progress of a dig.

That went quite well for the first year. Then Paul made another innovation in televised archaeology. Together we decided to initiate and finance our own excavation so that viewers could watch an archaeological dig that though it was televised would nonetheless be conducted to a timetable and conform to criteria that were not television's but academia's. Archaeologists would not be asked to re-stage discoveries, nor to stop excavating until the cameras could be there, because cameras would be there all the time. If necessary we would keep them there for weeks. If necessary we would return the following season. Archaeology would be practised in front of the eyes of the public with a distinguished archaeologist in control so viewers would really understand the process of archaeological discovery.

The first place we decided to do was Silbury Hill. It suited BBC2 very well. The site was beside an arterial road, the A4, so we would have an Outside Broadcast van with the BBC2 logo stationed beside it which would publicise the new network and illustrate the sort of thing it could do.

So that was done. I may say that when I announced the plan to the assembled press the first thing I said was 'Let us make it absolutely clear from the word go that this is not a treasure hunt. The treasure we are looking for is information.' And then a chap from the press gets up and says 'Are you actually saying that if you found a grave full of gold in the middle of the hill you would be sorry?' 'Of course not', I replied. 'We would be delighted'. So, the press reported that the BBC was on a treasure hunt. In the event, of course, the excavation did not reveal anything in the nature of a burial at the end of the first season - and the press immediately said 'There you are. It was a disaster. The excavation was a failure. They picked the wrong thing. They didn't find any treasure'. But that apart - no

indeed, not that apart - that was one of the valuable things which the Silbury Hill excavation did. It showed that archaeology is not a treasure hunt; the search was for knowledge. That televised excavation was, in my view, another great innovation in televised archaeology that was - once again - led by Paul Johnstone.

As I have mentioned, I left archaeological programmes when I left "Animal Vegetable Mineral?" but happily we have three people here who after that series worked not only on "Buried Treasure" but on "Chronicle", the BBC2 series that followed it. And, I am going to ask them to join me on these chairs so that when you ask questions about the BBC's archaeological output, 90% of which I won't be able to answer, they will. So, first of all, Ray Sutcliffe, who specialised in marine archaeology. Then, Anna Benson Gyles who directed many of the films and David Collison who was in charge of the Silbury Hill programmes and who is wearing his Silbury Hill tie.

Now, are there any questions? [TI: 44:45] And, particularly about those programmes, "Chronicle" and "Buried Treasure", which actually did more, they weren't just quizzes; they were major archaeological documentaries. If you have questions about them I am sure that the four of us between us will be able to answer them. So, anybody?

**Nina Wale**, (Cambridge undergraduate, Bioanthropology): Letters from the time and your speech have indicated that television was seen as a great power and a medium to bring archaeology to the public. I was wondering why you had this mandate when your much documented difficulties with technology were there. The cameras were cumbersome. I imagine taking them to Silbury Hill was quite difficult. Was it because the Talks programming was determined by the personalities and interests of those employees? You went on to do natural history programmes. Paul Johnstone was an historian. Was it personal or personality led rather than anything popularly determined?

**David Collison**: Silbury was a technical challenge to say the very least. In 1968 you couldn't get BBC 2 in Wiltshire at all so our engineers rigged an enormous mast about 200 feet high and bolted it to the ground, just on the side of the A4. And with some stuff called camera tape, which is very sticky, they got a small black and white monitor and strapped that into the corner of the control van and they said, 'Right, there you are, when that screen goes blank, you're on the air.' We had no means of keeping in touch with Television Centre whatsoever because, although it was an expensive operation, funds were limited so technical things that might have made life very much easier in this day and age were simply not available to us. The cameras were cumbersome but, in fact, it is interesting to note that Silbury was the one place where we actually pioneered a small hand-held camera. It had miles and miles of cable behind it and it took

three 'riggers' to hold it, to get it into the end of our excavation tunnel. But we put first-class colour pictures onto BBC 2 screens "live" in 1969. So, it was a challenge. And, I think the other part of your question was, 'Was the decision to go to Silbury occasioned by Paul Johnstone's wish to further his own interest in history and archaeology?' Well, yes, I think it was but with tremendous support from the Controller of BBC2, on my right, and from Desmond Hawkins, who was the Head of BBC West. The three of them were determined that it would be done and I think, between you and me, they had been dreaming of doing it for years before. Thank you.

