

STEVE NORRIS

Edited transcript of a video recording of Steve Norris interviewed by Jack Tolson at Steve's home on 2nd September 2011. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/133. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 27 June 2015.

[Part 1 0:00:19] Tolson: Could you just first of all tell me your name, date of birth and where you were born?

Norris: Right. My name's Steven Norris. I was born on the 12th of March 1949 in the Portsmouth area. I came from a council estate environment in Portsmouth and had a secondary education and then did an electrical apprenticeship in Portsmouth dockyard.

[Part 1 0:00:52] Tolson: Just tell me a little bit about your parents.

Norris: My father met my mother up in Scotland, up in Scapa Flow during the war and he brought her back to the Portsmouth area. And throughout the Second World War he worked in Portsmouth Dockyard as what they called a Foreman's Writer at the time, and he did that until he retired. Sadly I lost my mother in I think it was about 1972 when I was just in my early twenties and I was actually living in the United States at the time. [Sound of phone ringing] Oops. Cut! Sorry about that.

[Part 1 0:01:43] Tolson: OK, we are running again Steve. So your dad brought your mum down from Scotland, so you are half Scottish?

Norris: Well that's right, and I still have Scottish family up in the east of Scotland, around Peterhead, Fraserburgh when, before the oil boom, when they were still fishing towns. And even as a young boy I remember going up there and my grandmother, up in Scotland, taking me around and showing me around the herring gutting yards and seeing people barrel walking on these barrels of kippers.

[Part 1 0:02:26] Tolson: So getting back to childhood in Portsmouth, I think you are about ten or eleven, you go to see something at the cinema that rather perhaps influences you in your future?

Norris: Well very much so. I don't think I was 11; I think I was about 9 or 10. We used to go to this Saturday morning picture club in Cosham, which is the area where I used to live and I remember seeing it was like a Pathé News or Gaumont News programme, and it showed one of the ships that was on Sir Vivian Fuchs's Trans Antarctic Expedition offloading these strange looking vehicles. I think it was offloading them in Southampton. And these strange looking vehicles, vehicles I had never seen before, which I later found out were Sno-cats. That struck me straight away and some years later I was Head Boy of my secondary modern school, called Portsdown Secondary Modern, and I was also the chief librarian, and I had the job of sorting through books and discarding books that were old and tatty and then replacing them with newer books. One of the books that I removed, as being old and tatty – it even had a Portsdown Secondary Modern School stamp in it – was *Scott of the Antarctic*, which I brought home and I have still got it in my library now, which I kept

and read. So even back in those early days, I had a bit of interest, not realising that years later I would get the opportunity visit and work in Antarctica.

[Part 1 0:04:31] Tolson: So it was a childhood, momentary, sort of memory glimpse of Antarctica?

Norris: Oh very much so, yes.

[Part 1 0:04:39] Tolson: And put away for later years. So when you left school, you went to work in the Royal Naval Dockyards?

Norris: As an electrical apprentice in the Dockyard, and of course that also afforded me the time to also get educated in what was then the Portsmouth Dockyard Technical College, which it was further education that, as a boy from a secondary modern school from a council estate, I never knew existed. I came from a working class background. We would never ever go to places like university. We never even had the opportunity but this Dockyard Technical College gave me the opportunity to get further education and get qualified quite highly in electrical engineering. So that was a big boon for me. It's not mine.

[Part 1 0:05:43] Tolson: It's all right is it? You presumably ... Was there ever any possibility that you would have been going to sea, or were you purely a dockyard electrician, to be land-based?

Norris: I did all my apprenticeship in Portsmouth Dockyard and I think was at the time – because in the Dockyard's own paper, it said I was the youngest person ever to be promoted to this Technical Grade 3. They made a big publicity of it, the way I was promoted. My future seemed to be in Portsmouth Dockyard. But I thought that I didn't want to spend the next 40 years of my life in Portsmouth Dockyard so I joined P & O, Passenger Division, and worked on passenger ships for two years. But I can't say that I really enjoyed that kind of ... I thought it was an opportunity to see the world but I was really wrong because when you are an engineer on these passenger ships, obviously the only time that you can work and maintain equipment is when the ship is stopped, usually in a port. [Laughs]

[Part 1 0:07:10] Norris: So that wasn't really for me. So that's when I decided to leave P & O and I took a year off just to hitchhike around the United States and Canada and also parts of Alaska. And it was when I arrived home after that trip, in the early part of 1973, that I saw an advertisement in I think it was the *Daily Express* or something like that. I didn't realise at the time how little in those days that the British Antarctic Survey actually advertised for people. I soon cottoned on to the fact that normally it was word of mouth by people who had already been down telling their friends and then their friends would then apply.

[Part 1 0:07:59] Tolson: So you saw this advertisement in the *Express*. Your memories probably flash back to when you were a young lad. You put two and two together and contacted British Antarctic Survey there and then?

Norris: And of course in those days they were based at the back of Victoria Station in Gillingham Street and that's where I had to go for my first interview. Again it very

quickly struck home with me the way that in those days BAS did things because it was an old Victorian building in Gillingham Street and I remember this old lift with the ornate metal doors that you had to close and then go up to a particular floor. And then coming out on the floor where the British Antarctic Survey offices were, and it was totally cluttered with boxes and stuff.

[Part 1 0:09:02] Norris: And there was this lovely lady that I eventually found out was Eleanor Honeywill who was busy banging away on an old fashioned typewriter and she was very pleasant, very nice. But also in that corridor was a man who was trying to put up a tent in the corridor, and I have heard similar things from other ex-Fids that were employed at Gillingham Street. They would meet this character in the alleyway and they were asked to pack boxes or unpack boxes and things. Anyway this chap asked me could I hold this rope, coming from this tent, and did I think it would stand up to 100 mph winds in -40, and of course I didn't have a clue and I later found out this was Sir Vivian Fuchs in the corridor. But the amount of stuff that was piled up: there were boxes and boxes and boxes of equipment. There was photographs of planes and ships and husky dogs around the walls. Then I got asked to sit in this waiting room before I went and had my interview.

