

MIKE SKIDMORE

Edited transcript of a recording of Mike Skidmore, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at the BAS Club Reunion, Cardiff, on 11th June 2010. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 20th October 2011.

Track 1 [0:00:01] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is Mike Skidmore, recorded by Chris Eldon Lee, at the BAS Club Reunion, Cardiff, on the 11th of June 2010. Mike Skidmore.*

Track 1 [0:00:11] Mike Skidmore: The name is Mike Skidmore. I was born in Wolverhampton on the 30th of May 1943.

Track 1 [0:00:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *And what was your first brush with the Antarctic? When were you first aware of it?*

Track 1 [0:00:24] Mike Skidmore: When I was first aware of it: back in school days in 1957/58. I was quite keen on geography and one of the aspects of geography, I suppose, would be knowledge of the world about us. I was always very keen on knowing where things were and what was happening to the world. It so happened at the time that Fuchs' Trans Antarctic Expedition was running, was in place, had been set up and they were about to set off on the traverse of the Antarctic from Shackleton base to Scott base on McMurdo Sound. What got me really was the fact that every morning on the eight o'clock news there was a bulletin about their progress. I think that just inspired me really, to think in polar regions. From that day, I suppose, I always thought 'Well, yes. That is something unique and something I would like to do.'

Track 1 [0:01:34] Mike Skidmore: I suppose following on from that, when I was at university, we were discussing (towards the end of our final year) ambitions. Some people would say something and when it came round to me I said 'I think I would like to go to the South Pole.' Little did I believe that I nearly got there. But how it came about, I suppose, was: there was a recruitment drive coming round to the universities. They asked anybody that was interested. They were looking for geologists, for electrical engineers; they were looking for surveyors; they were looking for all forms of scientific staff. I went along to the meeting and I think as a result I probably picked up the application forms and sent them off and in due course I was called for interview.

Track 1 [0:02:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *You were doing geology at university?*

Track 1 [0:02:36] Mike Skidmore: I started off doing engineering but I found the natural world a little bit more to my interest and I eventually swapped from doing engineering to geology.

Track 1 [0:02:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *So had geology been a hobby of sorts?*

Track 1 [0:02:54] Mike Skidmore: No. I think I had been inspired really. Some years previously, when on holiday, I was fascinated by this guy on the beach somewhere (I think it was Weymouth but I am not at all certain). He knocking open pebbles and splitting them open and he was finding crystals inside. Little did I know that they

were geodes, but the main thing was: that fascinated me. I remember going home and finding all the pebbles in the garden and smashing them open and not finding a similar ... [laughs]. I think from then on I had that interest in the natural world and the processes thereof. I had the interest in geography, and this is what brought about my interest in actually going down to the Antarctic. Of course by applying to British Antarctic Survey, it was a stepping stone on the way to this ambition to the South Pole.

Track 1 [0:03:49] Chris Eldon Lee: *So the 'milk round' (as it used to be called), the university ..., that was the first suggestion in your mind, that you might actually even get anywhere near the South Pole.*

Track 1 [0:03:58] Mike Skidmore: I suppose so, yes. Yes, I think so. I think that was the first indication that it might be possible. Little did I know that other people, from other backgrounds, could also apply, but this was the notice on the wall, the departmental noticeboard, looking for Earth Scientists (or geologists in those days) to apply.

Track 1 [0:04:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *We are talking here about the mid 60s, aren't we?*

Track 1 [0:04:23] Mike Skidmore: This would be in '66, early '66, yes.

Track 1 [0:04:27] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was the interview like? Do you remember it?*

Track 1 [0:04:30] Mike Skidmore: There were two people I can remember in the interview. Because it was an interview for a geological post, there was Bill Sloman and there was Ray Adie, and there was somebody else. I do not know really who that was.

Track 1 [0:04:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *Nobody seems to be able to remember the third person.*

Track 1 [0:04:47] Mike Skidmore: I seem to think it was an interview more about character and interests, rather than accent on geology. Little did I know that not only were they interested in somebody who could do a bit of geology, but somebody who could fit in, I suppose.

Track 2 [0:05:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were being sussed out psychologically, were you?*

Track 2 [0:05:13] Mike Skidmore: Well I mean the assessment, the people I put down as my references were staggered by the amount of information which those references demanded. I never knew what they actually did demand, but I was told later they were extraordinarily extensive. That was how it was done in those days.

Track 2 [0:05:29] Chris Eldon Lee: *So by the time you got to the interview, do you think it was more or less a foregone conclusion?*

Track 2 [0:05:34] Mike Skidmore: Well I think I had the interview, then the references went out.

Track 2 [0:05:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *Oh, I see.*

Track 2 [0:05:39] Mike Skidmore: Yes, because they were so demanding. Then I heard later that provided I got a degree, I was on board. As it happened I just got a 'drinker's degree' which was good enough. I went along to the Prof. I said 'Look, this says "...provided I get a degree". Does that mean any degree?'

Track 2 [0:06:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *So a 2:2 was OK?*

Track 2 [0:06:04] Mike Skidmore: So a 2:2 was fine, yes. They would have accepted somebody with a third, actually. Provided they got a degree.

Track 2 [0:06:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *So what happened next? Was there an extensive training ...?*

Track 2 [0:06:15] Mike Skidmore: No, what happened next was: having got my degree of course, I sent a letter to the British Antarctic Survey and said 'Yes, I have got the degree.' They wrote a letter back saying 'Turn up at Birmingham University Department of Geology on such-and-such a date and you will be signed on, and so on. Which I duly did. This was about probably the middle of July, or the end of the first week in July, and from that day until I left we were immersed in geological matters with all the other geologists who had just come back, like Lewie Jukes and another guy called Mike Fleet, who were working in that department. Because the Department of Geology at Birmingham University in 1966 was the base of the geology section of British Antarctic Survey.

Track 2 [0:07:11] Mike Skidmore: So one got to know a few of the old lags, so to speak, those that had come back, and we were there from July, August, September, and finally I sailed early October. But prior to that there was a meeting in Cambridge where everybody was assembled and given tea and cakes at Sir Vivian Fuchs' house, and the press came round and interviewed everybody. A general amalgamation of all the people who were going to go South that year, I suppose there must have been 30 or 40 of them.