**Sir David:** Anymore? Yes Sir.

**Simeon Innocent**, (Cambridge undergraduate, Bioanthropology): Do you think that popular culture and media have a role in archaeology today?

**Sir David:** Ray, you go. (laughter)

**Ray Sutcliffe:** Absolutely. I think people don't necessarily, immediately, see what they have before them and the presence of an archaeologist who can interpret that material brings it to light in a way that only comes when they go to museums and that is a much later stage. Of course, a digression I was going to make, after David spoke, it is worth remembering that for quite a lot of its early life "Chronicle" was in black and white. Colour was a new invention and, of course, it is the black and white that is unnatural and colour which is natural and BBC put BBC Colour on the end in case you hadn't noticed. British archaeology can be spectacularly uninspiring at times; and in black and white it is generally so. (loud audience laughter) It greatly benefited from colour.

**Sir David:** Sir?

**Unidentified speaker (who is this?):** Sir David, you have furnished us with some wonderful details of the general public's reaction to "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?", I was wondering if you can tell us more about the initial response to televised archaeology in academia, particularly in the University of Cambridge. (audience laughter)

**Sir David:** Well, there are a number of apocryphal stories (audience laughter) about how it was received amongst the academic community. There is the one, in the very early days, when a BBC producer rang up a distinguished archaeologist in Oxford and said, 'Would you be interested in appearing on "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?"' and he said, 'Yes, but how much would I have to pay?' (audience laughter) But, it was Lord Renfrew here who made programmes in the "Chronicle" series which reflected his latest, and, if I may say so, quite complicated archaeological theories and who took us through Minoan

Crete, for example, or the megaliths of Malta and explained quite high level archaeological propositions in language which ordinary viewers could understand. And, it had huge audiences. It had audiences of 4 million. David, you can remember.

**David Collison:** Certainly, in the early 1970s, we were regularly getting audiences between 2 and 4 million.

**Ray Sutcliffe:** Which is more than Newsnight even now (audience laughter).

**Sir David:** So, we did and the Unit did propagate archaeological knowledge of quite sophisticated kind and I'm sorry that there isn't a unit now that is still doing it.

**David Collison:** Can I just pick up on that? It's about Glyn Daniel. One of the things that Paul did in 1965 when he first was offered the editorship of the History & Archaeology Unit and its flagship "Chronicle", was to ensure that his principal advisor would be Professor Glyn Daniel. Now Glyn, as you will all know by anecdote or personally, had his ear very, very close to the ground. He was also the Editor of *Antiquity* which meant that he had a limitless supply of contacts and stories. Also, having spent the '50s as a television star himself, he kind of knew what worked. And, so, he had real input and, in fact, when Colin Renfrew and I made a film about the megalith builders together, it came about because Glyn rang Paul Johnstone and said, 'I've just been up to Sheffield University to listen to a young lecturer there, one of my students, and he's trying to redate the entire prehistory of the world. So, I think perhaps you should have a word with him.' [audience laughter] And that is precisely what we did and a lot of programmes came about that way. Glyn was absolutely invaluable as a piece of litmus paper for what we were doing but also somebody who introduced us to what the new minds in archaeology were up to.

**Sir David:** Ray

**Ray Sutcliffe:** One thing that Paul had was the amazing ability of being able to deduce what the public wanted to be interested in. Even to our sometimes horror we would be sent off on something that we thought we would never get away with. In fact, he was usually right. One particular one was a thing called the "The Lost Treasure of Jerusalem" based on the book, *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* which came out from a very strange discovery or non-discovery in Rennes-le-Château. We never thought we would get away with it. It sometimes would take us by surprise. I remember particularly myself going into Sparrow Cove in Falkland Islands and staying there for ten days with the prospect of making a 50-minute documentary about 2,000 tones of rotting iron. It is not going to happen but he was right and it did.

**Sir David:** Let me ask Anna who came into the Unit as a general film director and who had not had experience of archaeology particularly. How easy were they to direct and how difficult was it to get them to be comprehensive?