[Part 1 0:10:28] Tolson: Tell me who was at your interview. Who was the panel?

Norris: The three people that were at my interview ... I walked in. It was the first time I had ever met Alan ('Dad') Etchells, and Bill Sloman and Sir Vivian Fuchs. They were the people that interviewed me.

[Part 1 0:10:53] Tolson: Do you think now, in hindsight, that perhaps Sir Vivian Fuchs was giving you a pre-interview in the passageway with the tent?

Norris: I think so because I have heard not exactly the same story but other Fids at the time that went into Gillingham Street and met him on the way and he briefly had a chat with them. As I said, he was either unpacking boxes or doing something. I think very much it was like a pre-interview.

[Part 1 0:11:25] Tolson: It's extraordinary that we are talking 40 years ago roughly now but the style of interviewing then and selection, as against BAS now, in the 2000's ... How did it compare? Did it seem archaic to you even in those days or was it a clever, good, way of selecting?

Norris: I think it was a very clever good way because they were looking for people that could be independent and I gave them my experiences of hitch-hiking around America and Alaska and Canada. And also being a team member when I was working on board ship with the P & O, and that kind of life. So I think with that past experience, they took that on board as well. They didn't seem to go through the psycho-analyst kind of interview that some other countries did at the time, like the Americans. I did hear from people down at Palmer Station say that their interview was 'Why the hell do you want to go there?' But that was all different at this particular interview at Gillingham Street.

[Part 1 0:12:55] Tolson: So do you recall now, all these years later, when you heard, got the answer back, or was it there and then?

Norris: It was virtually there and then. I had to go back into the waiting room and was told, literally before I left, that I had got the job.

[Part 1 0:13:14] Tolson: What was this job?

Norris: It was to work as an electrical engineer but they wouldn't tell me where it would be. Not at that time. They said that I had got the job and I had to go on a training trip to Cambridge, where we would spend a week together, have lectures, films, and also meet other people that we were going South with. And also I had to go and do another week's training up in Scarborough, at the place where they made the generators at ... I can't remember the name: Scania or something. We had to do the training up in Scarborough with two or three people as well.

[Part 1 0:14:06] Tolson: So the week you did in Cambridge was a getting to know your peers and people that you would be sailing down South with?

Norris: Sailing down South with, which was a great way to meet people, and we also had film shows and lectures of all the different sciences that were connected with BAS at the time. So that was a great education.

[Part 1 0:15:29] Tolson: Were you somewhat gobsmacked at the fact that BAS was such an organisation, had so much scientific work under its belt?

Norris: After Gillingham ... Yes I was. It seemed a lot smaller when they were in Gillingham Street and to me it was all about exploration with doggy teams and things like this. It wasn't until I got to Cambridge that I realised the extent of the science and of course, at that time, they were closing the offices in Gillingham Street and moving the whole operation to purpose-built buildings in Cambridge, which were opened by the Duke of Edinburgh. And of course every extension that was ever built in Cambridge, the Duke of Edinburgh was always invited to open the extensions, and he did make some comment about 'Please, no more extensions!' [Laughs]

[Part 1 0:15:35] Tolson: So now you have done your familiarisation at Cambridge. You have done your Scania training for the generators, and you are about to embark on board ship. You arrive in Southampton I think.

Norris: In Southampton yes, which was not far for me to travel and even though I was travelling South on board the *Bransfield* and the *Bransfield* was virtually a new ship at that time It had only done I think one trip before¹. It felt really good to be back on board a ship again even though I wasn't a working officer as I was with P & O.

[Part 1 0:16:24] Tolson: What was (at that time, the day of arrival) your expectation? You came on board I think probably in the morning of the day we were going to sail. Is that right?

Norris: That's right, yes, and it was just finding a cabin to be in and being told ... They were quite nice cabins at the time: four-berth cabins but quite comfortable. And

¹ *Bransfield*'s maiden voyage was in the 1970-71 season, so this would be her fourth voyage South.

then just meeting everybody and then ... It was interesting; I must have been one of the few people that didn't have anybody to say goodbye to. Everybody else had their friends and families. I was very much on my own there at the time.

[Part 1 0:17:13] Tolson: You were still pretty young. You were about 23 or 24.

Norris: 23 or 24, yes.

[Part 1 0:17:18] Tolson: And you were surrounded by technicians, scientists (many of whom were about the same age as yourself). Did you feel in any way that because you had a trade background and you were on a ship which was a part of your trade, that you felt different from them? Or did you immediately feel that 'I am one of the Fids'?

Norris: I think I had this self-confidence that I was one of the Fids, although you used to get these young graduates from their different sciences, this was their first ever job that they were coming down to. And as always, they tended to look down on the technical people. It was always interesting: even when you were working on base, you had these new graduates – as I said it was their first job – and they did tend to look down on some of the technical staff – until they wanted something. Then they became your best buddy. [Laughs]

[Part 1 0:18:30] Tolson: Travelling down on the *Bransfield*, it wasn't exactly a holiday cruise: you were set to work. What sort of things did you (in particular) get up to?

Norris: Well it was good. Otherwise you would really get bored. A lot of what we did was deckside maintenance: chipping and painting for so many hours every day. So that was a good way to keep occupied. And even in later years, when I finished in late '76/ early '77 with the Antarctic, you would still volunteer your services to do things around the ship. I remember even changing one-way valves in toilets that had become defective, just to make a contribution and keep yourself occupied.

[Part 1 0:19:40] Tolson: This was a trip when there were a few characters on board. Tom Woodfield was on his final voyage?

Norris: Tom Woodfield.