Track 2 [0:07:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were you given things such as crevasse rescue training and Health & Safety training?*

Track 2 [0:07:50] Mike Skidmore: Ha, no! [laughs] There was nothing like that. We all thought 'Well we should have crevasse rescue training.' Health & Safety interrupted activities. In those days we were just signed on and you would probably pick it up on the way as regards things like that. No I do not think I saw a crevasse until I got there.

Track 2 [0:08:19] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were you briefed about the geology you were expected to do?*

Track 2 [0:08:22] Mike Skidmore: Ah well. Yes, but the work I was expected to do never actually took place for a long time. I was sent to Halley.

Track 2 [0:08:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you know why?*

Track 2 [0:08:36] Mike Skidmore: It might have been because I would probably fit in better with the other people there. That is the only reason I can think of, because I found that I got on well with the people there. I did not get on so well with the people who went to other bases. So I think they assessed one's character as being able to fit in probably better with that particular environment than others going to other bases, particularly down the Antarctic Peninsula. I have always wondered about that and I can only think that was the case.

Track 2 [0:09:09] Chris Eldon Lee: *It is not really relevant only to you, but was Halley regarded as slightly second rate compared to working on the west coast of the Peninsula? Was it a less popular station?*

Track 2 [0:09:20] Mike Skidmore: I have never thought of it in that way. The fact that it was Base Z when others were Base A, B, C, D and E etc. may have brought something into it but I do not think so. I never regarded it like that in any light at all.

Track 2 [0:09:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK. When you got there of course, things were different weren't they?*

Track 2 [0:09:38] Mike Skidmore: When I got there ... Well on the way of course I did a couple of months geology on South Georgia, and indeed on the way out I did some more work on South Georgia, but consider the time I spent at Halley ... I was about the only geologist who spent 18 months not touching a rock.

Track 3 [0:09:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *So what went wrong?*

Track 3 [0:10:00] Mike Skidmore: Well, the field season, which would be '67/68, we were scheduled to go through the Theron Mountains, across the Slessor Glacier to the Shackleton Range. That was the plan. That plan unfolded and we did go. We went off but we never got there. We were diverted further and further away because of the incredible crevassed nature of the Slessor Glacier. Now without a map it is a bit tricky to describe this, but we were pushed: instead of going south, we were going northeast at one stage to try and get round the head of this glacier. We got probably to within about three days journey, but that was only at the end of our normal supply line. Had we gone further forward, from the furthest point we got, we might have set foot on it. But then we might have encountered difficulties ... We might have brought about problems because we were at the end of our supply line. It was probably not the wisest thing to have done: push forward four days, then it is four days back, on half rations or anything like that. There was no backup, and if you got into trouble, then it would have been a case of 'who would have thought it.'

Track 3 [0:11:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you travelled what, 600 miles to get there?*

Track 3 [0:11:30] Mike Skidmore: The journey there: we went south from Halley, across the Bob-Pi crossing (which you have probably been told about). We went

down through the Therons. We went from the Therons. A reconnaissance party set out to go directly to the Shackletons but got deviated all the time and eventually was diverted well away. The tractor party, with all the supplies, had to find a safe route and so this advance party, the reconnaissance, we had to then follow them really. So the dogs ahead of the 'keg party, but at a certain point they could not go further forward. They would have to dump the supplies wherever they had got to at a certain date to get back to relieve the ship, because the vehicles, the Muskegs, were required then.

Track 3 [0:12:22] Mike Skidmore: We would then be left on our own, just two dog teams and we realised that we were at such a point that one dog team could go forward; another dog team could actually backtrack. But instead of going round two sides of a triangle to get back to Halley, they were going to cut across the third side, and they proved a route I would say probably two thirds of the way back to ... But then they had to come back to meet us and at the furthest point our sledging party got to, and I was with it because I was the geologist (rocks were the general idea), we reckoned we were just 600 miles sledging to get back to base. I seem to recall that on something like the 12th or 13th of January we turned round to return home, and we arrived back at the end of the first week in March. I cannot remember the exact dates. I have got it in my diary. That was my geological field excursion that year, so really I was a bit cheesed off without having no work. I was in a professional environment. I had nothing apart from the work on South Georgia to offer, and I was not very happy. I was not a happy bunny.

Track 3 [0:13:41] Mike Skidmore: On base I realised that nothing could be done about it and I think as a consequence I applied 'Look, can I be transferred down the Peninsula? The likelihood of finding rock down there is a bit better.' But in the mean time, the Office in London (Sir Vivian Fuchs and so on) had made arrangements with the National Science Foundation of America to join a party which they were flying in from Christchurch and McMurdo, a party of Norwegians, to the Norwegian sector of the Vestfjella or the Heimefrontfjella where Tony Baker went to, who you have spoken to earlier, when he was on his first trip.

Track 3 [0:14:36] Mike Skidmore: So the plan was: they were going to fly both parties in, drop one off in the Vestfjella (which is the Norwegian name for that particular sector), fly to Halley, pick us up, fly us into the Shacks, drop us off, then fly back via the South Pole. We were within an ace of not being dropped off in the Shacks because the ground was obscured by cloud, and if you have cloud and the pilot cannot see any ground relief, he dare not make a landing, especially with a Hercules. He would have flown on to the South Pole where he knew if he landed in fog or whatever because he had landed there before. He was doing a once time landing in the Shackletons and the only place he could find was something like 20 miles south of the main range. That was the only bit of sunlight he found. He went for it and we landed there. So we got there in the end and I nearly got to the South Pole at the same time.

