

## DAVE FLETCHER

Edited transcript of a recording of Dave Fletcher interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 25th April 2012. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 18th October 2012.

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Dave Fletcher interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 25th of April 2012. Dave Fletcher, Part One.

Fletcher: My name is David Fletcher. I was born on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1948 in Wokingham in Berkshire.

[Part 1 0:00:20] Lee: So you are now how old?

Fletcher: 63; 64 in June.

[Part 1 0:00:24] Lee: It is nice to interview somebody so young. [laughs] Tell me about your parents.

Fletcher: Bless them, yes sadly both have gone now. Both again from Berkshire, from Warfield, from a family that has actually worked in the Great Forests since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. But again, sadly, I don't think I gave them the credit they deserved when they were alive. They did things that I did not appreciate at the time, but they supported me in doing strange things. Like when I left school, I turned down a university place because I wanted to go climbing for a year. I went climbing in Aberdovey. When you think of it afterwards: there's Mum thinking their son is going off to this wonderful academic world and then he is turning it down to go climbing. But there was never ever a hint of 'Don't do that.' It was always supportive.

[Part 1 0:01:26] Lee: What was your father's job?

Fletcher: My father, he was an artist actually. He did the work for a company called Wokingham Plastics, and designed all their screen prints, screen printing screens basically, and was a freelance artist himself but mainly doing cutting and designing on screen printing. Again, very understated. He never pushed himself forward. After the war, six long years in the war, I just think he didn't feel that ... He just wanted a job and settle down, whereas he could have gone much farther.

[Part 1 0:02:02] Lee: Was he a good artist?

Fletcher: He was very good.

[Part 1 0:02:05] Lee: Have you got examples of his work still?

Fletcher: No. Yes I have, in the loft sadly, but I have got to get them reprinted. But he did things like: I remember when I was young he used to line out traction engines, and things like that.

[Part 1 0:02:16] Lee: What, the real thing?

Fletcher: Yes, the big ones, when, as I realised later, the whole movement was just starting with steaming. But he used to go and he would do the flywheel, the lining on the flywheel. He would just spin the flywheel and just boom, do it by hand – amazing.

[Part 1 0:02:33] Lee: What was his name?

Fletcher: Don, Donald. My middle name.

[Part 1 0:02:36] Lee: And your mother: did your mother have a job at all?

Fletcher: Not really. She was, if you like, the classic housewife, but superb cook, tremendous knitting. If you like, the traditional fifties housewife. Again, so many of the things she made and she did for me, you do not actually appreciate at the time.

[Part 1 0:02:57] Lee: What about the school? Was it private or public?

Fletcher: No, it was a grammar school, a very old fashioned grammar, Ranelagh Grammar School which started in Winkfield in 1658 I think, and then ended up in Bracknell, near Woking. 200 boys, 200 girls, absolutely superb school actually. You don't appreciate just how good it was until you leave. I look at our local schools here, and they are great schools don't get me wrong, but if ... We had a sixth form of about 25-30 leavers each year, and everybody went to university. It was that sort of standard.

[Part 1 0:03:38] Lee: If you had gone, which one? Where would you have gone.

Fletcher: I went eventually to Bristol.

[Part 1 0:04:33] Lee: But at that time?

Fletcher: At that time I had a place at Oxford.

[Part 1 0:03:47] Lee: To read ... ?

Fletcher: I was going to read geography, at Lincoln, but I turned it down.

[Part 1 0:03:52] Lee: So where did the passion for climbing come from?

Fletcher: I had always climbed, trees when I was a bairn, and then I used to climb at High Rocks in Sussex. I used to take the train from Wokingham which went right through to Guildford, and then change, when I was 14 or 15. Also, at school, we had what you could only say was an inspired master who really ... He would probably be locked away at this time of year. What he allowed was fantastic. He ran a climbing club. So we would have excursions literally all over the country when I was 15 or 16 and that really inspired it. Then this year out ... I rang Aberdovey. I had gone to Aberdovey as a student.

[Part 1 0:04:43] Lee: Aberdovey?

Fletcher: The Outward Bound School at Aberdovey. The school had two places but it was grossly expensive. It was £130 and this was in 1964. I had said to Mum and Dad 'I will put my name down.' I did not think then they obviously had a huge struggle paying the money, but there was no hesitation. That transformed my life really, that 26 days at Aberdovey. Then I went I went into the sixth form. When I had finished, I didn't want to go to university; I just wanted to go climbing. I rang Aberdovey (it is just incredible what you think), I just rang them and said 'Have you got any places for an instructor?' There I was, an 18-year old. The Warden, Freddy Fuller, rang me back and said 'Come as a temporary instructor.' I actually ended up there as a year and the thing that changed my life is that three member there were Johnny Green who was the Purser (ex-BAS), Ian Fothergill (ex Base Commander, Hope Bay), Mick Cousins (ex Base Commander, Stonington). They were the three that changed my life, really.

[Part 1 0:05:49] Lee: I find it hard to believe that you spent a year in that company and they would not have mentioned the Antarctic.

Fletcher: Oh no. Everything was ... Where we used to climb was a place called Tonfanau and of course it was called 'Tonners', after 'Stonners'. There was this sort of thing. Yes and indeed it just transformed ... I had obviously heard of the Antarctic but I had really no connections. Suddenly I had these connections and that was what I was going to do.

[Part 1 0:06:15] Lee: Can you remember the sort of things they might have said which would have caught you imagination?

Fletcher: Two things actually, strange things. One was nothing to do with the Antarctic. One was Mick Cousins telling me about the whaling stations in South Georgia, because when he came out, they had just closed, literally. Because he came out in '69; they closed in '65 of course. I was fascinated by these massive factories in the middle of nowhere that were closed down as if someone had just gone out for a cup of tea. So that changed my thinking about all these things completely. Up until then I was doing a teachers degree at St Pauls at Cheltenham. I was playing very serious rugby, first class rugby. That was my future, basically, until I went to this place, and then the whole thing changed.

[Part 1 0:07:10] Lee: Was there a second thing you were going to mention?

Fletcher: Yes, indeed, my apologies. It was also the concept of dog sledging, the concept of just going on base and being given a project and you just sledged into the sunset, basically.

[Part 1 0:07:30] Lee: It sounds very romantic.

Fletcher: It did, and it was a bit like that. When I went to Halley, my first base, you just .... I suppose I was lucky because I had done a lot of snow and ice climbing, but most of the lads I went South with had no real what you would call training. I just shudder to think, in this day and age of Health & Safety, I just cannot even imagine it happening. But those two things: whaling station, (I could not come to terms with this great mass of things in the middle of nowhere) and the concept of going on base

without a rigorous regime of training and learning, and just literally sledging into the sunset.

[Part 1 0:08:26] Lee: 'Boys' Own Adventure' type stuff

Fletcher: Yes, yes.

[Part 1 0:08:28] Lee: So what happened then, at the end of your year at Aberdovey?

Fletcher: I wanted to go South straightaway actually but again (good people) the Warden there, a chap called Freddy Fuller, virtually insisted that I went to university, and again, it made an awful lot of sense. To get a formal qualification and pursue my rugby really, as well. Gloucester wanted me to play for them but I stayed at Harlequins. There were things like this going on at the time. I had the most ridiculous interview at St Pauls I have ever known.

[Part 1 0:09:09] Lee: At Cheltenham?

Fletcher: At Cheltenham, yes. I went for interview and the interview basically consisted of 'Would you be prepared to play flanker rather than number eight?' That was essentially the interview.

[Part 1 0:09:19] Lee: So the rugby preceded all that? When did you start playing rugby?

Fletcher: I started playing rugby back in the '50s, when I was in primary school. The primary school played rugby, played cricket, played football, played everything really, which is completely different from modern days. And Ranelagh, the grammar school, was very much a rugby school. They had places as well: Richmond, Harlequins, sides like that. I had got a place at Harlequins so I was playing junior Harlequins when I was still at school.

[Part 1 0:09:54] Lee: But you did moderately well, didn't you, I seem to recall?

Fletcher: Yes

[Part 1 0:09:58] Lee: What was the pinnacle of your rugby career?

Fletcher: Basically getting a cap for England Students. I played for England Students, two actually, against Scotland and against Wales. I was actually in the ... They didn't have 'squads' in those days but I was in the 'mix' maybe for going for an England trial. I never did, but I was playing pretty consistently for Harlequins.

[Part 1 0:10:22] Lee: Amateur?

Fletcher: Amateur? Well yes. Expenses on travel and you know. 'Amateur' in inverted commas. Yes very much so actually and I loved it, but again (funny how things change out) by the time I finished three years at college, where I was playing rugby for St Pauls and rugby for Harlequins, I was losing, not losing enthusiasm for rugby – I played rugby until a year ago. I still play and I hope to play in a few weeks

time – but I had lost the enthusiasm for, if you like, top-class rugby, professional rugby. It was everything that I don't like about professional rugby now. This driven to do things for a game, for me it lost the beauty of the game.

[Part 1 0:11:13] Lee: It was no longer the sport of gentlemen?

Fletcher: No. There are some wonderful players but it is just driven along by ... Actually these days I still follow sides like Gloucester and Harlequins of course. I would rather go down and see my own little rugby club, see the juniors play to be quite honest. It is fresh for me. I lost that competitive drive. I just played too much when I was young, I think, and did not really see a future. Fortunately of course there was no future in rugby in those days, but when I saw the option of going South ...

[Part 1 0:11:53] Lee: We will come to that in a minute. St Pauls in Cheltenham is a teacher training college?

Fletcher: It was a teachers' training place, specialism being physical education. It was up with St Luke's, Loughborough, Cardiff. It was that sort of standard, produced some fantastic sportsmen.

[Part 1 0:12:10] Lee: So you turned your back on the academic world then?

Fletcher: I did, completely really. Yes I did, but I never have, if you see what I mean.

[Part 1 0:12:19] Lee: You will have to elaborate on that a bit.

Fletcher: The things I really enjoy now, and have done for years, is actually the logistics of science. We will obviously talk about it later, but one of my periods in the Antarctic, I was Base Commander at Signy for five years, and it was probably the most fulfilling time of my life. Seeing young scientists coming on base in their first year, and then developing over three years, and many of them now are the world's top scientists. Seeing that development, I always used to tell them the adage: 'First summer, forget it, it is a waste of time; second summer you learn your trade; and the third summer you actually do some work.'

[Part 1 0:13:06] Lee: So in what way were you helping these chaps achieve what they wanted to achieve?

Fletcher: Lateral thinking, I think, would probably be the word, as you probably know yourself. It was one of the problems I had when I was doing academic things, I tended to be very blinkered, and a thing I found I could offer them at Signy was a lateral look at things. I insisted on sampling with every scientist on the base at least once a week, so I could understand what they were trying to do. I could also understand their requirements, because I often felt, and again this tends on to the communication thing, they weren't supported basically and that is no disrespect to BAS – it was a simple matter of telexes and the impossibility of communication at times. So they were on their own and I just really enjoyed, if you like giving them the platform to do their science. And I still do. I still do a lot of work with universities in Germany and other educational groups.

[Part 1 0:14:13] Fletcher: I did for many years run a thing in Greenland where several friends of mine who run chairs at universities were finding they were funded for a field trip at the end of the season. Everybody went out on a field trip and sadly the young people, perhaps in their second year at university, had never sampled in the ice, had never sampled in the wind, and just everything failed. The whole field course turned out to be a waste of time and I, while funding was good, I used to run this little course where we would teach them to sample in gloves, batteries stopped in the wind – all these sorts of things. Real basic stuff, so that when they actually came to their proper field trip, they were thinking on how they might improve their situation.

[Part 1 0:15:04] Lee: How to get round the adversities.

Fletcher: Exactly, yes.

[Part 1 0:15:07] Lee: When you say sampling, what do you mean?

Fletcher: In particular two universities in Germany, Kiel and Jena, where they do a polar ecology course. So there are some botanists, there are some geologists. There is a whole raft of different scientists within this polar ecology course, and many of them are sampling, ice sampling, doing shallow drill cores, that type of thing. A lot of people working on plants for example, many of them in minute micro-temperatures, and things like that. Most of this stuff was all done in the laboratory perfectly well, but of course as soon as you put it on the Greenland ice-cap, forget it.

[Part 1 0:15:48] Lee: Was this also true in the Antarctic?

Fletcher: It was initially, because many of the people involved in it were Antarctic people. The chap who runs the thing at Jena was at the Russian station Bellingshausen for many years and I knew him down there. So it sort of extended north.

[Part 1 0:16:06] Lee: So in your weekly get-together on Signy with the scientists, talk me through the kind of exchange that might take place – a typical or classic exchange.

Fletcher: Well Signy base was in not a very good position, so to get anywhere from Signy base, you either had to take a boat or you had to walk, and I always offered myself forward as a Sherpa, basically. I would either run the boat for them to take them to the other side of the bay, so they could then walk on to wherever they were going, or sherpa because most of them had the old-fashioned kit, batteries and goodness knows what else, was a fairly major logistical exercise, So I would offer myself as a Sherpa, but in that sherpa-ing, I would not actually tell them that I was coming to watch them sample, because these sort of lads would feel that was an infringement of their professionalism or whatever. Yes, intrusive, but I just wanted to understand what they were doing, because as part of the job as base commander, I needed to know what they were doing. Alright, I could read the script if you like, but I wanted to see that. Equally I wanted to see them so I could then put in ideas, I could support them and I just felt it was a good way of pulling the team together basically.