**Anna Benson Gyles:** Well, it was not easy. Ray had mentioned about black and white; one or two of my first outings, archaeologists would come rushing over and say 'we made this wonderful find', a hearth. And I would go whizzing along and there would be a slightly different shade of brown (loud audience laughter). It was quite difficult to bring it to life really. But, there was a kind of respect for academia that perhaps we could well remember. We really did want to serve the idea. Although we would say to the academics, "We can't really do justice to your book in the time we have but we can perhaps give a sense of it and maybe light fires in the imagination so that people might go and buy your book." We found ourselves once. I was doing a film about Flinders Petrie in Egypt. We were plodding through the desert sands because there was a spot where this great find of some pot had been made. The sand would look no different to the sand we were now on. But the actual shot was another two or three miles and, being 'Chronicle', we plodded the two or three miles. We felt that there was a kind of authenticity about that kind of thing. One didn't make it up. I found it both stimulating and quite frustrating at the same time.

**Sir David:** Madam.

**Jacke Phillips,** postgraduate, McDonald Institute: Could you, you were all involved in the early days of archaeological television. Could I ask each of you your opinions on current archaeological television? Not so much "Time Team" but the History Channel, that sort of thing, the recreations, etc.

**David Collison:** I think there's a dearth of ideas in all kinds of factual programming now; just to get off the subject for the moment, one example which hits me between the eyes every time I switch it on is "Horizon". In 1970, you practically had to have a Ph.D in Microspectography to watch 'Horizon' - to understand it. {audience laughter} It employed the likes of Sir Fred Hoyle and Professor Porter, the President of the Royal Institution. It seemed that everyone who took part in Horizon was the leading expert in the world in their subject. And, the viewing figures were fine. Four of the directors of that series in the early/mid '70s went on to become Hollywood film directors. There was no shortage of talent around. But, I have to say, and I hope I'm not treading on toes, that "Horizon" now in terms of its intellectual rigour and its fund of ideas and stimulus and influence sometimes seems a shadow of what it used to be. And I think the same might be said of an awful lot of programmes, setting David's (Attenborough) programmes and natural history to one side. When David

started BBC 2, he originated "The World About Us", "Horizon" and "Chronicle" and an anthropology programme called "Life", presented by Desmond Morris, which all went out monthly to start with. But "The World About Us", edited by Brian Branston, had the most amazing scope. Often it gave film to travellers and then edited the results on their return and the programme offered wonderful insights into the world. Seems to me now that unless you actually have access to the star of six-part series on a Comedy Channel somewhere you're not going to get a programme made about the Spectacled Bear of Peru or whatever. And, I just think that's a pity.

**Sir David:** Let me add one codicil to that. It is easy to be critical of present programming. But, the present situation is different. It is fundamentally different. There is only a certain number of people who are going to watch television on any particular evening. When I started, if they wanted to watch television, they watched the programmes BBC put out. A few years after that, they had a choice. They had ITV and a few years after that they had a third choice, BBC2, which is what we are talking about. At that stage there was just three choices. Now, as everybody in this hall knows there are 50 choices. So the struggle to attract people is far more intense than it was when, in the glory days, if that is what they were, of BBC's monopoly. So, while I don't demur from anything that David has said, nonetheless, the problem is very, very acute as far as public television is concerned. And, one is driven to think that there are methods of electronic communication which are not known to me as an aged practitioner. Young people now will use electronic communication in ways which are as abstruse to me as BBC1 was 50 years ago to many people in the population. Maybe the place where you are going to find quality, intellectual quality, is not going to be on these mass public vehicles after all. If that is the case we then are faced with another problem which is how do you finance them adequately? Where do you get the money from to put the sort of money that we were able to put into the Silbury Hill excavation or "Chronicle", or "Buried Treasure"? It is a problem. It is difficult now to get the audiences to justify the costs for many subjects.