Track 4 [0:15:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *The decision on the first attempt, to turn back; elaborate on that. Was there some argument? Was it heartbreaking you were so close yet so far.*

Track 4 [0:15:57] Mike Skidmore: I was with Pete Noble. Now Pete Noble has written a book. I do not know whether you have read it; it is called *Dog Days on Ice*. The first part of it involves the story of him and me starting off from virtually our furthest point and sort of back tracking but diverging to various other aspects on the way so I recommend you read that. No, there was no question of going anywhere out of where you shouldn't, really. The party of Peter and myself, we were with a dog team called the Hairybreeks and our job basically was to find a route in – a route that could sustain a vehicle. So we probed further the head of this glacier, and I think we had to turn back and backtrack a couple of times before we finally made it and we could actually see, in the distance, nunataks in a blue haze.

Track 4 [0:16:58] Mike Skidmore: We tried to estimate where we were. I suppose it was probably three or four days we had done dead reckoning from a known spot and plotted in on the map. We may have been within ten miles of that place, I do not know. But there was no question of risking lives and limb by going forward because there were other people involved in the party as well. There was John Gallsworthy and Nick Mathys – the other sledge party were with a dog team called the Mobsters and they were back tracking a way back to Halley cross-country (so to speak). They only did that job when we started our return journey so we were never more than about a hundred miles apart. If anything had befallen either of us, then we were never more than about a hundred miles or 2 or 3 days journey apart.

Track 4 [0:17:52] Chris Eldon Lee: *So it wasn't Health & Safety that drove you, it was common sense?*

Track 4 [0:17:54] Mike Skidmore: It was common sense, yes. There have been instances where people have said 'Let's dump this and let's dump that and let's go for it.' and done it, got away with it, come back and then told people later. But if anything had happened: a case of 'who'd have thought of it'.

Track 4 [0:18:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *Before the second attempt, with the Americans, tell me how you spent your time at Halley. What were you doing? Did they follow each other quite smartly or was there a gap?*

Track 4 [0:18:16] Mike Skidmore: When I returned on this first trip, there was no geological work to do, although on the way back we had a bit of a holiday in the Therons and I had actually tapped my hammer on a rock. But the thing is: it had already been done by Dave Brook who had been there two seasons before. That was his field area. All I could do really was have a look at it, and from a geological point of view just sit on a rock and say 'Well here I am.' It was not my work area. So I think I picked up a few samples and brought them back with me but that was about it. When I got back to base, of course, I had been involved in the building of Halley-II which was known as Grillage Village. When we arrived in '67, we were building a new base about 2 miles inland from the old base. It was laid out in such a way that there was a lot of grillage on the ground to spread the weight of the buildings which were put up on them, and the term Grillage Village has stuck. But it was the second Halley base. In the first season I found myself really a bit of a spare part. I did the cooks, I did that, I did this. I went out with the glaciologists.

Track 4 [0:19:45] Mike Skidmore: Then I finally found myself involved in the field preparations for the season we actually went out, in '67 to '68. When we got back, of course I had no work to do, so I was more or less a spare tool, a spare hand, and I involved myself with all the other work of completing the building of the base, primarily the geology office. So I did learn a lot of carpentry skills. At one point I said to the Base Leader 'Can I just have a job, rather than turn up every day like a docker, and wait to be allocated a job?' I said 'Can I do something?' He set me on with a guy called Bob Docchar ('Geordie' Docchar) who was taken down as a carpenter, and I learned a lot from him of basic joinery. That has stood me quite well ever since. So when I got back from this big field trip, it was build up the office and paint it. In fact I found myself doing quite a bit of painting, putting up ceiling tiles and all sorts of little jobs.

Track 5 [0:21:05] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did BAS HQ feel about a geologist spending a year not doing geology?*

Track 5 [0:21:09] Mike Skidmore: Well I think it was one of those things that just happened.

Track 5 [0:21:15] Chris Eldon Lee: *They had to swallow it?*

Track 5 [0:21:16] Mike Skidmore: It is like: there is an aeroplane. They go and crash it, so it does change the whole programme. It is just one of those things. I just happened to be at the blunt end of it. I enjoyed my time there but I did not do any geology until we heard that we were going to be flown in with the Americans in a 'Hercy-bird' to the Shackletons.

Track 5 [0:21:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *What happened when you got there?*

Track 5 [0:21:45] Mike Skidmore: Well we landed and we were about 20 miles south of the main area. Clearly we could not work from there so we spent the first week sledging in everything much closer in to the mountains.

Track 5 [0:21:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *They landed dogs with you, did they?*

Track 5 [0:21:58] Mike Skidmore: We took 27 dogs, 3 sledges, 6 men, food, all the supplies needed to establish us for about 10 weeks and then I think they put an extra drum of avtur on in case of problems and so on. The amazing thing was, I suppose, was when we tried to take off from Halley. The Hercules, the C130F, they used to have JATO bottles which they attached to the side of the fuselage to give it a bit of a boost to get it ... because they used to go along the ground and bouncy bouncy and then it would gain more air speed. At a certain point the pilot would pull the switches once he got sufficient airspeed it was hoped that the JATO would give him that bit more punch to get him into the sky. It did not work. We went on and on and I seem to remember somebody said 'If they keep going in the direction we are going, we are going to end up in the Gin Bottle.' which was an area of ice disturbance about 4 or 5 miles from base, because the prevailing wind was coming from that direction. Finally we staggered into the air, circled base once and we were off. I think we were given an all-up weight of about 10,000lb.

Track 5 [0:23:29] Chris Eldon Lee: *Scary moment? Were you worried?*

Track 5 [0:23:32] Mike Skidmore: Well, we still had plenty of time to stop, but you know he kept going. I presume he had done it before and he knew it. But the boost that these bottle gave ran out.

Track 5 [0:23:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *So anyway here you are in the Shackletons?*

Track 5 [0:23:47] Mike Skidmore: Here we are in the Shackletons. The first thing that happened, I fell ill because obviously I had been on base for some time and there were two people coming in from the outside world, one was Ken Blaiklock who was a well-known, well-respected surveyor. He had another surveyor with him called Tony True. They came in and I had not been on the ground more than perhaps a day, and I just felt absolutely awful. So did Ken Blaiklock and I think he had picked something up on the way and I had got it as well, probably from the crew on the aircraft. The funny thing about that it is: they did not know where they were. When they flew out, the Americans flew, it was always regarded as a mission, so only the pilot knew where they were going. When they landed in the Vestfjella they dropped the Norwegians off, they landed at Halley, they wondered where on earth they were. We said 'Oh you are at Halley Bay.' Well of course they had not got much idea where it was, what time of the day it was, or anything.