[Part 1 0:19:48] Tolson: And Stewart Lawrence was Chief Officer.

Norris: And there was a man that, especially Stewart Lawrence, who was nothing like any Chief Officer I had ever met before. You very rarely saw him in uniform. He was always in his overalls, wandering around doing things. And even when we were down in the Beagle Channel, and obviously Tom Woodfield was giving his wife a holiday of a lifetime, ... So we went along the Beagle Channel which was great for us also. And I remember Stuart Lawrence lowering the rope ladder over the side, as Chief Officer to welcome on board the Argentine and Chileno pilots that we had. They came up the rope ladder, completely ignored Stuart Lawrence in his overalls and shook the hand of one of the other officers in uniform. But the interesting story there was the pilots we that had, one Argentinian and one Chileno, who both thought that they had sovereignty over the Beagle Channel and we had the Argentine pilot on one

bridge wing and the Chileno pilot on the other bridge wing, and never the two should speak to each other.

[Part 1 0:21:26] Tolson: So we finally reach Port Stanley, the gateway to Antarctica. As a Fid now, is there anything left for you to do. Do you have to go up to the BAS Office and get clothing or had that all been sorted?

Norris: No. In those days, all the clothing and everything, you got all your Fid clothing, your Fid equipment including your Fid knife, from the Stores Section of the British Antarctic Survey which was based in Port Stanley. Of course this has all closed now, shut down years ago, and has since moved to Cambridge, but at the time it was quite evident that most of the Falkland Islanders were walking round in Fid clothing.

[Part 1 0:22:24] Tolson: I seem to remember they also had their houses painted with ...

Norris: Yes, with paint from the FIDS Store.

[Part 1 0:22:41] Tolson: What was your recollection, your feeling about the life on board? You had the officers upstairs, the Fids in the middle, the crew at the bottom. Did you feel that there was something not right about that or did it work for you?

Norris: I think because of my past P & O experience, it worked quite well for me because I got on quite well with the crew and got to know them very well, and of course that stayed with me over many years later. As a Fid on the middle deck at the time, Ella Woodfield used to come down and join us. And I guess at the time I was one of the older, more experienced persons on board, so we used to chat away with Ella and she used to join our table with myself and Jamie Boyle. It so ended eventually when I got off at South Georgia, that both Jamie Boyle and myself were invited up to Tom Woodfield's cabin, just to say goodbye to Ella. Unfortunately I couldn't make it because I was busy at Grytviken, at KEP². So Jamie Boyle went up and basically said goodbye to Ella at that time.

[Part 1 0:24:26] Tolson: We have left Stanley now and you are still not really fully aware of where you are heading for?

Norris: No, we left Stanley and then we went down the Peninsula for the first time, and going across the Antarctic Convergence and the Drake Passage. I think that was probably the biggest eye opener. Then seeing the massive big icebergs and the much colder climate as you went across the Convergence and then down the Peninsula, and seeing the different bases that the British Antarctic Survey ran at the time. Going to Lockroy, going to Stonington, going down to Adelaide which was the base before Rothera, when they still had the dog teams. Doing all the reliefs down there using the scow, which was an adventure in itself. Using just one of the power boats, one of the boats off the *Bransfield* and of course doing things like re-stocking a base like Stonington, with a year's worth of coal bags, dragging them one by one. Loading

² King Edward Point.

them onto the scow and then offloading them onto the shore, and then chaining them up to the dump by the side of the base and getting absolutely filthy with coal dust.

[Part 1 0:26:09] Norris: I remember it quite vividly that towards the end of the working day we were supposed to go back on board and then get something to eat and then come back the following day and do the whole thing again. I remember talking with the bosun and everybody else and we all decided 'Sod this!' Rather than do another day's work of chaining coal bags and getting filthy again, we might as well just carry on and we worked till, I think it was about 9 or 10 o'clock at night, but it was still daylight around. The sun was still shining and so we carried on until we got all the coal off and did it on that long one shift, and I am glad we did. It was well worth it. Then we got back on board the *Bransfield* to find out that the galley hadn't left us any food and we had cold showers. Alan Allison was Chief Engineer at the time, in the wardroom, and we all stood outside the wardroom with our black faces, and Alan Allison had to go and fire up the boilers so we could have hot water.

[Part 1 0:27:30] Tolson: You were a Fid who was, to a great extent, worldly wise. You had travelled around and you'd had a proper job beforehand. What was your recollection of the 'green' Fids, the scientists and those who had never worked before, being hit by this environment and its hard work? Did it faze people at these early stages of their time?

Norris: Some did and others didn't. I must admit there were some scientists who thought that all they wanted to do was just do their scientific work, and there were others that didn't have what I would call a work ethic in getting things done. And one of the things you find out I think about Fids is this wonderful word at the time called 'Fid power', where you used to get some of these new scientists who would stand around talking about the best way to do a job instead of getting on and just doing it.

[Part 1 0:28:40] Tolson: Yes, absolutely right. So you were down in the Peninsula, chit-chatting with guys who were on the bases and you were starting to hear some tittle-tattle about you were going to South Georgia, and you were learning something new about your new job?

Norris: Yes.

[Part 1 0:29:01] Tolson: And you had to go and confront somebody?

Norris: It was interesting that when we left Stanley, in fact I think it was Montevideo, the chap that came in and shared the cabin with me was the person who offered me the job in the first place, which was Alan 'Dad' Etchells. So that was good. It was really good to see him, and one of the things I didn't realise was that when I shared a cabin with him, how often I would be kept awake at night by his snoring. But yes, we went to Stanley and then down the Peninsula and it was down the Peninsula, going to these bases and teaming up and meeting electricians and diesel mechanics down there, that I found out that I was the guy that was going to sort out the problems with the generators at South Georgia, and this was the first time that I had heard about it.