**David Collison:** I think we were very lucky; there's no doubt about that. David and his contemporaries were the pioneers; we came afterwards but the opportunity to start new things and I'm now prompting Ray to talk about Industrial Archaeology and Maritime Archaeology both of which became specialisations of his and neither of which was even known about off television or on. Professor Kenneth Hudson from Bath University wrote a book called *Industrial Archaeology* and that's where the discipline came from. We were in a position, thank heavens, it made our lives wonderful, to actually pick up these new disciplines and ideas and run with them. [TIME 1:00.37]

**Ray Sutcliffe:** David has said it. What actually was happening was that

archaeology itself was evolving just as we were evolving with the techniques and methods of filming and recording. It changed before our eyes and of course before our cameras which was very useful because it gave us something to film. And we also came up with rather eccentric titles one of which was "Win a second-hand crane." (audience laughter) Exactly what any industrial archaeological societies actually wanted. [audience laughter] A second-hand crane was a really good thing to have. [audience laughter] And the same thing was true with maritime archaeology. That too was a great specialisation of Paul's; he was, of course, a personal authority on the subject. It was also an area where the viewers couldn't go themselves. You had a huge advantage. You could take them somewhere, as David takes people into wild jungles, somewhere where the viewer themselves couldn't actually participate; so it broadened that experience completely. Also, as the other David has just said, we had the advantage a limited number of channels. Now, there is more archaeology on television, apart from football, than virtually anything else. It runs into hundreds of hours. And what the BBC has moved into is what I might call narrow casting. The idea of target audiences is now sadly long gone. Does this really help the cause? I personally think, as a broadcaster as I was then, it doesn't but the solution I am afraid, I don't know.

**Sir David:** More questions.

**Michael Wood** (Broadcaster): David, can I ask you something about your own roots? When I was a student of Anglo-Saxon history years ago, one of the two or three most useful books was a book by Frederick Attenborough who was your father. I hardly need to tell you, but perhaps the audience is interested to know, he was one of the most influential historians of twentieth century Britain because he founded the Leicester Local History Unit that brought Hoskins and Finberg and all the rest. And, rumour has it that there are photographs of a tousle-haired 10 year old in the '30s counting hedgerow species and things like that. So, although you were a biologist, can we hear a little bit about your history background?

**Sir David:** Well, you're very kind to mention my father. He did indeed establish a chair in local history which I believe was the first in a British university. And, W.G. Hoskins, who will be known I dare say to some sections of this audience, was the first holder of it. My father, as well as being an Anglo-Saxon scholar, was also an extremely enthusiastic photographer. Hoskins and he travelled around the countryside in the Midlands taking photographs of churches and talking about building stone and counting species of plants in hedgerows. My job was as his assistant. My father would say, 'There is a very nice shot there, my son', he would say and 'There is a nice 14th century church there but you see it's a very empty foreground.' And, I would say, 'Yes.' And he would say, 'Now there is a herd of cows over there; just drive them in.' Being a 12 year old, I simply did

what my father told me and got myself into frightful trouble with farmers all over the Midlands. Anyway, thank you very much. [1:04:40]

**Sir David:** Now then how much more time do we have? There are more questions there anyway. Yes, Sir

**Tony Legge** [Professor at Birkbeck]: I have the distinction of not only seeing "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" but doing so within 200 yards of where we sit. We have been seeing the Tollund Man special from "Buried Treasure" which I very well remember. I have a question. Did you at the time realise the impact it had on a youthful mind? I am here today because of that programme.

**Sir David:** Well, the Tollund Man programme was another one of Paul's experimental archaeological programmes and one with a slightly wicked turn to it. Glyn Daniel, as I am sure people in this room know, many do, was a *bon viveur* and certainly a gastronome of major proportions (audience laughter). So they had got the analysis of the stomach contents of Tollund Man, who you will recall was ritually murdered in a Scandinavian bog, and Paul had reconstructed the meal that Tollund Man had before he was ritually murdered and presented it on camera to Mortimer Wheeler and Glyn Daniel for them to give a connoisseur's appreciation of what this meal was like. Mortimer Wheeler suggested that the man died from his wife's cooking. (audience laughter)

Sir?

**Christo Thanos** {archaeologist in the Netherlands with the ennisbeheerder cultuurhistorische informatie rijksdienst voor archeologie, cultuurlandschap en monumenten}: Can you tell us why Glyn Daniel was chosen to be a chairman?