Track 6 [0:24:57] Mike Skidmore: Anyway I was distinctly not very well for about three or four days, and during this period me and Ken Blaiklock were sort of billeted in the same tent. The others were running in and out, shuttling back all the supplies about 8 or 10 or 12 miles nearer the Shackletons to establish a permanent base. Finally I picked up and went in with them. So I think my first few days there, I was pretty grim; I remember feeling quite lousy. But it picked up and I was all right since. Then Peter Clarkson (have you interviewed Peter?) ...

Track 6 [0:25:37] Chris Eldon Lee: *No, but I gather he is coming this weekend.*

Track 6 [0:25:38] Mike Skidmore: Oh right. Well he was the geologist who came in when Dave Brook went out, and so he was the geologist who I accompanied or we had been to the Shackletons together. So we had one sledge. The surveyors each had a General Assistant and they had the other two sledges. Their idea was to put in ground control for the trimetrogon photography which had been flown some years previously. Meanwhile, at the same time (I must just say this) a party from base with Pete Noble as leader, with Alan Etchells and John Gallsworthy and a couple of other people, actually drove to the Shackletons by the route which we had proved the previous season. They spent about three weeks actually in the Shacks, the eastern end of the Shacks, collecting what they could of the rocks and then they had to return for the ship. So in fact that trip we made the previous season '67/'68 was used but it was really unviable to operate at such long range from Halley under the circumstances.

Track 6 [0:27:06] Chris Eldon Lee: *They were using Muskegs?*

Track 6 [0:27:08] Mike Skidmore: They were using Muskegs and International BD8s. In the event the fuel consumption figures meant that we towed the Muskegs on sledges pulled by the little BD8 bulldozers. They did the main journey, then they

would drop off the BD8s and go on in the Muskegs, and they built a caboose on a sledge which they all slept in. It was quite famous really. So they were in the eastern Shackletons; we were in the western Shackletons and the idea was to confirm the geology which had been first looked by the geologist with the Trans Antarctic Expedition only about ten years before. The idea was just to confirm it, extend it. A term we would use was reconnaissance geology I think would be the way we would do it. Just go along, see what is there, make a few measurements, move on, see what is there. Any further interpretation, any detailed work would have to wait until another occasion. We had, as it turned out, about 8 weeks which we had to go to the western Shackletons and the central area of the Shackletons. Meanwhile the surveyors were running round doing all the surveying. There was Ken Blaiklock, Tony True, Nick Mathys and Harry Wiggins. Now there is a story there.

Track 6 [0:28:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *Go on.*

Track 6 [0:28:39] Mike Skidmore: I don't know which one you want to hear first.

Track 6 [0:28:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *Both of them.*

Track 6 [0:28:42] Mike Skidmore: Oh, right. After about ten days we had the alarming news that Nick Mathys had broken his leg. It was a Pott's fracture. He broke it skiing. So that made things rather difficult. They had to get him back to base. We all had to go back to base. We all had some plaster of Paris bandages and we were able to set his leg under the direction of Murray Roberts. Has he mentioned this?

Track 6 [0:29:12] Chris Eldon Lee: *Yes, briefly. The base you are talking about is not Halley base but the base you made in the Shackletons.*

Track 6 [0:29:17] Mike Skidmore: The base we made in the Shacks, yes. Whether it had a proper name, I do not know.

Track 6 [0:29:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *Carry on with the story, please.*

Track 6 [0:29:26] Mike Skidmore: We all returned there. We set Nick's leg, and very stoically he then spent the next six weeks more or less sat in the tent looking after himself, or somebody might have been with him at times making sure his leg got better. I understand that by the time we were flown out in the middle of January, they did X-ray his leg and it was healing up quite nicely. There was no further need for any treatment.

Track 7 [0:29:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Murray Roberts says it took him absolutely ages to get the plaster cast off, it was so thick.*

Track 7 [0:30:03] Mike Skidmore: It was a good one. [laughs] Anyway that is Nick's story. That meant the surveyors had to work by themselves, so each man: Ken Blaiklock and a dog team, Harry Wiggins and a dog team. Tony True went out occasionally, but they had to complete the work by themselves. So it was a case of sledging round by yourself, not two people like Pete and myself. They achieved and succeeded in doing it.

Track 7 [0:30:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *Tell me about the geology you found. What did you find and were there any surprises?*

Track 7 [0:30:42] Mike Skidmore: The geology, oh dear. I must confess that when I first got to a rock, it was the horror of all geologists. I had not got a clue what this is, because I had not seen that one before. But when you get exposure it is 100%, you know. It is not covered with dirt or anything. Eventually we were able to determine it was hornblende schist or something like that. I really must confess that I have forgotten much of it now, but we were able to work round what we knew, add to what there was, make a collection for every station, and then proceed to other areas which had been seen from a distance and not been visited on previous occasions. It is very alarming when you have spent all this time wondering, you get to the Shackletons and the first bit of rock you pick up, you think ‘Crumbs, what on earth is that?’ It was embarrassing as well, but anyway that is the story. It did have some nice crystals and I must confess that I have got the odd bits at home. But by and large, I think the most interesting mineral we found is a mineral that is called fuchsite. That is nothing to do with Sir Vivian Fuchs. It is true, it is a greenish mica, and there was plenty of that associated on the Mount Absalom area and the central part of the range.

Track 7 [0:32:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *But you were taking samples for analysis back in Birmingham?*

Track 7 [0:32:34] Mike Skidmore: Oh well we were taking samples: boxes and boxes. The idea you just bring samples back. But as regards to work out the detailed sequences, it is not really necessary, I suppose not really the sort of thing we can do by just travelling round. You have got to spend time there studying them. There were other things we found there of interest. There is the birds, the wildlife: there were Antarctic petrels nesting. Not Antarctic petrels, snow petrels. I cannot remember. Could be snow petrels, not Antarctic, in the Shackletons, which must be ... The nearest sea must be 250 miles away and that will be the southern area of the Weddell Sea round where Shackleton base was. The lichen would be growing on the rocks; it was amazing to find life at virtually 80 degrees South. We were able to travel with the Hairybrecks dog team then. We would arrive at a location and split up. Pete would go up that mountain and I would go up that hill. We would have three or four hours and then we would come back and move on.