[Part 1 0:30:09] Norris: So I immediately went back to my cabin and said to Dad Etchells at the time 'I understand there are problems with the generators at South

Georgia.’ And that’s when he came out and said ‘I meant to tell you about that.’ And that’s when I found out that these brand new Dale generators with Scania engines had been hunting. There were two generator sets and they had been really dependent on the old Blackstone generator that had been there since the old Government days of KEP. So it was urgent that we sort out these problems at South Georgia eventually. Even though the electrician at South Georgia and the diesel mechanic that were already there, that we were going to replace, they couldn’t figure out what was the problem either. So that was going to be an interesting thing, but this was the first time that I had found out about it.

[Part 1 0:31:28] Tolson: Tell me, when you actually arrived at South Georgia, and you go into Cumberland Bay and then you go into the cove, it’s a very very striking impressive sight. What were your immediate feelings about this place?

Norris: Well you know it’s one of these things that does ... As you quite rightly say, it strikes you as being quite a place: beautiful surroundings, beautiful mountains, some of them snow-capped even in summer, glaciers and things like this. A naturally stunning location. When the weather is good, there is no place quite like it. When the weather is bad, it’s hell on earth with the winds and things like this, but it is an absolutely striking place to go and of course it’s the burial place of Shackleton. And of course anyone who, over a period of time, learns the history of Antarctica, learns the story of Shackleton and the *Endurance*, and obviously one of the things you do when you first get there is to visit the great man’s grave as well.

[Part 1 0:32:43] Tolson: We will come back to your fuller stay in South Georgia, but you spent a brief time there and then we went down on the ship, the *Bransfield*, down to Halley where you spent some weeks.

Norris: That’s right. After the Peninsula, we did a trip back to Stanley where (again I will touch on it a bit later) we picked up these chickens. But then we got to South Georgia and ‘Abdul’ Smith, who was the electrician there at the time, and John Carter who was the diesel mechanic, they were quite happy to spend the rest of the summer there. And so Jamie Boyle got off which gave me the opportunity of going down to Halley and help out with the summer build of Halley III which was being constructed, which was the real first of the Armco bases at Halley³, so that was a great opportunity, and also to visit Shackleton base with Tom Woodfield and Ella as well.

[Part 1 0:33:52] Tolson: So, in a very short time, you saw a lot of firsts; I mean to see the ice and the ice edge and the arrival at Halley station on this floating ice, it must have been another massive eye-opener for you.

Norris: It was, and one that you ... that I never grew tired of. I think that every time that you went on deck and you saw things like that and you took it in, you could never become blasé about it. To me, no matter what year I went down, if I knew that we were approaching the Filchner Ice Shelf⁴, no matter what time of day or night, I was up on deck to see it, and to get the reaction of first year Fids to see it for the first time.

³ In fact Halley III was the only Armco base at Halley.

⁴ Halley is on the Brunt Ice Shelf, not the Filchner.

[Part 1 0:34:45] Tolson: What was that? What were those typical reactions?

Norris: I think one of awe really, and the camera shutters never stopped. What's his name⁵ (I can't remember his name; it will come to me later), he was base commander at Signy for many years and is now on these tourist ships. He always tells the passengers to put down their cameras and just to take it in with their eyes, and he says their heart as well. He says that stays with you a lot longer than taking photographs of it.

[Part 1 0:35:30] Tolson: So you arrived in Halley, were tied up alongside the ice edge and you are thrust into immediate work on Halley III. Tell me a little bit about this Armco thing.

Norris: Well first of all: the Armco was going up and obviously Big Al Smith was there; Dad Etchells was there; I was there, But my main job at the time was to go into Halley II with Dad Etchells and dismantle and disconnect the old generators that were there and then use the big bulldozers to tow these old generators out of the base, out of Halley II, so then they could be taken down to the *Bransfield* and then loaded on board. Because these generators, these two generators from Halley II were then going back to UK for refurbishment and then they were going down as bigger and better generators into Signy base. So the following season they were refurbished and went into Signy base. At the time Dad Etchells said to me, did I know of anybody that would go down to Signy base and install these generators, and I said I had got just the guy. I said 'I used to work with him at P & O.'

[Part 1 0:37:04] Norris: I said 'He's a great guy and at the moment he's working in a factory near Shrewsbury that doesn't have any windows and he was complaining about it and I told him I was coming down to the Antarctic,' So he said 'Well get him to apply.' So my great friend Colin Maiden applied to BAS and got the job of installing these generators at Signy Island. So the year after I joined, he came down and he told his mother that he had this six-month job with the British Antarctic Survey, so he just carried one little holdall. He left his job in this factory, came down to Signy Island to install these generators and then Dad Etchells asked him if he wanted to winter. So he said 'Yes, certainly.' So he stayed for over a year and in his second year he was made base commander. So he came down for a six-month trip and he ended up staying over two years.

[Part 1 0:38:24] Tolson: Don't worry, you're BAS. Steve, take me back to your time at Halley, Halley II you were closing down. Was this a case that they were actually transferring personnel from Halley II to Halley III all in the same season?

Norris: It seemed that way. Obviously the construction of Halley III was this Armco. The time I was there it was the last section that we were doing. The generation shed had already been built. It was the connecting tunnels between the generation shed and the main occupation building which tended to be the workshops that we were building. That's when I got my insight of how these Armco sections were put together, with Big Al Smith and the other guys that were working. The circular sections of the Armco all bolted together and inside that we would build the small

⁵ Dave Fletcher.

buildings that would become the accommodation of the workshops inside. The idea was that in between the buildings and the Armco, we would blow cold air through fans and out the shelves to take any heat that was generated from the buildings, which would stop the melting around the Armco tanks.

[Part 1 0:39:54] Tolson: Right, we are Tape 2 with Steve Norris. Steve, picking up on Halley then, Halley II was a slightly different design and construction. Just tell me briefly how II differed from III.