**Sir David:** Yes. The question is, 'Can I explain why Glyn Daniel was chosen to be a chairman?' Yes, I can. In those days . . . it is difficult to explain to people now how alien television seemed to be in the '50s. There was this new monster among us and people thought that it had some kind of magic, some kind of mystique, some kind of unfathomable complexity which would frighten them and that would make them tongue tied or behave in an extraordinary way and speak in an extraordinary way. And so people who were not fazed by the camera were quite few on the ground. People who conducted quiz programmes of a light entertainment nature were familiar with these things . . . it wasn't just adult entertainment . . . there were brain trusts and so on and so you didn't think that a university academic could possibly take over and run this complex programme which was all live as I explained. What would he do when the cameras broke down which is what they frequently did. So I think I am right in saying, but I could stand corrected, the first chairman on the first programme of AVM? was a chap called Lionel Hale and Lionel Hale was one of these strange subspecies,

rare species, rare birds, who could conduct, be chairman of a quiz. And he was put in and he wasn't the least frightened of the cameras but my memory was that he was absolutely terrified of archaeology. (loud laughter) So Paul, it must have been, took the decision that we should say 'thank you very much' and there is 10 guineas and they took Glyn who sparkled on the very first programme on the panel and made him chairman. That is how it happened in my memory.

Yes Madam

**Harriet Flower**, (Cambridge undergraduate, archaeology); Television was obviously in its very early forms when these programmes were being made and different ways were explored on bringing the objects to life. I believe Glyn Daniel and Wheeler used coloured toothpaste at one point. Can you enlighten us on the methods that you used to bring the objects to life?

**David Collison**; Coloured toothpaste to bring the objects to life?

**Sir David**: Never! (loud audience laughter) What!

**David Collison**: You aren't going to spill the beans, are you? (audience laughter) You are not going to tell them the toothpaste story. (more laughter)

**Sir David**: What is this toothpaste story!?! (laughter and clapping)

**David Collison**. I don't know (more loud laughter)

**Sir David**. There is one right at the end there. Sir. Yes you Sir.

**Francis Pryor**: Yes, I am waiting for the mic.

**Sir David**: Well done.

**David Collison**: Francis, you're the last person who needs a mic! [audience laughter]

**Francis Pryor** (British archaeologist and Time Team specialist): I have a question for the younger, well, that is the wrong word ... in the middle. [audience laughter]

**Sir David**: You are referring to this aged gentleman here. [audience laughter]

**Francis Pryor**: Many years ago you directed me in a children's series for the BBC and you were quite firm and I was very malleable. What I'd like to know is, what was it like to direct Colin Renfrew and Sir Mortimer Wheeler.

**David Collison:** Oh boy, what a wonderful leading question. As Wheeler would say, 'That's a very good question, - I didn't ask you to ask that!!' And the person he did say that to on camera was, of course, Magnus Magnusson, whom I worked with a great deal. In fact, the last thing I did before leaving the BBC was when Ray and I collaborated on a 10-part series with Magnus about Viking Civilisation. Magnus was a wonder at 'bringing people out'. The way he brought the best out of Colin Renfrew was, first of all, to turn up late after lunch so that Colin, who had been kept waiting, was by now fuming [audience laughter] and then with a cheerful smile Magnus would ask Colin all the difficult questions we'd prepared. It produced wonderful, wonderful dialogue which you didn't have to cut at all, just put it onto the screen. So, Colin was a very, very quick learner. The other point about this is that I'm in favour of television programmes which have some kind of interlocutor, rather than giving academics like yourselves as it were, a free rein. The best example of that I can think of was Mortimer Wheeler in the '60s, who made, with a very distinguished director/producer, later Head of Radio 3, Stephen Hearst, two programmes called 'The Glory that Remains' and 'The Grandeur that was Rome' in which he was frankly given his head. And, because Sir Mortimer had a rather orotund sort of delivery, if there was no intermediary between him and the camera, it sometimes became very posed and almost arrogant-sounding. I didn't meet him properly till he was 80 and then worked with him on (interrupted by Sir David: "Young chap!") several films - in fact we didn't make our best programme until he was older than you are now!