Track 7 [0:34:14] Mike Skidmore: So a day’s work would be sledging, stop, picket the dogs. We would choose a different ... We generally did not work on the same bit because we were there gathering information. I remember on one occasion I suggested ‘I will go up that one and you go over there.’ It took him hours to walk to his ... He did not realise. The distances are so difficult to determine. In about twenty minutes I was on my rocks probably and he was still walking to it. You just could not tell how far these things were away. That was the one that was eventually, I understand, called Mount Skidmore. Yes, I was privileged to be given the name of a mountain on which I believe I had actually walked. I have got pictures of it. I found subsequently, on the Net, there was a party from Exeter University were actually working on or had their base camp near Mount Skidmore on the north side of the Shackleton range, overlooking the Slessor Glacier, but that is by the by.

Track 8 [0:35:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was that recently?*

Track 8 [0:35:26] Mike Skidmore: A couple of years ago, yes.

Track 8 [0:35:28] Chris Eldon Lee: *Have you had any contact with them?*

Track 8 [0:35:29] Mike Skidmore: I have had contact. I got him to send me pictures of Mount Skidmore, but they really were not what I would have hoped for, I am afraid.

Track 8 [0:35:39] Chris Eldon Lee: *When did you find out you had a mountain named after you? Did you know straight away?*

Track 8 [0:35:45] Mike Skidmore: Oh no. I cannot remember how it happened. The Place-Names Committee met, something like 1972, and they allocated a whole lot of mountain names to all the people who had worked in them,. There is Clarkson Cliffs. The people who did the traverse in the Muskegs, they have all got names. The guys we were with, they have all got names of minor features. So yes, I was quite pleased to be given a mountain.

Track 8 [0:36:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were you told or did you just discover it anyway?*

Track 8 [0:36:18] Mike Skidmore: I think I just discovered it. The process: ‘Here is a map and it has got your name on it.’ That is as much ceremony as I think there was about it. I think it was Pete Clarkson actually who provided me with the paper on which Mount Skidmore’s name was placed.

Track 8 [0:36:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *Whilst we are talking about geology, you also did some work on South Georgia on your way down to and back from the Antarctic.*

Track 8 [0:36:41] Mike Skidmore: Yes, I sailed on the *Shackleton*. The *Shackleton* dropped me off on South Georgia in about the end of October I suppose. I then spent a couple of months at Stromness, staying in the Manager’s House, but whether that was the one that Shackleton ended up in or not, I really do not know, but that is the one it is credited with. There is some discussion that there was another manager’s house at the time. But it was very comfortable. We took the lid off the chimney. We got the fire going. Plenty of coal in the back yard. We got the hoses from the fire hydrants. We managed to run in fresh water down the fire hoses. We just put them in a stream further up, away from where all the sea elephants were; then we had fresh water.

Track 8 [0:37:33] Mike Skidmore: We operated from this base at Stromness until the beginning of January (just about six weeks). I did not stray very far but what I did do: we went over to Fortuna Bay. When Shackleton did his trek in 1916, he got to a certain point on Breakwind Ridge and he said to his fellows ‘What time is it?’ They said ‘Seven o’clock’ and they could hear the whistle from the whaling station. They knew they were within range of human life and then it took them about another twelve hours to descend across the mouth of Fortuna Bay, crossing the glacial outwash stream, then come up the other side, down the little waterfall. We never actually found the waterfall. If there was, it must have been much bigger in those days. But that last trek, I suppose, was for them a miracle. We found it quite hard as well. We camped for a few days. I remember it was New Year’s Day overlooking

Fortuna Bay, did some fieldwork there, strayed onto Fortuna Glacier. But in those days you did not have problems with fur seals. Nowadays you can hardly move. It was quite a rarity to see one.

Track 8 [0:39:22] Mike Skidmore: This was 1966/1967. So that was the first experience, and on the way out the *Perla Dan* dropped Pete Noble and myself off at Prince Olav Harbour whaling station. That was totally derelict so we used our sledging tents and lived in them for about two or three months until we were picked up by the *John Biscoe* in early April. Then we came home. The geology there was more detailed fieldwork which led to my getting an MSc out of it and published papers for the British Antarctic Survey Scientific Reports. I think it was Number 72.

Track 9 [0:40:14] Chris Eldon Lee: *A slightly left field question, but why was it so important to know what the rocks were made of? Why do the geology in the first place?*

Track 9 [0:40:23] Mike Skidmore: Well I think it is the search for knowledge, isn't it? In my world it was fairly academic, but understanding how the various lithologies have been laid down, and the processes, leads to an understanding of the evolution of the world. In those days, plate tectonics had not yet been proven, or they were in the process of being proven. It was a new idea and it was a transition phase between the traditional approach to geology and this new evolution one where we could prove that the continents are actually moved around. Understanding the process involved in causing these was part of understanding the Earth history. At the same time the North Sea oilfields were being opened up, and understanding the processes involved in formation of structures; it was an essential part of learning more about your world.

Track 9 [0:41:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you find any fossils?*

Track 9 [0:41:48] Mike Skidmore: On South Georgia I found about two.

Track 9 [0:41:51] Chris Eldon Lee: *And in the Shackletons?*

Track 9 [0:41:54] Mike Skidmore: None.

Track 9 [0:41:56] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you think there was also a political reason for all this, in the 'game of chess' that was going on at that time about who owned or who had the right to be in which bit of the Antarctic? If you had done the geology you had a greater claim. Did that strike you at the time or subsequently?*

Track 9 [0:42:13] Mike Skidmore: No. I think it had been declared at an earlier stage that although there had been territorial claims, they had been set aside. I think there had been the Antarctic Treaty drawn up in which the nations had agreed not to pursue territorial gains, not to pursue activities which would be unreasonable in that environment and for it to be maintained as a pristine environment. Subsequent to that of course, all alien species have been removed.