[Part 1 0:17:34] Lee: It must have been rather unusual for BAS to have a GA as a base leader who could have got an Oxford degree.

Fletcher: Yes, I suppose that is true but then that came about strangely by a disaster really, well not a disaster but when I went to Halley I was originally going to do two years at Halley as a dog driver doing the Shackleton programme. The Shackletons are about 400 miles south of Halley and I was going to be doing the dog driving which had been quite successful over the previous years. Part of the arrangement was that the Americans flew a Herc in, which flew us down to the Shacks. But that year the Herc wasn't available, so the programme essentially collapsed, if you like.

[Part 1 0:18:14] Fletcher: Pete Clarkson was the geologist and he was going to come in and we would fly down, but that didn't happen. So essentially I had a year at Halley, OK it wasn't a wasted year. We did quite a lot of work on glacio lines and survey and so on, but the whole point of the next summer had gone. So the other GA who was down there, a bloke called Jack Donaldson, he was basically sent home really His contract was terminated because Stonington was full, and I got this thing saying: would I be prepared to take over as the base commander at Signy that summer. It turned out to be a permanent job eventually. I said 'Yes, OK. That sounds great.' With my biological background I thought 'Yes, lovely, super.' I was disappointed because I did really want to go into the Shacks and equally I would have gone quite happily to Stonington, but I felt 'Mm, it sounds good.' So that was how I got to Signy. So that was a 'mistake' if you like, anyway.

[Part 1 0:19:15] Lee: Is it true to say that you were the first professional base leader?

Fletcher: There were two of us actually, me and Steve Wormald. We were the first two and then Mick Pawley after that. I took over at Signy, Steve took over at Adelaide and then of course set up Rothera, and Mick at South Georgia.

[Part 1 0:19:31] Lee: Were you aware of any decision making behind that? Were BAS beginning to realise that they needed professional chaps.

Fletcher: Only after it happened. I didn't really realise at the time. I just felt quite privileged that I was asked.

[Part 1 0:19:46] Lee: What did you learn in retrospect? What did you learn later about that process?

Fletcher: Do you mean as far as the Office was concerned?

[Part 1 0:19:53] Lee: Well the fact that they were going for professional base leaders rather than ...

Fletcher: Having seen what had gone on at Signy before, it was a tremendous idea. There had been no continuity. Don't get me wrong, there were some excellent base commanders at Signy and other stations as well, but it was a lottery, because you might really get a good bloke one year and the next bloke might be a disaster. Many of them just said 'I am a scientist. I will do the science' and the base commanding went out of the window. As a permanent base commander, the greatest benefit I found, or I thought from previous years was the fact that I could actually go back to the office in those days London and then Cambridge, to actually carry on the ordering process, the personnel process. People who perhaps weren't making it; people who

needed more support: I could follow that up. Whereas the previous way we used to do it, there was no follow-up.

[Part 1 0:20:54] Lee: But you were aware of a clear decision in the BAS management in 1972?

Fletcher: I was, yes.

[Part 1 0:21:01] Lee: It had to happen?

Fletcher: It did, yes. There had been a couple of epics on all bases, but at Signy there were a couple of things. They went off in an open boat to Orcadas which is about 25 miles away. There were things going on that really weren't ... that needed control, basically. And the thinking also gave them the GAs. They felt GAs if you like had a better overview obviously of safety, because we were field personnel. One of the problems, as you probably know, at places like Argentine Islands, Signy, was that you had non-field personnel in field situations and wanting to go farther, and of course that was a problem with Faraday right until the end. So yes, it was a good step forward. I did become aware of it, not at the time of being asked to go.

[Part 1 0:21:58] Lee: Does it work, the policy?

Fletcher: It did. It did work, yes. It got a much better grip of the situation. It got a much better grip of the logistics of ordering as well, because, again, the way of ordering (your indents) was a pretty hit and miss affair. But it could have been catastrophic. You were indenting this year essentially for two years time, and if you didn't bother, then the lads on base in two years time had a nightmare scenario: they either had too much or nothing at all. That was a pretty hit and miss affair and this, again, became a bit of a consolidation on the logistics. It became much more organised, yes..

[Part 1 0:22:46] Lee: We will come back to Signy and to Halley later on but at the moment you are still wearing your gym shorts at St Pauls. The teacher training course at St Pauls had been two years?

Fletcher: Three.

[Part 1 0:22:56] Lee: Three years. In what way, looking back on that, did you feel that equipped you for what later evolved in your life in the Antarctic?

Fletcher: The greatest thing about, one of the greatest things was the fact that I spent a year out at Aberdovey before I went there. If I had gone there, I would have just been a schoolboy going one more year, but having had a year out, I really appreciated the course actually. Again we had good people, good instructors, but what I enjoyed about it was, if you like, the overview of life. I was playing an awful lot of sport and it was very sport-orientated but it had a lot of educational sides to it. It really gave you a fuller view of things.

[Part 1 0:23:41] Lee: Fitness?



Fletcher: I was as fit as ten. I was obviously fit from playing rugby, climbing. I was as fit as I had ever been in my life.

[Part 1 0:23:50] Lee: Was there a medical element?

Fletcher: There was. We did quite a detailed physiology course, part of the PE course. It was 'modern magic' because it had only just started. I was involved in that with playing rugby because injuries in those days, which I suffer from now, you ran it off whatever it was. You got a twisted knee, well just run it off. Where in fact you should have had a week out or whatever; that did not happen and we were becoming aware of that. At senior club level, we were being given steroids, and things like that. We had really no concept of what they were ... We knew we really should not be taking these things but you did it because you were playing at that sort of level. So there were many things that we were becoming aware of and the course helped us with these types of things. It helped us enormously. Also I was very impressed with the responsibility the lecturers gave us, because I virtually ran the outdoor programme at St Pauls in my year because the lad there, he actually said to me: 'Look you have got far more experience in this than I have. Let's do this together.' Fantastic. Alright there was no loss of control from the lecturer's point of view but it was excellent being able to help and plan and be involved.

[Part 1 0:25:22] Lee: So were there skills you picked up on that 3-year course which you found yourself consciously employing in your later work?

Fletcher: Yes.

[Part 1 0:25:30] Lee: Such as?

Fletcher: Especially training, things like that. I still do. Simple things like I used to do on base. Stretching exercises, things like that which came from the course. But also on the education side as well. It was interesting We had a real mix of education lecturers. Some of them I would not have given them boot room, but there were a couple that were quite inspiring. It was just the time (and I really feel for teachers now) where classroom discipline was going out of the window. People were beginning to lose respect for teachers. You had these people saying 'Yes well classroom discipline? You get their interest.' Yes well fine. I had a great example in my second teaching practice, I was at Linden Street for Boys in Gloucester, made the Bash Street Kids look like beginners playtime. My first lesson I had 90 kids in a gym, one football. That was it; that was the total ... but in the end I really enjoyed it because I was able to do things with these kids. And because you do things, they appreciated it.

[Part 1 0:26:37] Fletcher: I ran a football team on a Saturday. I really thought nobody would turn up. In the end I had 20 kids because so many wanted to play. It was very fulfilling for me, hard work. It was those type of things I learned. I had a couple of very inspired teachers. One of them, Sid, I could have killed him on the first thing because he was a dance teacher. He said 'Get them to do dance.' 'Linden Street for Boys?' I thought 'This is going to be ... I shall get lynched here. Most of these lads are from Matson the back end of Gloucester.' But they really actually took to it, OK in a different ... I always remember one of them, a bloke called Clive Avis. I got him

to give a piece of music to do the dance to and I hadn't really thought this through and of course what he brought in was *The Stripper* [laughs]. I thought afterwards 'Well you are right.' But it was lots of lateral thinking and lots of different aspects which you did get and you didn't pull them all together at the time. But I felt it did really broaden my sense of education.

[Part 1 0:27:45] Lee: So the same question again. What skills did you learn at St Pauls that you then applied to the Antarctic? Were you getting the Fids to do physical jerks at 5am?

Fletcher: No. I was getting them to do stretching. People I used to take sledging, we would get very stiff. You run behind a sledge for 30 miles a day, you have got ...

[Part 1 0:28:02] Lee: Was that new in the Antarctic?

Fletcher: Newish. I remember Bill Sloman at the conference at Cambridge saying 'Well are you going to do physical stretches on the ship? What?' It was quite new actually.

[Part 1 0:28:17] Lee: Nobody else has mentioned it so far.

Fletcher: No. That's right. There was a Met man going to Adelaide who had also done a PE degree. I cannot remember his name but he was out ... We did it together anyway. That was quite new. But one of the things I took from St Pauls to the Antarctic, more when I was at Signy, was dealing with people really. I dealt with kids – I say kids; they were older than me – at Aberdovey. But it was a different situation because you knew what they were doing, they didn't. They were in a dangerous position; therefore they would look to you to get them out of trouble. That's fine but in the Antarctic you were very much equal or often inferior academically to many others and it was this ability to deal with people that I had learned at St Pauls that I did find a huge bonus actually.

[Part 1 0:29:11] Lee: OK. So what in the end made you want to go to the Antarctic? When did you apply? Was this straight from St Pauls?

Fletcher: Yes it was straight from St Pauls, yes. I got so involved with Antarctic people. After Aberdovey, when I was at St Pauls, I worked in the summer at a little outdoor centre up in Derbyshire which Ian Fothergill had moved on to. Then I had met people like Tony Bushell, Mick Pawley, so it was inevitable really. My three referees were Johnny Green, Mick Cousins and Ian Fothergill and when I went for interview at BAS, Fuchs and Sloman, and basically the comments were: 'With this bunch you have either got to be really good, or terrible.' [laughs]

[Part 1 0:30:01] Lee: You had to apply? You weren't invited?

Fletcher: No, I had to apply.

[Part 1 0:30:03] Lee: You were applying for a GA post?

Fletcher: I applied for a GA, yes. Because of my background of climbing and I had actually done some dog sledging. Not a lot but I had done some dog sledging in Greenland on a climbing trip there, so it wasn't completely new to me. But I had done a lot of glacier work, so ...

[Part 1 0:30:20] Lee: It sounds like you were an ideal candidate, so was the interview a bit of a formality?

Fletcher: It was, really. I was still incredibly nervous but I knew the way it would go because all these lads had told me 'If you are asked to go to a medical, you have pretty much got it then.' Fuchs talked to me about what I would do if I fell down a crevasse. Actually I didn't tell him, but that summer I had actually been down a crevasse in the Alps, so I knew exactly what to do. I was able to explain ropework and things I did. I didn't realise at the time, but that was just right. The fact that I had already driven dogs helped obviously, and this amazing background I had of people – I did not realise all these people and their input into BAS at the time.

[Part 1 0:31:10] Lee: This was 1971? You were 22/ 23?

Fletcher: Yes.

[Part 1 0:31:17] Lee: So what happened next? You did a medical?

Fletcher: I did a medical. I then actually went straight to Iceland. I was doing a trip across the Vatnajökull, across the glacier, so I did that and then I came back in September. After I left St Pauls, I had the interview, I did this, came back in September and then sailed on the *Bransfield* the first week in October.

[Part 1 0:31:43] Lee: Did you know at that point where you were heading?

Fletcher: Yes, I did, when I went to the Cambridge conference. Up until then I didn't, but then I knew I was going to Halley.

[Part 1 0:31:53] Lee: What are your memories of the conference 40 years ago?

Fletcher: It was at Corpus Christi. Really interesting actually. My memories are really of people I met, of ex-Fids. I met Raymond Priestley, which I knew from books and nothing else, and this remarkable person. I met Wally, Wally Herbert. He had just come back from doing a lecture tour about his crossing of the Arctic. So that is what I remember mainly. Also an incredible camaraderie really from all the new Fids who I had never met before and this mix with these wonderful names and the new people. The week went like a blur really. I can't remember too many of the talks to be honest but I do remember meeting all these people.

[Part 1 0:32:52] Lee: What struck you about Priestley?

Fletcher: A: the awe I suppose. He was a bloke who was with Scott and I actually read the book. But also his interest in new Fids, if you like. He sadly died while I was South, but I wrote him a letter and he wrote back and said 'Have a great time' and so on and so forth. And just being with Fuchs as well – that sort of era. Really quite

remarkable actually but I think it was this mix of new and young, sheer camaraderie. As I say, the day-to-day and minute-to-minute things, I really cannot remember much about it.

[Part 1 0:33:36] Lee: Do you remember any particular Health and Safety training?