Magnus did a wonderful thing. He was a historian and television journalist in his own right and a fine writer but he put himself 'on the back-burner' and really subsumed his performance entirely to Wheeler's and spent the programmes provoking Sir Mortimer into giving his best and coming back at him, making him think on his feet, as Colin used to have to think on his feet when somebody asked the difficult question, which Magnus and I had cooked-up over lunch - 'We'll get him this afternoon!'. And, it just produced a sparkle which I think prepared lines and autocue simply never have.

**Ray Sutcliffe:** There is another aspect to that too which I find particularly difficult to do. You then pretend, deliberately to misunderstand what people said to you so, in the end, people insist on telling you the things which they never intended to tell you at all. (audience laughter)

**Sir David:** Madam?

**Rosemary Cramp:** (Professor emeritus, Durham University) Would you suggest, that in modern television there is one thing a bit better and that is it is a bit more mixed in the sexes.

**Sir David:** A bit more?

**Rosemary Cramp:** Mixed. There are more women now on archaeological television.

**Sir David:** Oh, that kind of mixed. Yes, I think that's true.

**Rosemary Cramp:** You know one is struck by the fact that there was one "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" programme in which they had three women and that was it, wasn't it. I was one of them.

**Sir David:** Well, Jacquetta Hawkes appeared fairly regularly. I could also tell you a story about Margaret Mead. Her agent got in touch with the BBC. In case there's anybody who doesn't know about Margaret Mead, she was anthropology writ large in the United States in the '50s. She was the charismatic anthropologist in the States and wrote books about how children were brought up in Samoa. Anyway, her agent got in touch with us and said that Margaret Mead was coming over and she would consent to appear in our programmes on BBC. And, we invited her to appear on "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?". She turned up for one of these warming dinners beforehand and, again, the Beaujolais didn't do what it should have done. Glyn didn't get on with her very well. I have to say, she got very grumpy. When we got into the taxi to the Lime Grove Studio, she was really quite fed up. And when we got into the studio and started, Glyn said, "Now, we will have the first object." And he gave it to Margaret Mead who looked at it baffled and said, "I think this is a stupid programme. I have no idea what this object is and it is quite absurd to suppose that anybody would. But that kind of silly bits of unconnected information isn't something that I am in the least interested in." And, then there was a hiatus. But, what she didn't know was that we always gave the panel one object, from the museum before the programme started transmission in order that people should actually get into the mood of things. So, her statement had not been seen by anybody at all. She was sitting on the end of the bench looking away from the camera. And, we simply pushed the cameras in closer. And, although she had been introduced, she never said anything and her image was never seen. And, what is more, nobody actually noticed.

But, women in television, that is another issue. Jacquetta Hawkes, for example, appeared regularly and was brilliant and beautiful and perceptive. Kathleen Kenyon too. So, I would have thought that the proportion of feminine archaeologists who appeared on television was not dissimilar from the number in the academic profession. [TIME 1:18:10]

**Ray Sutcliffe:** May I add something? It is a common misconception that women

in the BBC are a new phenomenon. In fact, in your day, when you joined, when I joined, it was run by some extremely fierce ladies including Mary Adams.

**Sir David:** Every boss I had in the BBC was a woman.

**David Collison:** One of the reasons that women find making documentaries more accessible and more and more women are working in television now, which is an excellent thing, is that cameras are so portable now and relatively simple to use. (audience laughter, good-natured groans and noise from people in the lecture theatre) I remember David (Attenborough) and I made a programme in Nigeria which required filming in the women's quarters of the Oba of Benin's palace. And that was down to Anna, (Anna Benson Gyles, next to me). She had a three-day course on using a small film camera (we're talking about the mid 1970's). Now, Anna was a fine director but by and large, was not a cinematographer. She is a cinematographer now, as indeed nearly every young woman or young man going into television these days has to be. How often do you see on the credits 'written, directed and produced by Jennifer so and so', or 'Arnold somebody else'? It's something that I'm ashamed to say, but I would have to retrain entirely if I were able to do anything like that. I simply couldn't - we used to go on location with superb cameramen, wonderful sound recordists and an assistant cameraman and a PA (if we were lucky). That doesn't happen anymore.