Track 9 [0:42:54] Chris Eldon Lee: *Except one?*

Track 9 [0:42:55] Mike Skidmore: Except one, yes. Most people seem to think that should go as well, but then we would not be there to evaluate the place.

Track 9 [0:43:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were you disappointed with the decision about dogs?*

Track 9 [0:43:06] Mike Skidmore: That was a long time after I had gone.

Track 9 [0:43:09] Chris Eldon Lee: *But emotionally ...?*

Track 9 [0:43:10] Mike Skidmore: Emotionally, I think times move on. The skidoos, which have been running now reliably everywhere in the world, were just being introduced. Prior to that we had a thing called an Eliason, a snowmobile. Most people called it the 'Elsan' after that toilet. It was the forerunner of the more sophisticated and possibly more reliable Ski-doo. Once you had skidoos, it meant that you did not have to have dogs. If it was reliable and you had radios, you could send people into the field. A dog has to be fed; a skidoo doesn't. But when you wake up in the morning and stick your head out of the door, a skidoo does not start barking a welcome to the world, whereas dogs do. So a lot of people have sentimental attachment to them. I can well understand how that is the case. They have worked and been driven and they have worked so hard as animals, as companions. Over the whole of the original surveys of the British Antarctic Territory has been achieved by the, on the back of dogs, if you see what I mean. Not literally, but by their dog power.

Track 9 [0:44:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *What about the famous Muskegs? Were they ...? Did they rate in your view?*

Track 9 [0:44:33] Mike Skidmore: Well there is always a case of discussions between dog drivers and 'keg drivers, and one of the jokes I suppose is: you would go into a bar and you would either be going 'Kegs, kegs, kegs' or 'Dogs, dogs, dogs'. The talk would be mutually amusing. With 'kegs, if you were a mechanic and you were confident in your work, then they could pull a lot more, but they could also fall down a crevasse a lot easier, and in fact that has happened. There have been people in the Heimfronts, a party of three were crushed in 1964 I think it was [Transcriber comment: it was 12 October 1965. Andy Smith]. If they had been driving dogs, they might not have been in the same position, and that is very sad.

Track 10 [0:45:38] Mike Skidmore: So they have their merits but nowadays with skidoos and with aircraft flying in, it is a total change in approach to the work, and it reflects on the sort of people who come to these reunions I think. People who have been on a ship, they have spent two years. The charisma of the whole thing is imbued in that sort of character, whereas nowadays they fly them into Stanley, they fly them into Rothera, they fly them into the field. They are looked after, Health & Safety – wise by a General Assistant (Gash Hand is the term used). They do their work, they then fly back to the base, they then fly back to Stanley, they fly back home. What have they got? OK they have been to the Antarctic but they have not got the gut feeling there. Not like Captain Scott and Shackleton, those people who went out in those early days. I think we have more akin because we spent so much longer in that environment, living in that environment, working in that environment and

experiencing that environment than people have done today. You yourself have been down there, but it was a fleeting visit, wasn't it?

Track 10 [0:47:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *It was. Highlight of a lifetime.*

Track 10 [0:47:10] Mike Skidmore: Aye. My highlight might have been ...

Track 10 [0:47:14] Chris Eldon Lee: *Three or four years of it?*

Track 10 [0:47:15] Mike Skidmore: Well, two years of it.

Track 10 [0:47:17] Chris Eldon Lee: *So is that why, I have noticed at these reunions it is the old hands who come to the reunions; the more recent Fids tend not to.*

Track 10 [0:47:23] Mike Skidmore: Yes if you were to plot a graph of age or date of attendance against years, you would find there is always a peak around about the 60s and 70s. Before then they are not here because they are infirm, and after that there are more people that have been down but they have not got that intrinsic interest and investment that they have. Because of the means of doing it, doing the work.

Track 10 [0:47:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you think the threshold is the end of the Heroic Era, that you were towards the tail end of the Heroic Era and the youngsters of today aren't being heroes any more?*

Track 10 [0:48:08] Mike Skidmore: I do not like to call them heroes. The Heroic Era in my view finished with Shackleton. The mechanical era, we are a product of using that. I would not like to categorise our ... The 'doggie era' I think, if you want to categorise it at all.

Track 10 [0:48:31] Chris Eldon Lee: *When you were there, in the Antarctic, how great was the isolation? How much were you aware of what was happening in the rest of the world?*

Track 10 [0:48:40] Mike Skidmore: I am not much of a newsy person, newshound. The news to us was what was going on on base. We were there so isolated that you virtually lost interest. The Torrey Canyon Disaster, that was 1966 I believe. The Vietnam War was going on, and then Deception went up. Those are about the only three significant ... Oh yes, the World Cup was taking place the year I left. That was when England won it. But I think what to us was news on base was what was going on amongst our community. You see, we had a community., The first year there were 39 people there. The second year there were something like 29, and whatever news there was of interest to us was what was going on in our community. The penguins down at Emperor Bay; there would be which of the dogs were giving birth, somebody has got toothache (oh, that brings me to another story). But overall, the news to us was what was going on in our little community and how it affected what we were doing. You tend to get very insular I suppose. You tend to think the outside world is some distant part. OK, you could listen to the radio, but I do not think many people did. Maybe the met men did, on night duty, because they would produce a paper, a newspaper every Saturday, which summarised what was going on in the world. It was called *Pengwinge*. I don't know whether you have been told about this.

Track 11 [0:50:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is different from 'Halley's Comet', is it?*

Track 11 [0:50:39] Mike Skidmore: Yes. It was a successor to it. Or it might have been called *Phoenix*, I cannot remember, but basically it was news about what was going on. They tried to put down the football results and that sort of thing. I do not think I was able to contribute to it. I did not have a journalistic flair. When we printed it up, there were only five copies made. You could not do anything more. That was the top and four carbons.