Fletcher: None at all. None whatsoever. Actually one of the things (going back to one of your earlier questions) that again I took from St Pauls, on the training of the outdoor pursuits side there, was on Signy I insisted on taking everybody out and doing stretcher lowering exercises, rope exercises, camping. Because I was very conscious that we did not do any of this, really. In fact when I went to Rothera at a later time I actually started an outdoor programme which still runs today. I just felt the lads were going south, I went out with dogs within a week of getting on base. I knew what I was doing. I had an idea of what I was doing. Most of the lads had no clue and they were just off, gone.

[Part 1 0:34:33] Lee: Were you a bit horrified at the lack of preparation?

Fletcher: I was a little, I must admit, I was a little. But I always assumed it would be more later if you see what I mean. Because in those days, things were later. We did not get anything in Cambridge. Everything we got in the Falklands, so it was always 'Next week, next week.' I suppose subconsciously I assumed that was what would happen, that in a few weeks time I would know more and then in a few weeks time I would know a bit more. Actually I didn't and of course events always overtake it. Big effort in Stanley and all the bits and then as soon as you arrive on base, the great frenetic efforts of relief which you don't really contemplate beforehand. So all these things push along. Bits like Health and Safety and training just ...

[Part 1 0:35:24] Lee: One day?

Fletcher: Yes. It will happen.

[Part 1 0:35:28] Lee: So when you got to Halley, what was your first impression?

Fletcher: Overwhelmed, I suppose. The flatness, actually. Just incredible, you know? Obviously I had read about it. People had told me about it, but it is overwhelming really. You land on this ice shelf and then base then, it wasn't that far away, about 4 miles from the landing site. But it is just this vastness, the all-sky and flat ice. That was what really got me going, was just the vastness of the place and I remember the second day I had gone up to base with the dogs and there was an incredible sort of ?? [unintelligible] and an amazing inversion of the icebergs, They were all floating up in the sky. You just wonder how you had come to it – it is really quite incredible. Also, again, I was so impressed with the professionalism of everybody because everybody seemed to know what they were doing and then the whole thing went ... Nobody actually gave you instructions. Well they did of course: 'Can you help there?' or 'Can you help ...?' but the whole thing worked. That was one of the things that always has amazed me with Fids: it just works. You just get a bunch of lads together and it just happens. No big discussion usually. You have a big chat to start with but once people decide 'This is the way we are going to do it.' This is the way it is done.

[Part 1 0:37:01] Lee: What generation of Halley was that, in '71.

Fletcher: That was the second base, 'Grillage Village'.

[Part 1 0:37:08] Lee: And was it underground by then?

Fletcher: Oh yes, very much so.

[Part 1 0:37:12] Lee: So here you are, there are two psychological impacts on you: one is the vastness and the flatness, and the second one is having to live as a troglodyte.

Fletcher: Yes and in a bunkroom with no roof really. I was looking straight up into the ice cave.

[Part 1 0:37:23] Lee: Were you?

Fletcher: Yes, the top had all gone, really. It was in a pretty sad state actually, Grillage Village then, but it was ... Again, I had known about it. One of the chaps at the conference, Ricky Chinn, had told me about it, so I was sort of prepared for it but actually it was just part of what I expected. But things that I really hadn't ... I think about now, came as shocks because there was just this assumption (a) that you knew what you were doing, and (b) that you would just do it. I remember Paul Brangham, who was the chippy, he said 'Yes, under that bit of snow there, that is the extension for the dog tunnel. You need to fit that and ...'. You were just trying to absorb all this enormous amount of information and they just assumed that you would just do it, which had all been done of course.

[Part 1 0:38:19] Lee: So you were literally lying on your bunk looking at ice, were you?

Fletcher: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:38:22] Lee: So was the base awash then, because that would have been ... ?

Fletcher: No, but Bruce, who was the diesel mechanic, was just beginning to have floods then, but the rest of the base, no, it was fine. Many areas like the dining room and the lounge were still in really good nick, still in really good order, but the bunkrooms were suffering. The genny shed was just beginning to ... It was much worse at the end of my year than it was at the start.

[Part 1 0:38:48] Lee: You mean a tilt? The floor was no longer level?

Fletcher: That's right. It was beginning to heave up and down.

[Part 1 0:38:54] Lee: Did you mind living underground? Not underground, under ice.

Fletcher: No, not at all. Under ice. It did not really bother me. I did not even think about it to be honest. I spend a lot of time out of course with the dogs and so on. I can imagine, and I did think about it, people the geophysicists and things like that, did

spend most of their time in the base because that was their job basically. I did feel that could be a bit of a struggle. I felt I had the right job, put it that way.

[Part 1 0:39:28] Lee: Well you were out quite a lot and perhaps pick up on one or two of the notes I have got from some of the base reports I have been sent when you were there. There is a word in that base report which no-one ever seems to have heard before; the word is 'grabbing', in the biology report.

Fletcher: The 'grabbing; was literally grabbing, down in the ocean.

[Part 1 0:39:56] Lee: Grabbing what?

Fletcher: Bottom samples basically, sediment.

[Part 1 0:40:01] Lee: For biologists at Signy?

Fletcher: Yes well there were no biologists there but we all did a bit of biology. I did the bird reports and bits and pieces like that. A couple of people did grab off the ice edge, off the sea ice rather than the cliff edge, on sediments and things like that so there were bits of biology done. What the background to that was, I have no idea. Whether they had been asked by Head Office at some time and we just carried on, I have no idea, but I did a biology report which was essentially birds, because over flying.

[Part 1 0:40:37] Lee: How does one grab in the Antarctic?

Fletcher: I know how you do it properly. We used to do it at Signy a lot. You have a small grab-like thing which is on a double cable. You lower it down, pull one, and that closes it up and you bring it up. Normally you just put a glass tube in there, seal the glass tube, and that is your grab, but quite how they did it in the early years, I am not sure.

[Part 1 0:41:07] Lee: Was that then sent back to ... ?

Fletcher: Sent back to BAS and whatever happened I have no idea. Well Monkswood in those days.

[Part 1 0:41:12] Lee: Would it go on the next ship?

Fletcher: Yes.

[Part 1 0:41:15] Lee: What was this bird work you were doing? Was this in your own time?

Fletcher: In my own time. It was literally just overflying birds because these was an awful lot fascinated me because you obviously had birds like skuas and Dominican gulls on the base, on the gash heap and the seal pile. But you had overflying Antarctic petrels, snow petrels, which just seemed to be flying to nowhere. Afterwards of course they were flying to the Therons. There is a nesting site at the Therons. I was just fascinated by this movement and also whales, huge numbers of whales alongside the

ice cliff at Halley, mainly southern bottle-nosed but minkes as well. So I used to do numbers and you would see them a lot when you were dog sledging. You could hear them.

[Part 1 0:41:59] Lee: You could hear them?

Fletcher: Yes you could hear them: Whssh! Yes, bless 'em.

[Part 1 0:42:04] Lee: So was this part of an agreed programme, before you went South, or was this just something you were doing off your own bat?

Fletcher: No. Well again, I did lots of things. I started doing lots of things, accumulation studies as well. If you like the whole thing we were working to, which would have been the Shackletons, wasn't there. It suddenly didn't come. The only thing we had done on that, which was almost a disaster: we were looking for a new route up the Hinge Zone, between the ice shelf and the inland ice, and we lost a dog team.

[Part 1 0:42:36] Lee: I will come to that in a moment.

Fletcher: So that was the only work towards the Shackletons, and then we had the information that the aircraft were not coming. So we did survey, we took people out. We did all sorts of things and I just felt these other things were: you know, would have been interesting.

[Part 1 0:42:57] Lee: Were you filling time? Because Andy Smith sent me a note saying 'Ask Dave how he spent his time being one of two GAs on a base with no field programme.'

Fletcher: Absolutely. Alright, I got involved in some very strange projects, like rescuing an old tractor that had gone down a crevasse 7 years earlier. [Transcriber comment: In fact it was only three years earlier, in 1969. Andy Smith] Yes it was filling time, really, but it was also interesting because many of these things were happening. Because there wasn't a biologist, nobody was noting them and I thought it was something that should be noted. General interest for the future, really.

[Part 1 0:43:34] Lee: So that information would have gone back to BAS?

Fletcher: Yes, it did, yes.

[Part 1 0:43:36] Lee: Was it recognised by BAS?

Fletcher: Yes. Yes I wrote a proper BAS report on it. Just purely observation; nothing more than that. I just felt it was interesting.

[Part 1 0:43:46] Lee: Let's talk about the Hobbits. I don't know much about this. I have read a little bit about it but it was one of those things, wasn't it? Tell me the story.

Fletcher: Well myself and Jack Donaldson (who was the other GA), we had been asked to look at a new route through the Hinge Zone, or a route that had been done earlier by Graham Wright. It had been done several years earlier. We needed a route up the Hinge Zone, to either come back from the Shacks, or as an escape, or whatever. Also there was still a plan to take heavy vehicles at some stage. So we were asked to find a route up to the Inland Ice and flag any crevasse that was a tractor-eater. Well the first bit of it, the place was riddled with crevasses. We took, I can't remember how many flags, something like 50, because we thought that would be plenty to mark ... We had run out of flags and I could still see the first one. That's how many crevasses. It was just riddled. The place was like a minefield. We got through what we thought was the worst and was on the slow uphill thing and were flogging our way up really, in soft snow and it was a real flog uphill, but apparently relatively crevasse-free, and what crevasses there were we had come across, were coming straight across us. We were crossing with absolutely no problem at all.

[Part 1 0:45:11] Fletcher: I had my head down pushing and Jack was leading at that time. I had been leading in the morning. He had taken over because it was hard work being ... I looked up and he was sitting on the snow. 'What has gone on?' In my head I thought 'Well perhaps he has fallen over and the dog team has run off.' I did not really think. Anyway I got to him and of course he was sitting there literally like this, feet in the crevasse and Toby Stoneham, who was the other lad with him was rolled to one the side. It became obvious then that the sledge had gone through. From talking to them, the back of the sledge had gone through. The weight of the sledge had just pulled the dogs in after it. As soon as I got to him I got those two OK and I thought 'Right, I will abseil down, because there is probably a snow bridge or something and they will be just down there.' I abseiled down and I had about 120 feet of rope. I was just spinning in space; it was black; there was nothing. No sound; absolutely nothing. I jumared back out again. That part of the story, we got Jack and Toby, we rejoined. We got straight back to base actually because the base was only about 40 miles, 50 miles away. So we sledged back to base to just get them back because obviously we could not carry on with just one team and three blokes.

[Part 1 0:46:33] Then it wasn't much longer, about two or three weeks after, we took two vehicles up with another dog team, on the route we had tracked up. So we got up there. Not easily. We found lots more holes. The whole thing was impossible But we got back to the hole to see if we could recover anything off the sledge, because we had quite a lot of stuff with us like theodolites, and bits and bobs. Also to try and map out what was going on. We got there and we did a full survey of the thing and Jack had been desperately unlucky. The crevasse had come across and then for about 30 metres it had done literally a ninety degree loop like that, and he had hit it exactly parallel on the bit that was level with him. That was what he had gone through. It wasn't that wide – 4 or 5 feet wide at the top, something like that. Anyway we got the vehicle attached, backed it up and lowered a winch down and had two railway sleepers across the top for a small ladder to help us out and also the block for the winch. I put a chest harness on and then lowered me down. It was 180 feet to where the dogs hit. I was standing on the dogs and by then it was like this. It was really narrow. It was a huge box. The top was about 5 feet wide, for about 20 feet I suppose, then it just barrelled out into this huge bottle and then narrow ...

[Part 1 0:48:06] Lee: Like a cavern?



Fletcher: Yes, like a cavern. It was enormous. No snow bridges; just a clear fall, 180 feet. The dogs obviously died instantly. They were all folded up underneath me. The sledge had all been compressed. I sent things up like cameras, but they were all destroyed.

[Part 1 0:48:24] Lee: It was a complete wreck, was it?

Fletcher: It really was. It was awful, but as I say, incredibly unlucky. If he had crossed it 90 degrees and the back of the sledge had gone down, he would have carried on no problem at all. But just hitting it parallel ... There are always two ... 'You should have seen this.' I looked at it, the sun angle, there was low sun, I looked everywhere and there was no indication of it there at all. It would have been impossible to see. That basically ended the search for a route up onto the inland ice. It was riddled.

[Part 1 0:49:04] Lee: Did you regard going down that hole the first time, and indeed the second time, as being dangerous?

Fletcher: Yes, but I had been down crevasses before in the Alps and so that didn't bother me.

[Part 1 0:49:21] Lee: The first time you were hoping to find dogs that were still alive?

Fletcher: Yes. When I went over the top the first time, I looked down and it was dark. It does take time for your eyes to get adjusted. My previous experience, apart from big big ones, most crevasses of that size have snow bridges in, collapsed tops, whatever. I fully expected to see the dogs – OK, there might have been a few dead or injured – but I fully expected to see them laying on a snow bridge or whatever. There was absolutely no sound at all. I obviously could not see the bottom. I just saw the end of my rope spinning in space. 'OK. Time I wasn't here, really.' I spend my life being frightened, but it keeps me sharp I suppose.

[Part 1 0:50:11] Lee: You weren't base commander at that point but you still had to weigh up the decision about whether to go down the first time, and I can see the point behind that, but the decision to go down the second time, that was one man's life against maybe some equipment.