Norris: Well II was a massive buildings that were wooden construction but with massive beams to take the pressure of the ice, but even that after 10 years⁶ was starting to be crushed and even on the floor level there were massive big ice holes underneath the floor from the melt of the heat of the building. But it had all the attributes that people wanted to live on the base but it didn't last as long as they wanted. Halley III was regarded as quite a success for the Survey and of course Big Al Smith was involved in the building of all these buildings and he has done an incredible piece of research work into the building of all these Antarctic bases which I have luckily got a copy on CD and in hard copy as well, of all the bases that Big Al was involved in. Now Halley III, I was there for the final construction of the Armco but it did give me a taste for wanting to come back and winter at Halley at some stage as well.

[Part 1 0:41:43] Tolson: Which we will come onto of course. Now you leave Halley and then you find yourself finally installed in South Georgia?

Norris: Yes.

[Part 1 0:41:51] Tolson: Slightly towards the end of the season of '73/'74?

Norris: That's right, yes.

[Part 1 0:41:58] Tolson: What are you now feeling? You've met your challenges. The other guys are starting to go home. You've had quite a bit of experience already: Peninsula and Halley. Settling in well or is there any sort of tensions within the base?

Norris: No not really. I mean Mick Pawley was the base commander at South Georgia at the time and it was a case of settling in and getting down to work. I can't think of any tensions, as such, that was there. It was a case of meeting incredible characters like Scobie Pye for the first time, and of course to find out how the chickens were faring, which Jamie Boyle and I took to South Georgia.

[Part 1 0:42:58] Tolson: I want touch very specifically on the chickens because I think they in themselves were an interesting thing but they led onto something else with Scobie Pye, but tell me a little bit: where did the chickens come from and why?

Norris: After we came out of the Peninsula, we got back to Stanley, and then Jamie Boyle and myself had this request from the people on South Georgia (at KEP) to pick up these chickens that they had ordered from a farm outside of Stanley. So myself and

⁶ It was only 7 years since the 1966/67 season when the construction of Halley II began.

Jamie Boyle found this farm and my first impression was that we got given all these sacks and I thought these chickens were dead but they weren't. They were all in these sacks and we had to carry them back to the ship and Jamie Boyle and myself made a pen for them in the forward hold of the *Bransfield* and let them out, all these chickens out to run around this pen. And we fed them from some grain that we had and we thought 'Right these guys have got to do the trip to South Georgia.' It was literally the first evening that we left and we got woken up in our cabins about 2 o'clock in the morning to find out that Tom Woodfield was quite irate because these chickens had got out of this pen and were running around the lower deck. So it was Jamie Boyle's and my job to find them, pick them and take them back into the forward hold and put them back into the pen.

[Part 1 0:44:52] Norris: But eventually these chickens made their way to KEP where there was an actual chicken house built for them, and that's when they left. And then of course I went down to Halley and came back. In the meantime, it turned out that these chickens were bought by the base members to get fresh eggs but they weren't laying, and it turned out that this chicken house was riddled with rats and so these chickens wouldn't lay eggs. It was decided to think of different ways to get rid of these rats and the original method, done with Mick Pawley and Jamie Boyle, was to go into this chicken house and hide behind these dustbins full of grain with a .22 rifle, and when these rats poked their heads out of the rat holes, it was to shoot them. But this didn't work so then Scobie Pye looked up and said 'I know how to get rid of these rats.' and Scobie built these traps. We thought 'Well done, Scobe.' So he put these traps in the chicken house for a couple of nights and he caught, I think it was about seven or eight of these rats.

[Part 1 0:46:22] Norris: We said 'Well done Scobie. Now take them out into the bay and drown the bastards.' But Scobie said 'No, I am going to keep them,' and he used to keep them down in the Flubber House which was below Shackleton House, and he gave them all names in these cages. So he kept all these rats and he gave them all names and he then started to feed them with some of the best meat that he could get from the canteen, from the galley. Then they started to die on him. They died ... what we then found out was consumption: he basically overfed them I think, but he wanted to know what they were dying of. The scientists on base showed Scobie how to dissect a rat and showed him how to write a scientific paper on what he was doing, and he sent this off to be published.

[Part 1 0:47:30] Norris: The next thing we know, people from all over the world, ratologists I guess you would call them, were starting to contact Scobie to find out how this *Rattus Norvegicus*, common brown rat, was developing differently from other places in the world. Of course they were brought down by the old Norwegian whalers, escaped from the ships and were starting to spread all over the island. So Scobie – he was the carpenter cum handyman on base, of which the stuff of legend. The stories that Scobie got involved in is just legendary, and you can even find him on YouTube now. So he wrote a scientific paper and he said when he left BAS that he was going off to Australia and he went to Tasmania where he went to the University of Tasmania and got a degree, which from a bricklayer cum handyman cum carpenter, he got his degree in the study of rats. And I believe he actually went on and got his PhD and he now, although he still worked for BAS in some capacity in the past, he also does lecturing on cruise ships.

[Part 1 0:49:02] Tolson: I gather that he used to go on the cruise ships when they came into, around South Georgia. Is there any truth in the story that he went on dressed up as a very aged person?

Norris: It was. In fact it was a couple of stories about Scobie on that. One of the times was when the *Linblad Explorer*, literally one of the first Antarctic cruise ships to come into KEP. Of course they were going to have women on board, and when Mick Pawley told us round the dinner table that this cruise ship was coming in, Scobie bit into an apple and lost the front two teeth of his dentures into this apple, which cracked everybody up. But Scobie, at the time, was quite keen to glue these two teeth back in his dentures before this cruise ship came with these women on board and of course this was in the days when you had just slow-curing Araldite. You didn't have the rapid curing Araldite. So Scobie Araldited his two front teeth back in his top denture and left it on the radiator by the front door of Shackleton House and then promptly forgot all about it. So when the *Linblad Explorer* came in, we invited some of the passengers up to Shackleton House. They came in the front door and the first thing they saw was Scobie's dentures on the radiator.