Track 11 [0:51:17] Chris Eldon Lee: *Limited edition?*

Track 11 [0:51:20] Mike Skidmore: Limited edition, yes. I think I have got a couple at home.

Track 11 [0:51:22] Chris Eldon Lee: *You say there were nearly 40 men on the base at its peak, on Halley. When there are 40 men on a base, do they all seem to operate as one unit, or do subgroups appear?*

Track 11 [0:51:34] Mike Skidmore: Oh you do tend to get little subgroups. You tend to have the people that were studious; you tend to have the people that were always talking garrulous. You tend to have those that like a drink now and again. There was one called the 'Black Gang'. The Black Gang on base: they get covered in oil, they are the diesel mechanic, the motor mechanics, and so on; they would have their office in the garage. There was the survey and geology; well we would usually join them because they were part of the fieldwork. There was the met staff. But by and large, with few exceptions, I think everybody seemed to get on well with everybody else. I think it may depend on whether the Base Leader has a perception of what is going on, and if there are any difficulties, ironing them out beforehand. I do recall only one fisticuffs and I think that was basically one guy who was so keen to do things that somebody else got irritated by this keenness, and it just came to blows for a brief encounter in the bar, perhaps after a few drinks one night.

Track 11 [0:52:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *But frustrations were rare, were they?*

Track 11 [0:53:00] Mike Skidmore: I think I had frustrations.

Track 11 [0:53:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *I meant with each other.*

Track 11 [0:53:05] Mike Skidmore: Yes. I will tell you what I did. I was so frustrated, I built this model aeroplane. I had a Keil Kraft kit. It was a model Auster. Now the Auster was the reconnaissance aeroplane which was taken down with the TAE, and for some reason (I do not know how), I had this Keil Kraft kit. It was a balsa kit of an Auster. So I made it up and I painted it red, put BAS on it. I wound up the propeller and I flew it in the lounge, and it flew. Now it is recorded somewhere in the *Pengwinge* that this was a very successful ploy because in Voodoo, if you make an effigy of something you want to happen, it may work. Well I made this aeroplane. Lo and behold, the thing had flown successfully and it was not very long before we heard that it had been arranged that we were going to fly into the Shackletons. So I think that was quite ...

Track 11 [0:54:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *Not pure coincidence then?*

Track 11 [0:54:28] Mike Skidmore: No no, it was my balsa-wood aeroplane, and so we were flown to the Shackletons and as I said, there is a few stories there.

Track 11 [0:54:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *One of them is that you actually had a fall, didn't you?*

Track 11 [0:54:42] Mike Skidmore: I had a fall, yes, We were in the central Shackletons, in the Read Mountains. It was New Year's Eve. The highest peak in the Read Mountains, I believe, is called Mount Absalom, which is named after some professor, I believe. Pete Clarkson and myself had arrived at the foot of Mount Absalom and there it was. That afternoon we had been up on a ridge and I had been working on a ridge – on this occasion probably working together. We descended and, being New Year's Eve, we felt that it was appropriate to do something, so we decided we would climb Track 12 [0:56:30]. I said 'Well there are two sides to here. We can either go up the face which has got a snowfield at the top and a scree, or if we go round the other side.' (off to the right it would be). 'It may be a slightly more interesting route.' But the icefield ended in ice cliffs, so we elected to go up the scree slope and then up the main snow slope to the top. So we set off. We put rum in our cocoa, a couple of flasks of cocoa, packed our rucsacks, left the dogs well-fed and picketed, and we set off on skis and we skied across the snowfield to the bottom and then started up the scree slope. I suppose we probably did not have more than perhaps six or seven hundred feet to go.

Track 12 [0:56:30] Mike Skidmore: We left the scree field and Pete was ahead, and we were just kicking steps. Now we had kicked steps previously on virtually every other snowfield, climbing up to get to things, but on this occasion it was not quite as successful. Pete was ahead of me. We were not roped up. Now you may say 'You should have put your crampons on and everything like that.' But experience has shown that there was no real need. The slope was probably not more than 30 degrees anyway, but on this occasion it was soft snow on top of ice, and kicking steps you should have been able to go up. Pete was quite a way ahead and I was following on. Then all of a sudden... I was not going in his steps because I was making my own; I happened to be doing that. I suddenly found myself sliding down. I had ice axe, rucksack and I began to slide and gathered speed and there was this scree slope. Well of course it was better than the ice cliffs round the corner. The screes were no bigger than a football. They were not great big lumps but they were sufficiently big enough that once I hit them with my feet I was pitched forward and just rolled and rolled and rolled until I came to a stop. It was just like being inside a dustbin being beaten with baseball bats, that sort of sound. I ended up ... I remember I was face-down, downhill, rucksack over my head. I think I was unconscious for just a few seconds.

Track 12 [0:58:20] Mike Skidmore: Meanwhile Pete had turned and seen me. I had not even had time to try and get my ice axe in because it was not very far that I had slipped but it was bad enough. All I can recall was that I sort of picked myself up, took my rucksack off, checked my camera to make sure that was working, put the lens hood back on. 'Are you all right then, Mike?' 'Yes, I am all right.' He came down. He could see my face was covered in blood. I was OK; well I felt OK then. So I had to

help Pete down. He was so shocked helping me down, holding me to go down. I think I was more steady than him until we got to the tent. We got to the bottom, ignored the skis because you could just walk across, walked to the tent – probably a quarter of a mile away from the foot – got in the tent. Then I went. I just went ‘pah’, started shaking. Pete by that time was ... We talked about things and he decided I needed stitching up because I had got a great big gash in my upper lip. But before that, as a result of all this shaking, the shock and everything, I was suddenly, utterly and violently sick. So he had a bit of clearing up to do, stitched me up.

Track 13 [0:59:54] Mike Skidmore: I think for the next two days I just sat there and recovered. I was so stiff. I have never felt so stiff in my life. He had to actually help me up to use the pee can, hold me in position. Eventually I recovered enough to go walking to the nearby moraine and wander back again, after two or three days. Incidentally during this period the weather had manked in; we could not have travelled anywhere. That was amazing. Until I felt better and the weather got better and off we set again. So Pete looked after me. He said on the radio that I must have had a bang on the head because I was reading a geology book. So there we are.