Fletcher: Yes. The only thing that really concerned me: I looked at the winch and they had forgotten to put the brake on. That did concern me a little. No I did not really have a problem with that. I am not saying I wasn't nervous; I was always nervous. I still do today. I am always nervous on these things.

[Part 1 0:50:48] Lee: Had there been any precedents, other instances of using a winch to go down a crevasse to see what was down there?

Fletcher: Not that I am aware of.

[Part 1 0:50:56] Lee: So you were breaking new ground, if you will excuse the expression?

Fletcher: Yes.

[Part 1 0:50:59] Lee: Would you do that now? In the light of extra experience, would you still go over the edge, to ?? [inaudible] a sledge?

Fletcher: Yes, I suppose so. Yes probably. Also of course, we did not know the aircraft had been cancelled at that time, so we were still worrying about a route, if you like. The more we knew about this route the better, obviously, because we began to find out that it was a nightmare. So there was still that side to it. We were still thinking that we needed a route up, or down, as an escape from the Shacks, or a heavy vehicle route. We were rapidly beginning to decide it wasn't available.

[Part 1 0:51:46] Lee: Having lost a sledge and a team, and you had to get back, presumably half your supplies were down the bottom of the crevasse by then, so were you having supply problems?

Fletcher: No, because we had only just started. We had only been out – I can't remember exactly – but about 5 or 6 days. So we were only just into the supplies. So on one sledge we had plenty of supplies, and we had the tent on my sledge, so we had everything we needed on my sledge. You do that consciously. You do swap loads around. We did it right. Because we were relatively close to base, it wasn't a problem. I was a bit worried about Jack. Not Toby particularly, but I think it did, it affected him mentally really. Not particularly the fear, but the loss of the team, and it all ...

[Part 1 0:52:40] Lee: This is Jack ...?

Fletcher: Jack Donaldson.

[Part 1 0:52:42] Lee: That was my next question. How does that filter back to the base when you lose a complete team of dogs.

Fletcher: There was a lot of unfair criticism. Still today people say: 'He was the one who went down the crevasse. I satisfied myself very early, not because I was looking to absolve Jack, because obviously I wanted to know where this bloody crevasse went. You couldn't see it. You really could not see it. We had been crossing crevasses the whole day, but at 90 degrees. There was really no reason to ... It was just in a flat plain. In fact there was every reason not to have crevasses, it was getting that sort of territory. But there was a lot of criticism 'He should have seen it.'

[Part 1 0:53:33] Lee: This was from your colleagues?

Fletcher: Yes, but not direct criticism. 'Oh he should have seen that.' [This sort of thing. It was sad and Jack went into himself a bit after that, and basically flew a bar stool after that. He didn't do a lot more.

[Part 1 0:53:56] Lee: Did it split the base?

Fletcher: No, not really, no it didn't.

[Part 1 0:54:02] Lee: Were you aware of the base commander at that time dealing with the situation?

Fletcher: Andy? Yes, Andy Smith. Andy was very level-headed and just got on with it, basically, which in retrospect was exactly what was required. I must admit I was a bit concerned, still thinking of the Shacks coming up. That would disappear if you like. I am not sure what went on between Andy and Jack, whether he was talked to or whatever, I don't know. But I know it did affect Jack hugely. Then of course the problem was that when the Shacks were cancelled, there was nothing to look forward to. I got involved in all sorts of things but Jack didn't really get involved with anything. He went home and I don't think he has ever been seen again, which was really sad. I think it was all to do with this accident. Whether he blamed himself, as far as I was concerned he was blameless.

[Part 1 0:55:15] Lee: Do you think the gossip at base got to him?

Fletcher: I do, or the innuendo. Yes, I think so.

[Part 1 0:55:23] Lee: So that was a bit of a weakness in the BAS infrastructure, really?

Fletcher: It was.

[Part 1 0:55:27] Lee: There was no training to say 'If anybody has a close call, you don't criticise them.'

Fletcher: No, that's right. There is a way of dealing with it. He did not help himself by withdrawing, but that is the same as post-traumatic stress. It is the same. Obviously it is not as dramatic as that but in retrospect it did affect Jack.

[Part 1 0:55:59] Lee: Usually after a tragedy, and fortunately this wasn't a human tragedy, more often than not there is a case of BAS adjusting its procedures to avoid it happening again. Was there any possibility of that at all?

Fletcher: No, not at all. The fact that the project was cancelled, because of the aircraft, was the end of the thing, so it didn't need looking at any more. But the place was a nightmare. As I say, we ran out of flags and I could still see the first flag. It was just a nightmare.

[Part 1 0:56:32] Lee: Was it a close call for the human beings?

Fletcher: It was for Jack, yes, and Toby. Obviously I didn't see it, but the sledge dropped and as it dropped, Toby was actually sitting on the front, rolled to one side. Jack who was on his skis alongside, had a rope, a dongler on the handlebar. Fortunately it just popped off as the sledge dropped from underneath him. When I got there he was sitting there with his feet in the crevasse, sitting on the edge, and if he had gone down, there was absolutely no chance! It was a killer.

[Part 1 0:57:05] Lee: So he was close to going down?

Fletcher: He really was close, yes.

[Part 1 0:57:08] Lee: Which probably explains his behaviour afterwards?

Fletcher: Absolutely, and what hadn't helped, we were getting depth hoar all that morning as well, where you get the top 4 inches just collapse: Pffw! When the top of the crevasse had gone, that would have been the sound as well. You had had these combinations anyway and we knew it was really holey because we had all these holes before. Yes, they were lucky. They were.

[Part 1 0:57:39] Lee: Was that before or after the rescue of the International ...?

Fletcher: Before.

[Part 1 0:57:43] Lee: So this tractor had gone down in 1969, hadn't it?

Fletcher: Yes, a long time before, that's right

[Part 1 0:57:48] Lee: Three years earlier?

Fletcher: Yes.

[Part 1 0:57:50] Lee: So who hatched the plan to get it out?

Fletcher: Bruce, Bruce Blackwell, who was the diesel mechanic. Bruce had been talking about this all summer actually. It had obviously been in his mind a while.

[Part 1 0:58:00] Lee: Was anybody listening?

Fletcher: Not really. But then it all became ... He had obviously put a whole plan to Andy, and the strength of the plan was that he did not want to involve any BAS kit, if you like. It would be dug out and we would do it all by hand. So that was myself, Bruce, Toby<sup>1</sup> and Ian (Ian Bury). We were going to go. I was going to go as, if you like, Health & Safety, because again, we had to cross the hinge zone to get it across: and get our kit across and then get back. We did it literally at the end of winter. It was bloody cold but we did it because obviously the surfaces were good and I had no commitment then, no field commitment. Apart from looking after the dogs and running training teams, things like that, I actually had no long-term commitments. He had obviously convinced Andy. I am not sure Fuchs was fully aware of it until we actually got it out. That is another story. [laughs] Then off we went, and we did this training run, to go down there. We manhailed, basically. We took a tractor as far as the edge of the hinge zone, and then we manhailed in to have a look at it, to make sure it was accessible. We had sorted a route across the hinge zone, which at that time of the year was rock solid. There were no real problems at all. Then we came back to do the trip, which was a wonderful trip, amazing.

[Part 1 0:59:48] Lee: Well, give me the gist of it.

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<sup>1</sup> The fourth member of the team was actually Gordon Ramage, not Toby. AJS 3 Nov 2023.

Fletcher: Basically we went in with a tractor. We had to take a tractor because we needed the winch and things like that. We got there and manhauled all the kit in on the big sledges. It was a hell of a pull getting it in there. Then we dug it out, literally. We dug the top of the crevasse off. We dug a ramp. We lost it twice: we got it up to the edge and it went back in.

[Part 1 1:00:15] Lee: Winching it up?

Fletcher: The winch broke. The cable broke. The block broke. Then we were using the Tirfor, hand Tirfor. It is like a winch which eats the metal. It pulls the cable. We did that and we got her out – out she came. The amazing thing is: we got her out on the surface, put a new battery in, and it started first turn of the key, which was really quite incredible. In fact the falling back down had actually helped us because it had loosened everything up. Initially there was a hell of a job moving it because it had jammed across with the blade on one side of the crevasse and the back on the other side of the crevasse. By falling down, which obviously we did not do deliberately, eased it. But then we had to get it back and that was actually quite interesting because we drove it back and I skied in front, as a crevasse probe if you like. The lads drove the tractor with wires, from the back.

[Part 1 1:01:16] Lee: Why was that?

Fletcher: Well we were terrified of it going down another hole. But again we were freaked out by huge depth hoar every few minutes. We were all standing there shivering.

[Part 1 1:01:29] Lee: Depth hoar?

Fletcher: When the surface collapses about 4 inches. Big crystals. But then we got it back to the big chasm which is the main part of the hinge zone. We lowered it down. Then we thought ‘How the hell are we going to get it out the other side?’ Bruce had the idea. What we would do is turn it round, run the winch cable up to the top of the chasm, put it round a block, run it back and let it literally climb out on its own winch, which we did. We got it started, put it in gear. It chugged its way up, but of course half way up, the deadman that was holding it started to fold up. ‘Oh no!’ We thought all of it would go back down. It didn’t; it all jammed together and the thing just climbed itself over the top.

[Part 1 1:02:19] Lee: A deadman is a bit like a sort of miniature drilling rig, is it?

Fletcher: Well yes. It is basically an anchor, essentially. You used to use old railway sleepers and things like that. This thing had started to split as the thing was half way up. There was nothing we could do about it. The thing was doing itself. But it did, it climbed over the top. It was amazing. Then of course we got it back and that was when we sent the thing off to Fuchs. Congratulations.

[Part 1 1:02:55] Lee: Two points. One is that you didn’t even need to put any more antifreeze in the radiator when you dug it up. Secondly, I think this is a note from Fuchs which says ‘Best recovery of a tractor that I have known. Fuchs, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1973.’

Fletcher: That's right, absolutely, bless him.

[Part 1 1:03:15] Lee: A little note on the bottom of your black hearse report.

Fletcher: It was a wonderful trip, actually. Two great companions. It was Fid ingenuity at its top level. We just did it by hand. We didn't commit any ... apart from the vehicle that took us to the edge. And then we manhailed the whole way after that and did it ourselves.

[Part 1 1:03:41] Lee: Was it in good working order for the rest of the season?

Fletcher: Well it was, for two years, until Pete Witty dropped it through the sea ice some years later. [laughs] Until then it was perfect. That worked fully in its relief as well, yes.

[Part 1 1:04:54] Lee: Let's take pause.

Fletcher: Yes, certainly.

[Part 1 1:04:00] [End of Part One]

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Dave Fletcher interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 25th of April 2012. Dave Fletcher, Part Two.

[Part 2 0:00:10] Lee: How did the transfer to Signy come about?

Fletcher: My original contract was two years at Halley. Then the Shackleton programme fell through, so at that time in the Office they decided to take the dogs off, the remaining dogs at Halley, and take them round to Stonington. But there was really no position for me at Stonington, because they had already fully ... Then I was asked if I would be prepared to become base commander at Signy. So we brought the dogs out on the *Bransfield* with myself and John Newman. Then we stopped at Signy on the way, where I got off. Then the rest of the dogs went round to Stonington.

[Part 2 0:52:00] Lee: How different was it at Signy?

Fletcher: Oh, hugely different. Obviously topographically completely different, from the far south of the Weddell Sea to an offshore island really. Going from a purely geophysical base at Halley, we were now on a purely biological base at Signy. So there were many many differences. Fortunately I knew many of the lads at Signy because I had come South with them. It wasn't as if it was a completely new experience. I had seen Signy on the way down to Halley the year before so I knew what it looked like. But that was about it, really. I was, if you like, thrust in at the deep end. I took over from Mike Richardson, who of course became FCO Polar man for many years and just retired a few years ago.

[Part 2 0:01:42] Lee: Yes, I have seen him in Devon.

Fletcher: Have you? Oh right.

[Part 2 0:01:45] Lee: So were you base commander from the beginning?

Fletcher: Yes, I was.

[Part 2 0:01:48] Lee: Were you surprised at the appointment?

Fletcher: Yes, I was really. They explained they would like me to do it because (a) I was a GA background. They felt that would be a good input on the Health & Safety. There had been a few incidents over the years before at Signy which they felt was a bit of a concern. Also of course I had my biological background, which was of some help as well. But that was it, basically. I did find it a bit of a challenge, to say the least. A bit of a worry.

[Part 2 0:02:30] Lee: What were the biggest problems?

Fletcher: Well there were no real problems at all. I was very conscious of the fact that I was an outsider, been pushed into a position at Signy, in a completely out of the norm ... They had always had ... ; a senior scientist had been base commander for a winter and then gone on. That had been the tradition and now suddenly there was this outsider thrust upon them as it were. So I was very careful at the start to tread carefully and not impose my will on it. If there were going to be changes, that I felt should be made, then I would do them but I just felt I should do them very slowly. So I was conscious of going into a new place.