[Part 1 0:50:46] Norris: But the other story of Scobie was: he was basically the youngest old man that I had ever met in my life because although he was a young man, he used to dress in this old flat cap and this old oiled type raincoat. Anyway on one of these cruise ships that came in one day, some of the lads got together and they dressed him up in these dark glasses and this white walking stick, and they took him on board this tourist ship, convincing people that he was the old, the last night-watchman of the old whaling base. I think they introduced him as Bergar Hammold, the old blind Norwegian whaler and they fell for it and he had his photograph taken with all these passengers on board and he really played up to it. He really did a good job on conning these people. But what they didn't figure out ... obviously people called him Bergar Hammold but if you say it backwards, it's Old Hamburger.

[Part 1 0:52:14] Norris: So that was another story, but one of the other things, years later, ... Can I just mention this story of when I was working on ...? We had a visit from the *John Biscoe*. It was one Christmas when I was working with Jamie Boyle at KEP and the *John Biscoe* had this big Christmas Eve party on board. So we were all invited on board, lots of food, lots of booze to drink and things like this, and Scobie was leading the conga around the decks and round the wardrooms and all round with everybody following on. Myself and Jamie Boyle had to refuel the generators the next day so we had an early evening and went back to Shackleton House. Because Mick Pawley knew we were early risers, Mick Pawley came and knocked on our doors – this was about 6 o'clock in the morning – and told us that someone had a suspected heart attack, one of the crew members on board the *John Biscoe*.

[Part 1 0:53:36] Norris: So we went down and had a stretcher with us as well, and we went down and this guy was semi-conscious. We got him on the stretcher and there was a group of us walking him back up the road back up to Shackleton House where we were going to put him in the medical room at Shackleton House. We just happened to be passing the woodworking shop, Scobie's woodworking shop, and as we were walking past, Scobie came out looking very very hung over and bleary eyed. He looked at us with his eyes and his eyes followed us, carrying this stretcher up the

road towards Shackleton House. Scobie took off his cloth cap and held it against his heart and as we walked past, Scobie said 'Excuse me, what time is the next stretcher?' [Laughs]

[Part 1 0:54:52] Tolson: Back to more mundane matters of work at South G, you were pretty involved in building the wet lab.

Norris: Yes, again.

[Part 1 0:55:03] Tolson: Was this a big new venture?

Norris: Well Shackleton House was built mainly on stilts, and it was decided that a brand new wet lab would be built underneath Shackleton House. We had all the drawings for it, all the architectural drawings for it, and we had taken delivery of all the equipment that was going inside. Again Scobie did a brilliant job in doing all the building and insulation work, and we actually went over and got some of the old heavily-insulated refrigeration doors from the whaling station to use as doors to keep all the cold inside, and it was quite an interesting project to get involved in.

[Part 1 0:55:59] Norris: But as always with a lot of these projects, and I did have a laugh with Dad Etchells with it afterwards, because all the cabling had arrived to do all the cabling of all these different chillers and water pumps and things like this and all the starter posts for it, and it was all supposed to be installed with conduit. But it turned out that all the conduit had gone to Signy Island because they thought all the conduit was for the installation of the generators that we got out of Halley. So it ended up that all the conduit had gone down to Signy and so I had to install all these cables without any conduit, so I ended up boxing as much of it in as possible but a lot of it was left out. But at the end of the day, it all worked and it was quite a successful wet lab for the time they used it. It needed quite a bit of maintenance to keep it going, to stop it icing up quite a bit, but it worked, yes.

[Part 1 0:57:09] Tolson: Did you find, in the '70s, certain frustrations like for example you were missing parts and you had to muddle through, or perhaps in other instances where you just didn't get parts that you really needed to progress. Or could you always muddle through?

Norris: Well in those days we were quite lucky. The fact that the old whaling station over at Grytviken was still very much intact, and in those days there was quite a formality involved in visiting the whaling station to procure any kind of equipment that we needed, because everything was locked. Mick Pawley, as base commander, had the keys, which had to be signed for, and anything that we took from the old whaling station had to be reported. And if we used it, equipment had to be paid for eventually. Of course later on, in the '80s, when the whaling stations started to deteriorate, and the Russians started to come down in a big way, they started to loot the old whaling stations. So all that looking after them went out of the window. But most of the stuff, if we didn't have it on base, we either made it or we went and purloined it from the whaling stations.

[Part 1 0:58:43] Tolson: If you were having to sign for this, who did it belong to?

Norris: I think it was a company based in Argentina at the time, it was Albion or something like that⁷. But all this had to be reported back through Stanley, through our offices in Stanley, if we took anything from the whaling stations.

[Part 1 0:59:14] Tolson: Your winter-over in South Georgia, it's a fairly (dare I say) tropical belt and it's equivalent in latitude to Northern Scotland, but down South. What sort of things did you get up to, because you would go off probably for a winter jolly?

Norris: Yes. Mick Pawley was an incredible climber and I'm not a climber by any stretch of the imagination. At the most I like hillwalking. So it was good to go off with Mick Pawley to some of the other old whaling stations around and do a bit of recce work over there, and then head off and re-follow some of Shackleton's route down to Stromness and places like that. So that was quite interesting and we stayed over, on one of these trips, in the manager's house at Stromness. You could always tell the manager's house because it was always the most luxuriously fitted out, and I always remember seeing this 3-piece suite in the manager's house, which was incredibly ornate and behind that was this photograph of Shackleton and Thomas Crean and the other people, sitting on this 3-piece suite. But in those days we didn't dare touch or remove any of this stuff to keep for posterity. Years later, when I was electrical officer on the *Biscoe*, when the Russians were looting these old whaling stations, we had to go in and 'liberate' this 3-piece suite. But somehow this photograph of Shackleton sitting on it disappeared. We never did see it again – a bit sad.