**Sir David:** Anna would you like to say something into the microphone? (quiet laughter) [TIME 1.20:14]

**Anna Benson Gyles:** I did go to film school, spending hours trying to learn various technical things like loading cameras. New technology has made it possible now for many of us to make films actually all by ourselves and it is terrific. Except that it suggests that there is no craft involved just because you can press the button. So, there is actually no skill. And cameramen who learn about lighting, editors who learn about pace and rhythm, sound recordists who learn about sound. . . it is not a skill that you can just pick up just because you can press the buttons and I think there is a danger now that we are all so techie mad, we can all do it. But it actually doesn't look terrific half the time because it is not backed up with proper craft. And I think a bit like David that the future probably does lie in different forms of transmission apart from television. We have to learn and remind ourselves about story-telling techniques. It is not enough to stick music all over everything or flash frames. You have to work out what it is you want to say rather it is today or yesterday. You have to really work. The medium is not the message. [audience applauds]

**Ray Sutcliffe:** Anna won't tell you but I will; she has just largely single-handedly made a British Museum's film on Moctezuma and it is just available. She is a

highly accomplished filmmaker which is a craft in itself. She is fortunate to have all these disciplines at her figure tips. For someone like me, I need somebody to tell me that the train is coming behind me while you got your eye through the camera. That is what the director will do. It is not, in my view, possible to divide your attention three ways, to shoot it, to listen to it and then to direct it at the same time. One or the other will take precedence. It is a new business.

**Anna Benson Gyles:** I think that we are all in a bit of a hurry really. The great thing that we were privileged to have were teams. We got to know one another. We got to understand one another. We got to learn about the subject. Now people have to rush off and in half a moment get a few things off Google and then rush out and make a film. And there is a danger that it is all becoming very slight and surface and there is no real depth to much and certainly not much enjoyment which we all were fortunate to have had.

**Sir David:** Now, I don't know how long we are allowed to go on but I suspect that we have come to the penultimate question who is standing over there.

**Dominick McOmish,** (Cambridge school boy in charge of a mic). Does Sir David think that a programme like "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" would work today?

**Sir David:** Oddly enough, in a way which is really quite mysterious, it is very difficult to understand . . . the word *Zeitgeist* comes to mind . . . but the *Zeitgeist* that was around that liked this discursive "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" is not today's *Zeitgeist*. In fact, there was an attempt to revive "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" about a decade ago.

**David Collison:** It was the mid-1970s.

**Sir David:** But it didn't work. And it was quite hard to identify why it didn't work. You carry on.

**David Collison:** I know why it didn't work and I take some small responsibility for it, not too much, because I wasn't involved in the actual making of the programmes; it was made by a couple of friends of mine in the department and they said, "Well, you know archaeology. You know the people involved", and I said I thought that if you were going to do a programme with items from, say the Wessex Museum in Devizes, then why not have three panellists, who each in their own ways are experts on the Wessex Culture. But, of course, the beauty of the original "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" was that half the folk on the panel hadn't a clue what anything was and that added to the entertainment value. So the BBC made a very worthy "new" series of ten "Animal, Vegetable, Minerals" and it didn't work partly because they took that little bit of advice from me. It was a mistake.

**Ray Sutcliffe:** I think that it was something more profound than that in that the nature of archaeology by that stage had changed immensely. The kind of all-purpose, universal knowledge which the original contestants had could be 'got away with', if you like, whereas now, with so many subdivisions, is hard to find anyone who would even pretend to have that kind of universality. The largesse of Wheeler's was such that he was irreplaceable. I think that was the problem.

**Sir David:** Right. Now, one last question. Several hands have gone up. Who's got the microphone? You have Sir.

**Marcus Brittain,** (archaeologist with the CAU and historian of archaeology with HARN). We've heard some great stories said about these colourful characters and the craft of archaeology. I'd like to ask a question about Richard Atkinson and the relationship between the production team and the directorial sequence of the Silbury Hill excavations. Thinking about Time Team and the way that the three day format informs the way it is produced, I guess to a certain degree that the actual excavation and the personalities involved are also important parts of the way it is filmed. Was that the same for the Silbury Hill excavation?