[Part 2 0:03:17] Lee: So did you actually witness or perceive scepticism amongst the ranks or were you just worried that there might be?

Fletcher: I was worried there might be and I think from one or two there was initially. Somebody thrust from the outside . 'Why are you here?' Some of the questions when I arrived were 'What project are you going to be doing?' 'Why are you here?' As if there was some grand scheme. Well as far as I was aware, there was no grand scheme at all. I was just going in.

[Part 2 0:03:51] Lee: How did you bring them round?

Fletcher: I think by being quiet, really. I think by just fitting into the system. I tried to understand ... Obviously there was a handover between Mike and me, and I tried to learn as much about the base as I could, and get involved in all sorts of things, before I officially took over. It was at that time also that I perceived there were things I would want to change fairly quickly.

[Part 2 0:04:21] Lee: Such as?

Fletcher: Well there was no night watch at the time. Having come from Halley where night watch was a very important thing, I just felt that that was ... That needed changing; we needed a night watch. Because they obviously went off individually to do their scientific programmes, all over the island, I felt there needed to be more control on that.

[Part 2 0:04:51] Lee: You mean one person on his own?

Fletcher: Yes. I instigated a time system, and a book system where people had to check out and had to be back at a certain time, so we had some sort of control of what was going on. And as I say, I instilled a nightwatch.

[Part 2 0:05:07] Lee: Was there resistance to those ideas?

Fletcher: None at all, actually. The nightwatch, I think they had all wanted to do one but had not really ... In fact, funnily enough, the bloke in that photograph you have given me, Jan Hoogesteger, was also instrumental, because he was ..., he had the fire chief hat, if you like. He was very concerned that that wasn't really ... Together we ... So there was all sorts of help there.

[Part 2 0:05:32] Lee: So there was not really any concerted resistance to what you might call professionalism.

Fletcher: No.

[Part 2 0:05:39] Lee: In fact you hinted that they were actually rather hoping it might come.

Fletcher: That was certainly the feeling I got with the night watch and fire, that they thought it was something they should do but a situation had never developed to do it. Also on the field thing, because it wasn't a major change – I didn't stop them doing what they were doing. I just got them to sign a book, and do it on a much more formal basis.

[Part 2 0:06:06] Lee: So you knew where they were?

Fletcher: We knew exactly where they were, because we were just at that stage in the history, we were playing around with hand-held radios, which were frankly ineffective after 50 metres. So that was a nonsense, carrying those things around. We needed something. What we did install, in fact I did it twice soon afterwards, if people were late, I immediately organised a search party. OK I knew they probably weren't a problem but just to integrate the system. And we started doing things like a stretcher lower, practices, things I thought we should be doing.

[Part 2 0:06:48] Lee: Were there many false alarms, about overdue scientists?

Fletcher: No. I only ever had ... I did one in the first few months, and then I never had another one for five years I don't think.

[Part 2 0:07:01] Lee: Paint me a little thumbnail sketch of Signy as it was in '71.

Fletcher: Very basic, in '72. When I first got there, my first year was before the huge rebuild that went on (which went to all the bases actually). When I got there, there was essentially just this strange plastic hut thing. There was another one of course at Deception. And the old original base hut. It was a biological station, pure and simply. Everybody was involved in biology. Also, which was something I hadn't experienced,



it was a diving station, which I found a worry to start with. The lads were diving every day in difficult cold hostile water, leopard seals, all sorts of things. But that side: Paul Skilling was there then, and a chap called Howard Bissell – the diving officers really organised that brilliantly. That was superb but it was something that I was concerned about because it was something I didn't understand.

[Part 2 0:08:12] Lee: Had you been diving?

Fletcher: I had pleasure dived in the UK. But one of the first things I did was learn to dive down there. So I was able to go out on a lot of the dives. Then as I say, I also took time to go out with the people, to learn their jobs. The base was very small. In that first summer there were only about 25 of us. Then down to 16 in the winter. I actually managed to talk BAS Office into letting the builder, the chippy, winter, because I knew the next summer was going to an enormous building programme. I just felt that it would be good if we had him down there to have a winter before we started on this. So that was looking to the future. It was a very small close-knit station. Excellent morale, and Signy, although at first you think it is a bit like Faraday, a very small place where you can't go anywhere, Signy you can of course. It is 5 miles by 3, the island. There are lots of things like skiing, walking, and in the summer oodles of wildlife. So there is lots to do and they had had a couple of years there, two of the coldest years they had ever had, excellent sea ice. We had sea ice for 7 months of the year. So we were able to get on the sea ice. We did trips and so on. I encouraged expeditions over to Coronation Island. I am not too sure that Ted Clapp fully agreed with it in Stanley. But we only let him know what he needed to know, a need-to-know basis. [laughs] So yes, it was very small, knit, excellent very nice station. Yes, lovely.

[Part 2 0:09:58] Lee: There is a base report here from 1973 which suggests that going to Coronation Island wasn't quite as easy as you might have thought it was.

Fletcher: No, definitely not.

[Part 2 0:10:07] Lee: Tell me a bit about that experience.

Fletcher: It's a real challenge. The weather at Signy is appalling, to be quite honest. During the summer the weather is totally appalling. During the wetter winter as well you get these huge storms come through. The sea ice is 5 miles between Signy and Coronation, is not always guaranteed. We had done a lot of sea ice expeditions but going up onto the island, it is a challenge. Some of them were 'Oh we will do this.' 'We will do that.' I said 'Well if you do, I will come.' I am glad I did because the place is riddled in crevasses. It's just ice holes, basically. It is a serious undertaking. Also you are constantly battered by monster winds, 100 ...

[Part 2 0:10:56] Lee: How do you go about ... ? Presumably as base commander you had a sanction of all these trips?

Fletcher: Yes I did.

[Part 2 0:11:01] Lee: How did you go about making that decision?

Fletcher: Well what I did was: anything that was on the sea ice along the coast was fine, because that was what the lads did day in and day out, around the island. They were well aware of sea ice conditions. Obviously I made sure we went right through what gear they were taking, what provisions they were going to do, backup and so on. But if anybody wanted to go actually up on Coronation, then I went with them. I am glad I did because there were a couple of really close shaves.

[Part 2 0:11:30] Lee: Can you give me an example of that?

Fletcher: There was one, they originally wanted to go right down the island and I didn't really think it was possible. I said 'Look, I will come with you. Let's see what it is like.' We didn't go very far but we went across one of the glaciers which was fine, then up over a place called Echo Pass, and then got involved in these huge ice falls. We had one, the back of the sledge was over one bridge of a crevasse. We were on the other bridge of the crevasse. 'That's it.' With camping, then we turned round. We got back to the glacier again. Monster winds so I told the lads 'We will dig a snow hole under the tent. This tent is going to go soon.' It didn't as it turned out. But others who were on another trip, their tents did get blown away. You get these huge hammer-blow winds, 100 knots plus, coming off the tops. It is a difficult place. So we always tried to have it under control. We practised and we did vet these things as much as we possibly could. Alright it's blowing my own trumpet: I just felt these were the sort of trips that had happened in years gone by, which had been a shambles. But at least we got them under control, and had some overview of what was going on.

[Part 2 0:12:55] Lee: But you were still sanctioning trips for leisure?

Fletcher: Yes, these were pure leisure. It was one of the things; I became quite sympathetic with Faraday later on because you are stuck on this little blob on the ocean with the most fantastic scenery but unable to go anywhere. At least at Signy we could go somewhere. At that time in history there were also scientific programmes being done on Coronation. There was a small hut that had been built over there, called Shingle. So there were connections with Coronation. I just felt these leisure trips would help with safety. People would understand the problems that they were putting themselves in for.

[Part 2 0:13:37] Lee: Some of the diving was for pleasure as well, wasn't it?

Fletcher: Oh yes a lot of it was for pleasure. A lot of the diving was for pleasure / training. One of the things we tried to encourage was that everybody on the base dived, whatever they were: mechanic, carpenter, whatever. Because they then became aware of the effort that was required. If you had a dive in the winter, when there were only 16 of us, basically the whole base was involved. We had people driving the skidoo, we had people cutting the hole, we had people looking after the bath, we had people standing by the decompression chamber. The whole base was involved and if you had to get the whole base involved, you had to give them a feel for why they were involved. We felt that if we offered this diving pleasurewise, then at least they would understand the problems a diver faced. It was quite successful really to do that. There were so many things at Signy the only way to do it was to get the whole base involved. The base was too small to try and do it any other way. So you needed a team and that is the way we felt we did it.

[Part 2 0:14:48] Lee: There was a programme of sub-aqua photography going on. Was that something you were aware of?

Fletcher: Yes it was Brian, Brian Kellett. There were several bits and the Brian one, I was partially involved with that, because I felt it was a way you should go forward. We were doing his work on worms. Photography was in its infancy then. There were not that many underwater cameras. It was all pretty much an epic. Ektachrome films were developed by hanging them down the corridors and things like that. It was all pretty basic stuff. Of course it moved on considerably when Dougie Allan came down a few years later. There was a very early stage of a lot of development programmes really, photography particularly, which developed hugely as the years went on.

[Part 2 0:15:42] Lee: It reminds me of Hans and Lotte Hass. These photographers were actually going under the ice?

Fletcher: Oh yes, we dived under the ice virtually the whole of the winter.

[Part 2 0:15:51] Lee: Were they coming up with anything unusual?

Fletcher: As far as finds were concerned?

[Part 2 0:15:57] Lee: Yes.

Fletcher: Oh yes, there were new species found almost daily. Not that we were totally aware of it at Signy because these all went back to BAS and were worked up there. But there was also a thing that had gone on in the summer called the South Orkney Benthic Survey which was the *Biscoe*, the ship was doing trawling and they found things they had no idea about really. Coal fields and things like that which we had no idea about. Of course we were finding them around Signy. Obviously it has come into play in recent years with the death of Kirsty at Rothera, we had leopard seal contacts virtually every day.

[Part 2 0:16:43] Lee: Really? So were there any close calls?

Fletcher: A few. Me and Gordon Picken had one. But it is like the Kirsty thing, you see. I am not convinced the leopard seal attacks. I think the leopard seal is inquisitive because it is top predator. It wants to know what is going on. In my daily job now, I have Zodiacs bitten by leopard seals when we have tourists on board, but I am sure it is not an attack. I think they come in and their only way of finding out is to feel, with their teeth. They feel with their teeth and if whatever they are feeling suddenly moves off that inquisitiveness becomes attack, within a millisecond. It was the same when we were underwater with them. They want to know what you are. They come and push you with their nose, and you just hang there in the water. OK, you draw your knife but frankly it is more for your own benefit than them. And you do feel frightened, there's no two ways about it.

[Part 2 0:17:39] Fletcher: Big creatures, 12 foot of leopard seal pushing you in the back is ... And they will swim round you. They are just trying to find out what you are, but I am certain if you made a sudden movement at that time, then that

inquisitiveness would become attack, and I have a feeling that is what happened with Kirsty. She was snorkelling, she wasn't diving, and I just have a feeling that suddenly inquisitiveness became attack. I may totally be wrong but I don't think the seal went out to attack Kirsty. She was in it. She may have been in a position where the animal was interested and then suddenly a movement, whatever, grabbed her. Took her down and drowned her. It happened with us several times. Not on the attack side. You just got this feeling that they were tolerating you, if you like, trying to find out what you were. You just had a feeling that if you did something wrong, things would change.

[Part 2 0:18:37] Lee: Just for the record, Kirsty is Kirsty Brown. So after Kirsty Brown's death, there was a procedure installed at Rothera of having somebody on watch. Did you have people on watch?

Fletcher: No. We never actually, through naivety probably or whatever, we never considered leopard seals a problem. We had them virtually every dive. They would turn up because obviously they would hear movement in the water. 'What are you doing?' Most of the time they would just disappear, but occasionally you would get some that would come a little bit closer, but we never considered them a real problem. Before my time, quite a long a long time before my time, there had been a few schools of orcas (killer whales) had turned up. I never had a pod there. But then apparently the boatman would carry a gun in the boat. Well the whole thought of that just terrified me. I could imagine some bloke blazing away. It occurred to me that in a black wetsuit you look suspiciously like the back of a seal or a whale. We abandoned that one straight away. The only thing we used to take, occasionally, in the summertime, was crackers, like big fireworks, to drop in the water. Boom! With top predators, you benefit because they are not frightened but they want to know what that noise is and will tend to back off and assess what is going on. It is a similar thing with a polar bear. You have that gap, because the animal is intelligent, of trying to work out what is going on. In that gap you get out, basically, or move off or whatever. With the leopard seals we never had a problem with them.

[Part 2 0:20:26] Lee: There was no doctor at Signy in your time?

Fletcher: No.

[Part 2 0:20:29] Lee: Was that something that concerned you?

Fletcher: Yes, because it was me that had to take teeth out, things like that! Yes it did. What concerned me most of all, which of course changed in years, was the diving aspect again. If we had had a decompression situation, it would have been serious. We only had a single decompression chamber which was a nightmare. You put this person in this single chamber and send them down for about 24 hours or something. Nothing we could do about it. From Halley, we had a doctor at Halley but we had all stitched each other up, with all minor things. At Signy I had to take a couple of people's teeth out, and it's all a bit daunting when you have got *Kurafid* (which is a book) in one hand, and you are wrenching away. It is a challenge, put it that way. It was the diving side that particularly worried me.