[Part 1 1:03:39] Tolson: Very sad, yes. So your season at South Georgia came to an end, the summer rolled round, and were you given any warning, heads-up from Dad Etchells, what was going to happen to you in year two?

Norris: Yes, in fact because of my experiences down at Halley, I put a request in to Dad Etchells that for my second year, I would like to winter at Halley. He actually granted my request. In subsequent later years I think people found it harder and harder to change bases halfway through a contract but I was very lucky and of course that meant I could go back on the *Bransfield* and it also meant that the refurbished generators that had come out from Halley II, were then back on board the *Bransfield*. So working with Big Al Smith and Dad Etchells, I was also instrumental in offloading them off at Signy, so my good old friend Colin Maiden could install them at Signy. He made such a good job of it in the summer that they asked him to stay on for a winter.

[Part 1 1:03:14] Tolson: So you are now remaining at Halley for the full year. The winter of 24-hour darkness will be coming up. What was life like at Halley once the *Bransfield* had sailed? How did things, the dynamics change between flat-out working cooperation between ship and base, and now the ship's gone. What does that do?

Norris: Well the first thing is: I have still got the photographs now of being on the sea ice and the mist coming off the sea, and seeing *Bransfield* go away at the end of the relief season, knowing that you won't see another ship for at least a year. And to see

⁷ Albion Star (see South Georgia Heritage Trust website).

that go, you think to yourself 'Have I made the right decision?' But you then turn around and head off towards base, and of course in those days, you have still got to recognise that in those days, in the early 1970's, that BAS was still working under quite a strict budgetary restrictions and it only had literally a few million a year to keep ships and planes. So even at Halley there wasn't much in the way of vehicles to use to get yourself around. I mean nowadays, when I went back to Halley V, everybody seemed to have their own skidoo but in our days there was just a few working vehicles for people to use.

[Part 1 1:04:56] Tolson: And as the season went on and the sun sank lower, and the daylight got less, at what point does gloom set in? Were there in your experience then divisions within the camp?

Norris: I wouldn't say divisions as such, but people adapted in different ways. Obviously some like myself worked quite closely with Alex Hurley the diesel mechanic and Jack Temple the builder. We had lots of building work to still construct. Jack was fully employed putting up shafts even higher and higher, outside the base. So we had a lot of practical work to do, but it was interesting that a person like myself, I very much regimented myself by the clock. So I would wake up at the same time, roughly the same time every day and go to bed at the same time, so my biological clock didn't really change in that period.

[Part 1 1:06:07] Norris: But some of the scientists used to ... Their biological clocks just went out of the window because they used to work for as long as they could and then crash out and their whole biological clock changed and they would wake up and work during what I would call the night and they would sleep during the day. And the cook that we had, ... Well the interesting thing is that, from my point of view, no matter what the weather was like outside the base, whether it was blowing a hooley or it was a nice day, winter, summer, dark, light, I always made a trip outside the base at least every day. I would spend a lot of time outside, whereas I think the cook that we had during the winter months, I don't think he hardly went outside of the base. He stayed in all the time.

[Part 1 1:07:15] Tolson: And of course Halley III, it wasn't a case of opening the back door and walking out, was it, because you were underground?

Norris: That's right. The only time you could actually walk outside of base was to walk up the garage ramp, and that was the only way you could actually walk up. All over the base in other areas, were these shafts. They were about I suppose 6 feet square, these shafts, and went up. Excuse me Jack, can I just hook that door open. [Gets up. Filming stops, then restarts.]

[Part 1 1:07:48] Tolson: Starting up on Tape 2. Steve, yes there were shafts going up which you had to add to each year.

Norris: That's right. As the snow piled up outside, we had to extend these shafts, and it literally became a full-time job for Jack Temple but I was always impressed in the way that he would put these panels of these shafts up and obviously I had to work with him quite closely. He used to use these 6-inch screws and he would put up these shafts in next to no time. I was so impressed at his speed. I said to him one day, while

working with him putting one of these shafts up, I said 'Jack, I know' I said 'you are quick but you are hammering these screws in with a hammer.' And he said 'Yes.' I said 'But they are screws.' He said 'Oh the slot is only for taking them out.' [Laughs] So that was his way he could speedily put these shafts up.

[Part 1 1:08:58] Tolson: So your life was pretty ordered. You managed to occupy your day and sleep by your night, albeit that in the winter it was 24 hours darkness?

Norris: And of course in that winter night, there was always people up on fire watch, and also the met men. And so, if you were interested enough, I would get them to come along and wake me up if there was an aurora outside, just to go and photograph and take a look at as well.

[Part 1 1:09:33] Tolson: Tell me about things like, well for a start, if you were talking to the met men, you were getting an idea of the sort of temperatures and wind speeds but just tell me about wind speeds, temperatures and auroras, all fascinating.

Norris: Outside, the temperature at Halley I don't think ever went above zero, all the time I was there. Even in summer, the summer temperatures were like zero to -20 and the winter temperatures were -20 to -40 -odd, and I think in more recent years they have even had -50 at Halley. These are obviously in degrees Centigrade. One of the things I had to build, beside these workshops, was the construction and the electrical supply of the met balloon shed which was about a quarter of a mile from the main base. They sent up balloons which were tracked by radar and what I had to do was run the electrical cables from the generation shed over to this balloon shed and then install the electrical supply for the balloon shed.