Track 13 [1:00:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *Radios came into their own rather, didn't they?*

Track 13 [1:00:50] Mike Skidmore: Oh yes. We had Squadcalls. The Squadcall had been introduced the previous season. They were marvellous things, about the size of your briefcase. Three bell batteries; you had to warm the things up in the roof. You could talk just like being on the telephone, to base or even other parts of the Peninsula. If you had the right crystals, you could hear people talking in other field areas apart from us to Halley Bay. Sometimes we could not even speak to the ‘keg party. They were in the central Shacks, eastern Shacks, when we knew they were talking to base. We could not talk to them because they must have been in an aerial shadow.

Track 13 [1:01:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *I have got a couple more questions just to ask you, towards the end of our hour, if I may. I know ten years ago you were back in the Antarctic because I was in the same cabin as you on the Marguerite Bay 2000 trip.*

Track 13 [1:01:44] Mike Skidmore: Yes, that's right.

Track 13 [1:01:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *For me it was a trip of exploration; for you it was a return.*

Track 13 [1:01:50] Mike Skidmore: It was a return.

Track 13 [1:01:51] Chris Eldon Lee: *But to a different part?*

Track 13 [1:01:52] Mike Skidmore: A different part.

Track 13 [1:01:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did you feel about going back, ten years ago?*

Track 13 [1:01:57] Mike Skidmore: Ten years ago? I am glad I went, but I did not get the kick that I thought I might have got. I did not get that kick.

Track 13 [1:02:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *Have you worked out why?*

Track 13 [1:02:11] Mike Skidmore: Yes. When you consider the appearance of the Antarctic Peninsula, it is a fjord coastline. Although we knew we were south of the Antarctic Circle, you could take that geological environment and you could go up to Norway and see exactly the same. You have got the same type of rock (possibly) in the same geologically environment, will create the same type of scenery. Because I had gone down to Halley where it was totally different, ... You had got no rocky inlets. What you had was ice cliffs, ice shelves, creeks – an environment that was different to what you get down the Antarctic Peninsula. Although I enjoyed going down there, I went down there because I knew a lot of the history. In fact I had been writing a story of Antarctic Exploration. I had been doing the paintings which were illustrating some of the events taking place, and I was actually going to the places and seeing where Petermann Island was, where Charcot landed.

Track 13 [1:03:36] Mike Skidmore: We went to Hope Bay where Nordenskjold's party wintered, and we saw the actual hut which they built around their tent, where they spent the winter there. So from my point of view it was the historical association of the various bases with the stories which I had actually written, with the idea of illustrating the paintings which I never actually got done. Because of that and because the geo-morphological environment to my mind was very similar to what you might have in other parts of the world, I did not get the kick. You went down there because it was the Antarctic. So that is my answer.

Track 13 [1:04:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *Finally, and you have not got to answer this one, but I was reading your eloquent account of your life after BAS, and you openly mention a couple of difficult periods in your life. One was a divorce and one is a medical condition that you are now coping with. Is the Antarctic character building? Are you drawing upon something that happened to you 40 years ago, to help you cope with modern-day complications?*

Track 14 [1:04:58] Mike Skidmore: I suppose it is difficult to not use the experience you have gained. I cannot honestly say 'Yes, I have used that bit of information there.' I think it was something which has been a dominant aspect of thoughts of many periods, particularly with the paintings which I am still doing. In fact I have brought one which I will bring along tomorrow. So I think in more or less every aspect, it does help, but I cannot say specifically 'That has helped there.'

Track 14 [1:05:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you come back the same man who went?*

Track 14 [1:05:43] Mike Skidmore: I think I came back with a little bit more philosophical attitude towards things. If things are going to happen, then they are going to happen. That was probably why I did not get too upset, I suppose, about my field trip. I knew it was all a matter of accepting the conditions which were there at the time and I just accepted it, although I was not very happy, I just had to accept that that was the case that happened then. I think that has probably carried through much of my subsequent years, for better or worse in some respects. It is just a fairly fatalistic attitude to things that happened to you. With this current problem of prostate

cancer: I would rather not have it but I have got it and I have got to live with it, and I am taking the treatment that has been advised.

Track 14 [1:07:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *That approach to life that you developed when things did not go right for you in the Antarctic; the acceptance of one's position. We have a limited amount of authority over our own destiny?*

Track 14 [1:07:17] Mike Skidmore: You see, I think I am just fatalistic, I think probably more fatalistic than I should be.

Track 14 [1:07:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *Before or after?*

Track 14 [1:07:27] Mike Skidmore: Afterwards. I have been in other desert environments. I have spent quite a long time in other parts of the world, the Sahara for instance, and you could see from the way of the people we were living with. Their environment caused them to be fairly fatalistic about things, and you can see why they probably turned towards Mohammed as their guiding light. I think there is a certain character which I have I have got, and I think it has been determined to a certain extent by my experience down South and I think the way I am living now, it is still present. It is still there. I am still benefiting from it or otherwise.

Track 14 [1:08:29] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well good luck.*

Track 14 [1:08:31] Mike Skidmore: Thank you.

Track 14 [1:08:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *Thank you, Mike.*

Track 14 [1:08:33] Mike Skidmore: OK then, Chris.

Track 14 [1:08:35] ENDS

Snippets:

- Failure to reach the Shackleton Mountains in 1967/68. Track 3 [0:10:00]
- Overweight Hercules taking off from Halley Bay. Track 5 [0:21:58]
- Nick Mathys breaks his leg. Track 6 [0:28:42]
- Sojourn at Stromness. Track 8 [0:36:41]
- Dogs versus vehicles. Track 9 [0:43:10]
- News and the *Pengwinge*. Track 10 [0:48:40]
- The Black Gang and other groups. Track 11 [0:51:34]
- Flying a model aeroplane in the lounge. Track 11 [0:53:05]
- A fall on Mount Absalom. Track 12 [0:56:30]
- Squadcall radios. Track 13 [1:00:50]