[Part 2 0:21:25] Lee: In your base report in 1973, you said that 'if it is not possible for there to be a doctor, it should be possible for the new BC to attend some medical

courses, and particularly to become familiar with the commoner drugs and their uses, and the techniques laid out in *Kurafid*'.

Fletcher: I suppose you could say my background of mountaineering, I had dealt with many of these problems like cuts and bruises and breaks. It wasn't a problem. It was the drug side, it was the doctor, the diagnostic bit that I didn't feel comfortable with. The practical side you can deal with.

[Part 2 0:22:08] Lee: You were also concerned about the state of the teeth of people coming down to the Antarctic.

Fletcher: I was. It was dreadful. In fact the year after we had a dentist on the ships. It was two teeth I took out, and I filled five or six, which I am sure just fell out straight away, but ... Yes the state of teeth I was concerned with. In fact the two I took out (which was Don Goddard; he's dead now) he had broken the tops off. A winch handle had smacked him in the mouth. I am sure they didn't need to come out but the dentist back in Stanley (I think it was Stanley): 'They will have to come out.' But I am sure in a more modern era, with a dentist available on the radio, I am sure they could have been saved. I was more concerned with breaking Don's jaw than I was with getting the teeth out, because they were perfectly good teeth that had broken in half and that concerned me a great deal.

[Part 2 0:23:01] Lee: So did BAS pay any attention to your recommendation?

Fletcher: I think so. As I say, the dentist appeared not long after. I think also, to be fair, it wasn't just me. I think people were becoming aware that this was a situation, particularly with diving. We had a decompression chamber. OK, we had the manual, but we really did not have much input. Alright, we were not diving deep but we did have a few summer dives around 90 feet. You are on decompression times then. When you are working and when you have got animals around (when you may have to come up quicker). There were all sorts of implications. I actually talked to Ricky about it a lot because ... The trouble with doctors was that 99% of the time you can put them in a drawer. You don't need them, but then when you do need them ... I think this was the problem that BAS had as far as a recruitment policy was concerned. You essentially had a useless bloke, not useless but you know what I mean.

[Part 2 0:24:13] Lee: Spare?

Fletcher: Yes, and many of the bases simply could not carry that. At Halley, he did mainly cold research, so we had a programme. But many of us felt 'If they haven't got a programme, they are not going to be of any use.' But if we had had an accident, a diving accident, we would have been crucified, we really would.

[Part 2 0:24:34] Lee: Was that addressed later on?

Fletcher: It was. We got a two-man decompression chamber, which was a massive difference, and we had a doctor.

[Part 2 0:24:43] Lee: From when? Was that during your time?

Fletcher: No, sadly not. Everything after I left, really. No it was something we had to have.

[Part 2 0:24:54] Lee: The other thing that was coming in at that time was pollution management. BAS was becoming environmentally aware, as you were saying. Did that raise interesting issues for you?

Fletcher: It did, particularly at Signy, a very small base, very small area. Also a very strong photographic base. Not me but earlier scientists already noticed the implications of photographic chemicals going in the Cove, the Cove being a totally different world to what was outside the Cove, literally maybe 500 metres away. So that was already in the mind, and we had already tried to flatten tin cans. Still dropping them in the sea, but we were trying to burn the cans, break them down. There were efforts already starting. I instigated base walks where would sweep the base – I did it at Rothera – picking everything up, all the waste, to try and keep the place clean. I remember having a huge argument with BAS Office at that time, when I first went to Rothera, about taking fuel drums back. ‘No no, you leave them down there. We can’t cope with them being brought back.’ There was something really that actually did worry me. How many did we use at Halley, 3000 drums a year? At Rothera even more, with the aircraft. We were just dumping them out in the ocean. I just could not see the point on why we couldn’t take them back to the UK, which happened eventually, but it did take an awfully long time.

[Part 2 0:26:36] Lee: So that sounds like there was resistance to your proposal?

Fletcher: There was, and I think the resistance was that it was difficult to get them in, paperwork-wise. I think that is all it was; I can’t think of any other reason. Because all the drums had it stamped: ‘£5 on returns’. But I think it was just purely logistics and complications. I don’t know, but complications at this end.

[Part 2 0:27:00] Lee: So how did you solve the photographic chemicals, the used ...?

Fletcher: We tanked it. We put everything in a 5-gallon ... We began to then send that back. That was exactly ... So people had already become aware of these sorts of things happening, changes in the biology and so on. So it was already underway and we did try to keep the place clean and we did start to become more aware, as it were. Things like over the island, we were also aware there were hundreds of stakes from previous experiments. ‘Clear those sorts of things up.’ So there was a beginning of an awareness, yes.

[Part 2 0:27:43] Lee: Let’s move on, if we may, to your decision to ..., or the decision (it may not have been yours) to stop going to Halley. This would be at the end of ’79. Why did that change take place.

Fletcher: Stop going to Signy?

[Part 2 0:27:54] Lee: Signy I beg your pardon

Fletcher: Then to Rothera. ‘76/’77 I went to Rothera.

[Part 2 0:28:01] Lee: '76/'77? So how many years were you at Signy then?

Fletcher: I was at Signy for 5 years but basically one winter and four summers. And then I was asked if I would ... Steve Wormald had retired the year before and then Rothera was being built. They asked me if I would go in and commission Rothera.

[Part 2 0:28:26] Lee: Oh you were there at the very beginning?

Fletcher: Yes, right at the start.

[Part 2 0:28:28] Lee: So you were the first base commander at ...?

Fletcher: No, technically the second because Steve was still base commander when he was doing Adelaide and Rothera. But I was the first complete Rothera ... Yes, I was the first base commander, basically.

[Part 2 0:28:40] Lee: So tell me about that process of commissioning a new base.

Fletcher: Difficult. That was a difficult transition actually because when I went to Rothera there was ... It had not been a good winter. There was a definite division, Steve used to really drive people on, which half the base thought was great but half thought it was a nightmare. They had been left an awful lot to do during the winter, to bring the base up ready for the first summer. When I got there, there was definitely a real 'anti' feeling. There was a split between 'Rev, rev, rev' or 'Go, go, go' and others 'Back off 'or whatever. So it was a difficult summer, a challenge. I am not entirely sure I liked my first summer because I really got to love Signy very much, because I liked the freedom at Signy. There was so much to do, whereas Rothera I was basically flying a desk, essentially. But I did do quite a lot with the aircraft because I was not really happy with the way depots were being laid, so I got involved on the field side. But that first summer was difficult. But as I say, there was a split on the base, trying to get a new base running.

[Part 2 0:30:00] Fletcher: We had a terrible season for weather, so often the scientists were sitting on the base waiting to go out somewhere. And at the end of the season of course we had a complete epic. We left two scientists behind at Belgrano. We couldn't pick them up because one of the aircraft had crashed. The other pilot wouldn't fly out on his own (which I can totally understand), until we ended up leaving three lads behind at Belgrano. So the whole thing was very difficult. But it was OK. The good, the positive side is that I think we got people thinking my way and we began to get a bit more of a different regime established. It is always difficult going on a new base. Steve basically had taken over from Adelaide. That was the regime that had been going for twenty years. So we needed to establish a new regime. We needed to establish a new way of dealing with people. We needed to change the personnel as well. I was having big battles with the Office. The Office wanted to take out all the Met men. I said 'We can't have an air base without a Met man. This doesn't work.' So there were all sorts of these conflicts going on, as well as dropping an aircraft, having people stuck over at Belgrano. We were stretched. In retrospect we really shouldn't have had all these programmes going at the same time as we were trying to commission the base, but like everything, you get through. So it was a difficult summer. But to cap it off, after awful weather, we then had incredibly cold

weather at the end, so the ship was stuck in ice So we had half the base thinking they were never going to get out. Oh dear. Yes, interesting.

[Part 2 0:31:49] Lee: This was also going to be BAS's 'jewel in the crown' wasn't it, so was it perhaps the extra pressure of initiating a showcase base?

Fletcher: Yes it was. There was no doubt about that. 'This was going to be Rothera.' But I just got the feeling (and this is no criticism of Steve) but I just don't think he had been given the chance to ... It needed a couple of seasons to work it in, basically, and suddenly Adelaide became Rothera. End of story. The base wasn't finished; there were all sorts of things. The base morale wasn't great there. Little things: I remember the first day I was there, I looked out of the window and thought 'Where's the flag?' There was no flag flying or anything like that. There were little things like which we did and we changed it. We got people thinking about it. In the end we had quite a successful season, and then followed the second season which was hugely successful. So we did actually manage to get it running.

[Part 2 0:32:54] Lee: The lack of flag suggests a lack of pride.

Fletcher: Yes. That is exactly how I felt when I went in the station.

[Part 2 0:33:01] Lee: What were your tactics for turning that round?

Fletcher: Well trying to talk to everybody, basically. Cliques had developed, which is never ... I don't like cliques on bases and Rothera being that much bigger of course, cliques had developed and I was trying to bridge these cliques, get people involved in different jobs, which they hadn't been doing. 'Oh it's his job.' My technique has always been quiet. I don't see the point of just going in and push, push, push. There was enough of that had gone on. But we still had to do the programmes, but we needed to talk about it a bit more and get a bit more feeling involved and get people involved. That was what I felt hadn't been happening. People were pushed to extremes. If you get somebody loading fuel drums for six days a week, you have got to give them a flight on the seventh day. Get them up in the air; give them a break. That hadn't been going on. We tried it all. Eventually we got there.

[Part 2 0:34:04] Lee: Were there practical failures in the early years? Were there buildings that leaked, or ...

Fletcher: Yes. The big building at Rothera, I don't quite know how it had got there, there was a huge noise problem. The structure was such that originally it was going to be the other way round. It was going to be living upstairs like as normal, and everything else downstairs. But because of the structural concerns, that had to be swapped over. So we had the lounge/ bar/ dining room upstairs, bunkrooms underneath. Well as you can imagine, it was just horrendous. The noise was just awful. Eventually we got a floating floor in, the second year, but in that first summer it was very difficult indeed. Not ideal, so there were those type of problems. And problems up at the airstrip. We had to get the ramp; we were concerned about the ramp maybe wearing out, and getting all the depots established properly. And fuel drums, we had to pull the fuel drums up from the Point to the strip and then bring



them back down again if we didn't need them. So there were many logistical considerations as well, which didn't help, but it just took organising.

[Part 2 0:35:27] Lee: Once you had settled in, the problems didn't really go away did they, because you lost two Otters, or not you personally but two Otters were lost at Rothera?

Fletcher: I became highly skilled in boxing Otters up. I boxed three up in four years.

[Part 2 0:35:41] Lee: What was the story there?

Fletcher: Well the first one was in the first summer. Heavy take off. As she was taking off, fully loaded with ferry tanks on, she began to bounce. The front holio [phonetic] went straight up through the nose and twisted the fuselage, which led indirectly to the three lads being left behind in Belgrano, because we only had one aircraft then and we couldn't ... The pilot was unwilling to do a single ... Also it was a difficult one because we tried to get the Russians to pick them up. It didn't all happen. They stayed at Belgrano. But then we boxed that Otter up. It had never been done before. We took it apart, boxed it up, put it on the ship and sent it back. Then about four years later ... The trouble with the airstrip, it was about three miles from the base and the weather up at the airstrip was totally different from the base. So if you got a big wind on the base, it was probably twice as big a wind on the strip. It also used to oscillate, it used to change direction. We had these aircraft up. We had fairly bad weather to start, and then we had this huge blow that developed on the base and we knew it was like that on the strip. Nothing you can do about it. Three miles to travel and 80 knots, 100 knots; it was not even an option. You couldn't see anything and during the blow the wind went round 180 degrees. The aircraft were parked nose to wind. Normally not a problem. They fly in the wind, if you like. Gone round, straight up the tail, phoomp, just ripped them apart. So again, we boxed them up and sent them home. But of course, that is devastating to people who were on the base, who were supposed to be going to Halley, and people who were supposed to go out in the field, and ...

[Part 2 0:37:33] Lee: What was the Cambridge view of all that?

Fletcher: That we should build a hard strip, basically, which had been the talk 5 years earlier. But money, and building the new base, there were obviously huge implications involved. And there still is: the snow strip is fine, but it is a long way from base. You haven't got that sort of control over it. You can't just get to the strip in 5 minutes. It's not that sort of option. As was proved, the hard strip has been absolutely ... If you were going to do essentially 24-hour flying, when you need it you need a hard strip and you need total control over it, which we did not have.

[Part 2 0:38:16] Lee: You had gone to O'Higgins base, hadn't you? Which is ... I can't imagine how you ended up there.