**David Collison:** I think Sir David touched on this earlier on when he said that the undertaking was that the television would follow the rhythm, if that's the right word, of the excavation. I'm sorry, I can't really quite see what you're getting at. You are talking about whether . . .

**Marcus Brittain:** Was the excavation itself informed by the difficulties of actually trying to film it?

**David Collison:** Yes and no. The way we worked it, was that the programmes were live, 'when that screen goes blank, you're on the air'. Which was extremely terrifying, as you might imagine. When I first started in television outside broadcasts in 1963 as a lowly worm, many of the outside broadcast directors and producers had flown Spitfires and Hurricanes during the Battle of Britain. You had to have that appetite for danger! Not in my case, I must make clear. But there is no doubt at all that by going 'live' we gave the programme an edge each time we went on the air which was about four or five times in the space of two years. But, then, as David said, we had cameras there all the time. They were news cameras or film cameras and we were filming events as they went along, as they occurred. I'd be at the end of a telephone, ready to drive up the A4, direct the filming then take the material back to the cutting room and edit it. Then it was put onto 'telecine' and run in from London on my cue from our control vans alongside Silbury Hill - according to the script that we had for that particular item in the programme. You couldn't push Richard Atkinson to go any faster than he was going, or to find anything that he didn't want to find. And I think

what is quite impressive is that the overall findings at Silbury in 1968 and '69 are to all intents and purposes the findings that English Heritage made two years ago with their rescue dig. That was an invaluable operation. English Heritage used every opportunity to do more archaeology as they went to the centre of the hill. However, I believe given the circumstances Richard Atkinson found everything there was to be found with the time and money available.

**Tim Schadla-Hall** (Reader at the Institute of Archaeology): It's irresistible to ask one last question about that. Can I just chip in? You obviously saw the more recent Lion TV film on Silbury Hill. You actually produced a brilliant series 30-40 years earlier on the same. What went wrong between those two films in terms of the way they appeared on TV?

Uneasy murmuring from the audience

**David Collison:** If I give an honest response then it might offend somebody and it's difficult in this sea of faces . . .

**Tim:** It might offend a few people but it's important to know.

**David Collison:** I come back to what I was saying to Anna and Ray just now about the importance of having the right intermediary and I think that programme had two intermediaries who were absolutely wrong in both cases. Both the Scotsman who emoted on top of the hill with his flowing locks and all and the girl who looked like a Goth and rushed around expatiating about I know not what. It seemed neither of them knew or understood the first thing about Silbury. Neither of them had done their homework and I thought it was an indifferent account, I have to say. I'm sorry about that.

**Sir David:** Well, I think that . . . [audience laughter]. . . could we end on a higher note? [more laughter] All right, there is one over there; the lady there and this really must be the last.

**Cynthia Larbey:** (Cambridge undergraduate, archaeology). Archaeology has always been extremely controversial and I wonder in making the programmes if you ever came up against any protests, problems, religious, political barriers.

**Sir David:** I didn't hear that . . .

**David Collison:** If you or we ever came across any religious prejudice or true upsets? I can name one.

**Sir David:** Go ahead.

**David Collison:** Central Hall, Westminster with Magnus, after we'd made a programme called 'BC: The Archaeology of the Bible Lands', which set out with Professor James Pritchard from Pennsylvania to see whether archaeology would make the Old Testament stand up and frankly, in many cases, it didn't. But when we suggested that maybe King Solomon had never existed, the Christadelphians called a mass meeting, with about this many people, in Central Hall and we sat at the back and were publicly called the Antichrist.

Great laughter from the audience

**Sir David:** And there we are! Thank you.

LOUD applause, prolonged applause

**Colin Renfrew** (Professor emeritus at Cambridge): We say a word of thanks to Pamela Jane for organising this. [applause] We must thank with the greatest warmth not only the three participants whom Sir David summoned to the platform who have spoken so effectively and, in some cases, so candidly [laughter] about their experiences but above all, Sir David himself, the great inspiration of early television and archaeology and more recently the great inspiration for this occasion. It has been wonderful. Thank you very much.

Loud applause THE END