Fletcher: This was the aircraft that was crashed. This was the Buffalo, a Canadian test aircraft. The Buffalo, the de Havilland 5C. Apparently it had flown down to be sold to the Chileans, the background to it. Somehow the pilot had got talked into landing at O'Higgins when he wasn't supposed to. Didn't have skis, didn't even have soft tyres. A wheel had gone through the crust, the prop had hit the crust and basically the

aircraft was abandoned. That was the end of it. So we had heard about the crash, nothing else. Then obviously some accountant sitting in de Havilland's Downsview in Toronto thought 'This is about £25 million worth of aircraft. What is it still doing in the Antarctic?' So someone, presumably de Havilland's and the Canadian government decided they would rescue this thing but wanted somebody to lead the team. So they rang BAS and Dick Laws came in one day: 'Dave, would you go with a bunch of Canadians...?' 'Yes, OK.' Because at that stage it was a highly organised ... There were going to be Chilean input, Argentine input.

[Part 2 0:39:28] Fletcher: We had to take a complete new engine in, all sorts of bits and pieces, to rebuild this aircraft. So 'Yes' I said 'OK'. I led a team of 7 Canadian engineers, and a pilot. We went down to O'Higgins via Chile. A Hercules took us in and then essentially the international backup disappeared. Our only way of getting out of this place was to rebuild this aircraft. There we were in the middle of winter at O'Higgins. The base was superb; they gave us a fantastic support. We put a new engine on this thing. We dug it out at least six times. It got blown apart six times. We had this 'tent' from the Canadian Air Force, worth \$185,000, which was windproof, bombproof. It lasted 5 days. It got blown to bits. So yes we had a challenge. The whole thing we had to do: we ended up by putting it on skis, and a Buffalo had never been on skis. So we had taken down a set of skis for an aircraft called a Caribou, and basically had to bodge this thing to fit. All this had to be done with a couple of tons of fuel out in the wingtips because we could not take that off, because that was the only fuel we had. Trying to jack an aircraft up in snow is not the easiest thing. Trying to get it on skis it has never flown on is not the easiest thing. The epics were unbelievable. Trying to jack it up with a little car jack, and things like this, in the snow, the skis sinking on your wrists. Yes, super! Anyway we did it. We got it ready and of course then we had to think 'What do we do? How do we get this out?' Bill Pulliner [phonetic] who was the pilot, said 'Well, let's fly it out.'

[Part 2 0:41:13] Fletcher: We had no idea how this thing would react on skis. It flew off fine. We got it off and flew it over to Frei, which is the hard strip over on King George Island. There we had to take the skis off and put the wheels back on for the landing back to South America. Doing that we broke two tyres and damaged the axle, so when we eventually landed at Punta Arenas, we only had one tyre on one side and two decent ones on the other side. Big foam carpet. Bill landed it on the two and kept one wheel off and dropped it down. So it took us all winter, basically. I had this wonderful telegram from Paul Whiteman: 'Please come home soonest.' I sent a telegram saying: 'I'm trying!' But it was an incredible effort, it really was. These mechanics were brilliant. Doug Fleming who was the prop ... I have still got a photo of him somewhere. Obviously wires adjust the pitch of the props and it is done with a highly sophisticated machine. Doug did it sitting on a sledge with the wires, doing it by finger and he was so accurate that when it got back to Santiago, they could not improve on the accuracy of the pitch by the machine and Doug had just done it with his fingers. We working in -40, -45 every day. It was an epic but we got it out. Then the Chileans crashed it. [laughs] They sold it to the Chileans and they crashed it. Yes, that was an interesting trip.

[Part 2 0:42:46] Lee: So this was 1980. Were you by now still on the BAS staff?

Fletcher: Yes, I was still base commander at Rothera.

[Part 2 0:42:53] Lee: So when did you finish going to Rothera?

Fletcher: I finished Rothera the year after, in '81. John Hall took over from me and then I had a year back in the Office, as Procurement if you like.

[Part 2 0:43:08] Lee: So you didn't go to Rothera in the summers of '82, '83?

Fletcher: No. John Hall took over.

[Part 2 0:43:13] Lee: I am just correcting my notes here.

Fletcher: Really I had the year here back in the Office and it really wasn't for me. I didn't really want to go back on the stations but I needed something different and I actually then went off with the Indians for a while. I helped build the Indian base, Dakshin Gangotri, then got involved in all sorts of strange projects. Went up to the Arctic quite a lot and then in '93 I started with the cruise ships, and these universities, doing these programmes. I am still very much in the Antarctic even today.

[Part 2 0:43:49] Lee: And that was 20 years ago?

Fletcher: Yes.

[Part 2 0:43:51] Lee: 20 years this year.

Fletcher: I know.

[Part 2 0:43:52] Lee: On the cruise ships, is that a full time occupation?

Fletcher: Not the cruise ships, no. I don't work for one company. I mainly work for Hapag Lloyd. I am the Expedition Leader on a couple of their ships but I am heavily involved in an organisation called Students on Ice, where we take young people between 14 and 17 to the Arctic and the Antarctic. I am involved in those things, I am involved in these programmes in Greenland quite a lot, so still very much polar orientated.

[Part 2 0:44:23] Lee: Do you have a day job?

Fletcher: No, not really. I mean the day job is like next week, if you like. I sit on various committees for IAATO which is the tourist organisation. I am involved in quite a few polar bodies. So the day job is the committee work, the conference work when I am not South or North, which I cannot honestly say I fully enjoy but I do feel that I have something to give but I also feel an obligation to support these places that I love, and the only way I have supported them, that I can see, is to sit on committees, sit on groups, and try and put an input in.

[Part 2 0:45:16] Lee: We will come to the touring in a moment. Let me ask you a bit more about the decision to leave BAS. What made you decide to stop going to Rothera? What was it that prompted you not to go back to Rothera the following year?

Fletcher: Because I had done 11 years on the station and it is a young man's game. I was still young (33 or whatever) but I found myself each year saying more and more 'You shouldn't do it like that.' 'We did it like that last year.' It is a young man's game. They should have their own input, and I felt that I was maybe having a ..., not a bad influence, but it needed a newer influence.

[Part 2 0:46:03] Lee: So effectively you censored yourself.

Fletcher: Yes, because I felt that I was ... It was becoming too much 'in my image'. I had got into a comfort zone. Things ran really well because that was the way we had organised it, but I just felt that wasn't the way a base should go forward. It needed newer blood. It needed a newer input, a different way of doing things. I just felt that needed to change, and the only way I could change it was by leaving. I must admit perhaps it was a wrong decision. I went into BAS Logistics, again because I felt that was a good input. But that really wasn't for me. Actually I wasn't very good at it. It wasn't the way for me to go forward and when the Indians offered me this chance, in fact just here ... We built the base at Hereford with Structaply. Structaply rang me and said would I get involved and I said 'Yes, fine.' So that was another way ahead, if you like. I really saw that as quite an exciting challenge.

[Part 2 0:47:13] Lee: Was BAS a happy place, Cambridge, in the year you were there?

Fletcher: Yes and no.

[Part 2 0:47:21] Lee: Changes were in the air, weren't they?

Fletcher: Yes they were, very much in the air. It was a bit cliquey, which is always something I have always worried about the Office (whenever; not just that year). But big changes were in the air. BAS was expanding rapidly at that stage. Health & Safety, all these things were beginning to become much more important. I don't think it was that happy a place. There were a few mistakes that had been made with Halley V. There were all sorts of things going on like that. When they offered me the thing at Structaply and India, I didn't hesitate.

[Part 2 0:48:03] Lee: So you went from one to the other?

Fletcher: Well 6 months in between. I did not even think about it, which I am surprised. I think maybe if I had still been in the middle of the bases, then I probably wouldn't have changed. But I didn't feel that comfortable in the Office. I sometimes felt that we were there and they had forgotten that we had bases in the Antarctic. That was what we actually existed for. When I go back to BAS these days, that is again the feeling I have: it is 'them' and 'us', which is really sad.

[Part 2 0:48:41] Lee: Did you actually visit the Indian base *in situ*?

Fletcher: I did actually. Yes, I did a half ... Not a winter, I did a sort of half-summer half-winter there. One of their problems, the Indians, is they have got a lot of cold weather experience. They have done a huge amount of stuff in the Himalaya of

course. But they had not actually had a station at that time. They really wanted the routines. We had a few classics. There was one: a chap called Pavan Raina who was their coordinator, rang me. They were putting new orders in. He said 'Could I pass the orders past you, just to double check?' 'No problem at all.' I looked at this and they wanted 110 Elsan buckets. 'Why do you want 110 Elsan buckets?' He didn't answer, then he rang me back. Obviously he was quite embarrassed about this. The reason was because they hadn't got any Untouchables on the base. They were all Brahmins and nobody would empty the buckets. So they just ordered 110 buckets so they could have lots of full buckets with nobody emptying them. It was bizarre. They got over it by employing Tamils, not because Tamils were of a lower caste but because Tamils weren't in the caste system so it wasn't a big problem. Because they were all high Brahmins, they would not empty the buckets. It was little things like this ... Classic! It was good times.

[Part 2 0:50:12] Lee: Was the Herefordshire wooden base successful?

Fletcher: It was, hugely successful. It lasted it about twice the length of what they ... Because then they built a new base, at Maitri, which was on a rock outcrop further in, which they did because there was a bit of conflict (not with us but within the Indian system, because the Indian Army wanted to be involved, and blah, blah, blah). So there was quite a lot of conflict inside and eventually the Indian Army got their way. They would do the ... Obviously it precluded us, which was fine. It was, highly successful and it was good because we got this system running. Then I got involved with the Pakistanis just after that as well, because they went down with Jinnah. There were some classic stories there. The most famous one was: at that time I was living at Moreton-on-Lugg and I got this telex in the morning, saying 'Please order two Pissing Billies' 'What? What the hell is a Pissing Billy?' I sat there all day trying to work it out. Like always, you couldn't get back to them. There was no communication. There was a German tractor called a Kassborer Piston Bully and they had misread it as a Pissing Billy. It was like two incontinent goats or something: 'Could we have two Pissing Billies' 'What?' It was things like that. It was just brilliant.

[Part 2 0:51:44] Lee: Let's talk – we have got about ten minutes or so – let's talk a bit, if we may, about your tourism work. How did that opportunity open up for you?

Fletcher: That was the strangest thing. I did a lot of work for an organisation called Snowsled who make tents and sledges for everybody, based over in Tetbury. Two good friends of mine used to do it and I always used to help them out building the sledges and so on. Anyway at that time there was a German company called Hanseatic who had just bought a new ship and were crewing it and getting organised and going up to the Arctic that summer. It so happened that the person who was their logistics organiser was also the logistics organiser for the German group at the Alfred Wegener Institute. They were obviously talking and we were dealing with Alfred Wegener, making tents and sledges. This chap from Hanseatic had been asked: did he know any English-speaking lecturers. Well of course the combination, that we were dealing with ... 'Yes,' he said, 'we are dealing with a company in Britain now.' And I got this phone call at 11 o'clock one night. It was a classic. 'Will you come on this cruise ship?' [said in a German accent] type of thing. I thought John Hall, a very good friend of mine who had rung about an hour earlier, I thought it was him. I almost said 'John, shut up!' but it wasn't, it was this bloke from the logistics side, saying 'We

have got a requirement for an English-speaking lecturer on a ship in literally two weeks time, called the *Hanseatic*. Would you be interested?’

[Part 2 0:53:17] Lee: Going North or South?

Fletcher: This was North. This was in the Arctic. So I said ‘Yes. That sounds great.’ I had never been on a cruise ship in my life, these adventure cruise ships. So I went, and yes, basically it was a huge success. They said would I go to the Antarctic with them? That was in ’93. I said ‘Yes, OK.’ So that was the start of a long connection, as a lecturer to start with. Then for the last 12 years I have been the Expedition Leader.

[Part 2 0:53:45] Lee: So what were you having to talk about?

Fletcher: Up in the Arctic it was basically the Inuit people. Over the years I had made a lot of connections with the Inuit, because while I was with BAS I often used to go North during the summer, testing equipment, the aircraft over at Toronto, all sorts of connections with the Arctic. And over those years I had many good friends. So I knew quite a lot about the Inuit. So that is what they asked me to talk about, and the Arctic generally. When I went there, they said ‘Great. Do you know anything about the Antarctic?’ I said ‘Well yes. That is where I work.’ So that was the connection on from there. I went South with them then, and that has been the ... I do two or three cruises in the Arctic and three or four cruises in the Antarctic every year with them. These days, as Expedition Leader, I run the show, as it were.

[Part 2 0:54:41] Lee: OK. So talk a bit more about the responsibilities of the Expedition Leader please, because the boat runs itself, I guess.

Fletcher: It does, and we have a highly experienced captain and crew and so on. I am involved in ... We plan cruises and those cruises are put into brochures. Then about two years after the brochure we actually do the cruise. So when I join the ship, normally in the South, in Ushuaia, essentially it is up to me to do the day-to-day planning. Obviously weather, ice, logistics change the planning round. I know all the landings, so I am able each day: ‘Let’s go here. Let’s do this. Let’s do that.’ I am able to do the day-to-day planning, coordinate the crew. I run the shore side, if you like. The captain obviously runs the ship. The chief officer runs the Zodiacs, the boats, and the three of us work together to make sure a safe landing, safe for the passengers, get everybody off. I coordinate the whole activity really. How long we are going to stay there. What we are going to do there. Do we walk, do we stay? Obviously I have to fit in with the current legislation which is fairly colossal, make sure we do the right thing, and also make sure the passengers are well aware of Health & Safety, but also well aware of the ecological responsibilities of where they can’t go, what they can’t do, what they can’t touch and so on.

[Part 2 0:56:17] Lee: Is there ever any tension between the expedition leader, who wants to give his clients the best possible experience, and the captain of the ship who has a different set of priorities?

Fletcher: In the situation the ships I am on, no, because we have worked together for so long. It is really nice. It is one of the reasons I stay with Hapag Lloyd. It is a German company but the captains I have known. I have both known for twenty odd

years now. It is excellent because they will support me and I will support them. So if the captain is having a struggle with the anchor, he will get on the radio and say 'Dave, I think we are going to have to cut this one short.' Fine, there is no argument, but equally if I am on the shore and there is a monster swell running: 'Tilo [phonetic], we need to ... we are going to have to shut this one down.' Fine. There is never a problem. So yes, we have got a great working relationship, basically.

[Part 2 0:57:10] Lee: How have the clients changed over 20 years?

Fletcher: Actually a lot. You get legions of stories about silly tourists. Well you do get a few but the majority are excellent. They want to go to the Antarctic or the Arctic so there is this drive that they want to be there. They pay a colossal amount of money, so I feel an obligation that you have to give them a good deal as possible. The only thing I would say that has changed is in their attitude and that has changed quite recently. Up until about 5 or 6 years ago, people were so excited to go to the Antarctic. Now there is more of an attitude of 'It is my right.' 'I paid my money. It is my right. We missed a day because of bad weather. We shouldn't have done.' This sort of thing. There is that subtle change. Whereas in days gone by, people were just honoured to be there. People are still excited to be there, don't get me wrong, but there is a feeling that 'It is my right, I have paid my money.' From what I hear, that is pretty much similar right throughout all aspects of cruising.

[Part 2 0:58:24] Lee: Including the Med, so you mean?

Fletcher: Yes. It seems to be a sort of modern thing. But you still get people who are genuinely excited and I still think tourism is a bonus for the Antarctic, because they do act as voicepieces for the place. People go the Arctic; people come to the Antarctic; they come back and they talk to other people. At the moment it is a positive reaction.

[Part 2 0:58:50] Lee: Are they better informed than they used to be because of Attenborough and Palin?

Fletcher: Oh yes. Right the way through; much better. We have a really high-powered lecture team on board, really high quality lectures, so they are fully informed of what goes on.

[Part 2 0:59:04] Lee: Have those television series rather stolen some of your thunder?

Fletcher: Not really. It is amazing how many people haven't seen them, to be honest. I haven't. I don't have the television on, not because I don't like Attenborough. I have huge respect for him. It is just not my scene really, and I prefer to see things with my own eyes and be there. A lot of people are the same actually. Many people say 'Ah, it is different from the impression I got.' When you are there, it is the feeling, I often tell people, I say 'Just put your camera down for about 10 minutes. Forget your camera. Use the best camera you have got which is in your face and the best computer you have got which is your brain, and sit and listen to the Antarctic and feel it.' That is the only way and that of course you don't get with the television. There is the feeling with these places. It is like up in the North, in an Inuit village. 'Forget all you have heard, of the drunkenness, ... Just go and sit with these people. Don't try and tell them. They

have lived there for 8000 years. Just sit there and try and feel.' I find that quite successful.

[Part 2 1:00:14] Lee: Where do people like to go most?

Fletcher: That is an interesting one. Mainly the Antarctic because of the proximity of the animals. The Antarctic Peninsula: you have got animals 'coming out of your ears'.

[Part 2 1:00:27] Lee: So within that Antarctic Peninsula, what are the favourite tourist spots?

Fletcher: There is a variety. Port Lockroy is probably the most visited because of the base and the shop.

[Part 2 1:00:39] Lee: The Post Office?

Fletcher: Yes. But I suppose South Georgia is probably the most popular, and people will pay extra to go to South Georgia. We often do Falklands, South Georgia and Antarctica. People never get over standing on Salisbury Plain and places like this, millions of king penguins. And in the Antarctic, places like Paulet Island are hugely popular, where there is the quantity of animals. But what is interesting is: after people have been, the next time they want to see more ice. Our most popular parts of our Antarctic Peninsula cruises are the east coast, when we go through the Antarctic Sound, down the other side of the Peninsula, where you haven't got many animals but you have got ice, lots of.

[Part 2 1:01:23] Lee: Are you getting as far south as you used to? Or are you going further south?

Fletcher: We are going further south than we used to. I spend a lot of time down in Marguerite Bay, because I know it so well, but also there are not that many ships down there. Again there are not that many animals but the scenery is just awesome. You can get down there more regularly than you used to be able to. Despite climate change, Antarctic ice in the last few years has been really heavy. This last year we could not get through the Lemaire until late February. So it is not always the changes ... The Arctic of course has changed massively. That is a different kettle of fish entirely.

[Part 2 1:02:02] Lee: What is your view on the rather larger ships? There is some concern about the big ships, which I guess are mainly Japanese.

Fletcher: I personally would not work on a ship with more than 200 passengers.

[Part 2 1:02:13] Lee: Because ... ?

Fletcher: (a) I don't think you give them an experience, and (b) I don't think those size ships should be down there.

[Part 2 1:02:19] Lee: Because ...?



Fletcher: Safety concerns, basically. Small ships have accidents, of course they do, but if you have an accident with 200 passengers, you can do something about it. You can get them safe ashore or whatever. You have an accident with a big ship that has got 2000 passengers on. That is a totally different kettle of fish. It has got nothing to do with pollution because the bigger ships are probably actually safer than the small ships because they have got double hulls, they have got all sorts of other ... Also there is the aesthetic side of it as well. A small ship can tend to disappear behind an iceberg. An 85000-ton ship can't just disappear. They are there sometimes for the wrong reasons because they are coming down as part of another part of a cruise, because of their speed. Whereas they used to go round Buenos Aires and Valparaiso, now they drop down from Ushuaia. Because they can do 25 knots, they are down and back in two days, whereas it takes us two days to get down there. There are so many different reasons I feel, could be a problem.

[Part 2 1:03:08] Lee: So would people on a big ship perhaps not have the same kind of sense of values about their ?? [inaudible].

Fletcher: No, because most of them would not land. Most of the ships are not allowed to land at that size. IAATO regulations don't allow them to land. So they don't have that connection. They will see the Antarctic, and that is their argument of course, that they are putting less impact because they are not actually landing. But it is just a transient view of the place, really. They are not feeling Antarctica. On the small ships to get ashore, to land on the continent, these are really important aspects. That is why people come with us. OK, we are more expensive, but that is why they pay that extra money, because they want to be there. The same things happen in the Arctic. Ships that go round Greenland, the biggest complain 'Oh, we didn't land.' Unfortunately brochures tend to be a bit like a novel really. [laughs]

[Part 2 1:04:39] Lee: Do you ever find yourself on a tourist ship having to do other things? I am thinking of an incident when you had to bring mail to Signy.

Fletcher: Ha! You have been talking to Wearden. Yes we do. We support science programmes as much as we can. As a German ship we take down lots of German scientists for example.

[Part 2 1:04:59] Lee: To ...?

Fletcher: To the Antarctic. To work.

[Part 2 1:05:01] Lee: To O'Higgins?

Fletcher: Well O'Higgins, yes. There is a telescope centre there for the European Space Centre, but we also take them to Bellingshausen and other places where there are German installations. And Britain as well: we help quite a lot with BAS sometimes, taking things to South Georgia, whatever. Whenever I am in Stanley I will always check with the Post Office on what bases have or haven't got mail. Has it gone or is it coming soon? If it turns out that they hadn't had mail, they have got mail, and we are going to that base, then we will take the mail. We bring a lot of mail out for bases: Lockroy, other places as well. But this one at Signy, we always ... because obviously, connections with me, if they want mail (because they are very rarely

visited) I always take the opportunity. This time I picked up a mail bag and we got to Signy and it was quite late in the afternoon/ early evening. It was blowing a hooley. It was 75 – 80 knots. It was just hammering. But we thought ‘We’ll do it!’ So we went in very close and they didn’t know we were there. They had no idea.

[Part 2 1:06:09] Lee: With the big ship?

Fletcher: Yes with the *Hanseatic*. She is 8000 tons. We tucked in just round the corner. We had to get in close because of this wind. I went ashore with my assistant expedition leader, who is a gorgeous blonde: Christina (Christina Lambert). We got immersion suits on, went down in the Zodiac and it was a fairly nightmarish trip through the wind and spray. We landed on the slipway at Signy. They had no idea we were there and there was Allan Wearden and a few faces at the window. These two strange people from the Moon (as it were) landing on their slipway. We got out. Christina took a header, so this great flop of blonde hair. They couldn’t believe their eyes. I picked the mailbag up and we walked in and presented them with their mail. They really were lost for words because we just appeared from nowhere.

[Part 2 1:06:59] Lee: What were they more interested in – the blonde or the mailbag?

Fletcher: It was a split decision but it was a wild night, it really was. But no, I like to do it to support the stations. I have happily taken logistics sometimes, boxes, particularly to South Georgia and, as I say, we do a lot with the Germans.

[Part 2 1:07:18] Lee: You are a big lad, Dave. You play rugby. Al Smith is an even bigger lad.

Fletcher: Yes he is!

[Part 2 1:07:24] Lee: There was a legendary tug-of-war game at Stanley in which I gather you both took part.

Fletcher: [laughs] We did.

[Part 2 1:07:30] Lee: Tell me about that, as a finale.

Fletcher: It is something that BAS is missing out with these years. They tend to bypass Stanley and there is not really the BAS connection any more. But in those days there was a huge BAS connection. There was the main logistics store and we were always there for a week or whatever. So we played football, whatever was going, rugby and tog-of-war. The Marines were often the ‘enemy’. Of course they always thought that they were Jack-the-Lads. But we had some big ... Because there was Al Smith, there was me, there was the electrician. We were big lads and we just pulled then straight off the deck. The Marines, they were always upset about it because they always thought they were the ‘Kings’.

[Part 2 1:08:22] Lee: You were the Chelsea to their Barcelona.

Fletcher: Absolutely. That was the thing last night. But they were good times and it is one of the sad things, that that aspect had been lost. Because BAS has lost their

connection with Stanley in a big way and I felt it was a lot of the Fids' education on their way south, was to go through Stanley. A bit sad, that.

[Part 2 1:08:50] Lee: You say in the base report that you wrote for Signy in 1973 (final sentence). 'My best wishes to everyone staying. Potentially these are the two best years of your life. Make the most of it.' Still feel that way?

Fletcher: I do. I still get a tingle when I go South now. When I see my first icebergs. All these years – this will be 41 years (34 summers and 3 winters) but I still get as excited now as I did then. It is still amazing. I still remember that time I went down in October, that somebody was paying me to go to the Antarctic. I couldn't believe it. I did not even consider that side. Somebody actually paid me to go to the Antarctic, and still today I go to the Arctic, I go to the Antarctic, and people pay me to do what I want. It is amazing. I am very lucky.

[Part 2 1:09:46] Lee: It has been a real pleasure Dave. Thank you very much indeed.

Fletcher: Thank you Chris. Thank you very much indeed.

[Part 2 1:09:50] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- Three ex-Fids spark an interest in Antarctica. [Part 1 0:05:49]
- Advice for young scientists at Signy. [Part 1 0:12:19]
- Supporting scientists at Signy. [Part 1 0:16:06]
- Teaching sport and dance at a rough school in Gloucester. [Part 1 0:26:37]
- The interview at BAS. [Part 1 0:30:20]
- Meeting Sir Raymond Priestley. [Part 1 0:31:53]
- First impressions of Halley. [Part 1 0:35:28]
- Loss of the Hobbits dog team. [Part 1 0:45:11]
- On a winch down into the crevasse. [Part 1 0:49:21]
- Jack Donaldson not to blame. [Part 1 0:52:42]
- Planning the tractor rescue. [Part 1 0:58:00]
- Tractor recovery operation. [Part 1 0:59:48]
- Caught by a storm on Coronation Island. [Part 2 0:11:30]
- Winter diving at Signy. [Part 2 0:13:37]
- Swimming with leopard seals and thoughts on Kirsty Brown. [Part 2 0:16:43]
- No doctor and amateur dentistry at Signy. [Part 2 0:21:25]
- A difficult first season at Rothera. [Part 2 0:30:00]
- Three Twin Otters damaged. [Part 2 0:35:27]
- Recovery of a de Havilland Buffalo at O-Higgins. [Part 2 0:38:16]
- 110 Elsan buckets. [Part 2 0:48:41]
- A surprise mail delivery in an 80-knot blow. [Part 2 1:05:01]
- BAS beat the Marines in a Tug-of-War. [Part 2 1:07:30]