[Part 1 1:10:50] Norris: So I had these really massive big drums of cable which I ran out to the balloon shed from the generation shed and then when I measured the voltage drop over this quarter of a mile, it was quite obvious that the hydrogen generator was not going to operate on the voltage that was over at the balloon shed. So then I had to run another big thick cable into boxes that weren't designed to take these two massive cables but in the end it did the job and we managed eventually to get enough voltage over at the balloon shed to run the hydrogen generator and then send the balloon up. But it was always done in freezing cold conditions and it's quite interesting that if there's no wind, you could quite happily work at -20 without any problem, but when you get down to -40 it starts to get a bit chilly then. And then at night, during the Antarctic winter, you used to go outside and look at this aurora and you had these incredible green or red colours. I think it's atomic oxygen and atomic nitrogen coming into the sky, via the Earth's magnetic fields, and you see these moving bands of colour above your head - absolutely stunning to actually watch.

[Part 1 1:12:30] Norris: And our base commander at the time, was a met man of many years with BAS and that was Kenn Back. Not only did he do incredible winters in the Antarctic, he did just as many winters up in the Arctic as well: Resolute Bay and stuff like that. So he was always a goldmine of information on the met stuff but when we were building this balloon shed, it was quite interesting to see, to go over and take part in letting a balloon go because it was tracked. We had this radar on a sledge and of course as soon as the balloon went up with the radiosonde, the radar would lock onto it and that information would go back to the scientists in base who would then

track it and get all the signals back for the met readings that day. I always remember when Alec Hurley, the diesel mechanic, wanted to let go of a balloon himself, just to say he had done it and helped the met men.

[Part 1 1:13:52] Norris: So he went across and Alec was a mountain of a man. He must have been about 6ft 3", great guy, and he went over to the balloon shed and we had this nothing much more than a baby alarm as an intercom between the balloon shed and the scientist working in the met office on base. So you would communicate by this, as I said, not more than a baby alarm. Alec was over there and he filled the balloon up and he attached the radio sonde and the idea was for him to let the balloon go. So his is on this intercom and the guys on the base said to him 'Right Alex, what we want you to do now is for you to give us a countdown from ten and then release the balloon and then we can track it.' He said 'OK.' So he went 'One, two, ...' They said 'No Alec, give us a countdown, from ten not a count up to ten.' He said 'OK.' So on this baby alarm you could hear 'Ten, nine, eight, seven, ...' and then it got down to '... three, two, one.' I was looking at all the scientists intently looking at all their instruments. They are looking and nothing is happening and they are thinking 'Oh, don't tell me it's a duff radiosonde or something like that. Oh dear.' Then after a little while, over this intercom, was Alec's voice: 'Can I let go now?' [Laughs]

[Part 1 1:15:36] Tolson: So a lot of tolerance all round between scientists and technical crews?

Norris: Oh very much so, I think. You all had to work together, especially on base maintenance. One of the things on scrub-out day: it was quite evident that there was gradually being a build-up of ice in between the Armco where the bolts went through to join the Armco. Ice was getting in there and so we had to get in between the Armco and the building and chip all this ice out. And I still think I have got a bad back from that day. But it was interesting that in the sleeping accommodation, at Halley, which the builders did a great job on, in building these bunkrooms, and it was an Armco bunkroom with a big refrigerated door to keep the heat in, and the bunkrooms all had radiators and it was all very well designed. But nobody ever lived in there; they just used it for sleeping in and it was quite evident that when it was a heated bunkroom, where all the personnel used to sleep in (there was a bottom bunk and a top bunk) when they used to open this big refrigerated door, all this cold air would rush into this bunkroom and clouds would form. There was just this mist as you went into your sleeping accommodation and it ended up that if you were on the bottom bunk, you were still sleeping below freezing. If you were on the top bunk, you were sweating our balls off. So it was decided to do away with all the heating in the bunkroom and keep it at a constant -20. So that's literally the whole year we were kipping in -20 in double sleeping bags.

[Part 1 1:17:45] Tolson: Halley is pretty damned isolated: black during winter, nobody to go and visit. How did you communicate? What were the feelings going through everyone's minds? It wasn't very easy, was it?

Norris: Well when you consider that in those days, our only communication with the outside world – your parents or your girlfriends or whatever – was just 200 words a month, there was very very little communication with anybody else. We did have radio communication between some of the other bases: the 'Goon Show' as they

called it in those days, but very little other things. I remember we did play darts once on Saturday night with (I think it was) the American base, which seemed a bit strange. But it was a case of just communicating amongst yourselves more than anything, but I think because you had to keep the base going, there was always so much to do.

[Part 1 1:19:05] Norris: Halley was famous for, every time you went outside you always carried a shovel with you, because there was always something to be dug out of the snow because a lot of the food dumps and the spare part dumps, the wood dumps, were all outside and it was a continual regime of going out and digging these things out of the ice and snow. And our base commander, Kenn Back at the time, he wasn't a guy to forcibly tell people to do things. He always led by example. People would say 'Well, where's Ken?' And you would go up a shaft and you would see him down at the fuel dump, digging out fuel barrels and things like this, which was obviously part of my job as well. So that's one of the things we had to do.

[Part 1 1:20:03] Tolson: We'll cut there at the end of Tape 2, Steve.

[Part 1 1:20:08] [End of Part One]

Part 2

[Part 2 0:00:21] Tolson: This is Tape 3 with Steve Norris. Steve, just picking up on Halley: Kenn Back, as you mentioned, led by example. You were coming out now, of your winters. The ship was approaching but it hadn't arrived yet. You went on a jolly with Kenn Back, didn't you?

Norris: That's right. We took the last of the two sled dogs, Muff and Brae. It was the first time I had ever been in a tent with dogs and things like this. We went out to the Hinge Zone and that was quite an adventure in itself, and obviously Kenn had all his previous Antarctic experience and he could also just look up in the sky and tell what the weather was doing. The idea was to try to find a way through the Hinge Zone so the vehicles that were coming behind us a few days later would go through on quite safe territory, because they were going to do some scientific experiments up on the mainland.

[Part 2 0:01:37] Tolson: You were travelling with the dogs. How were you travelling? By dog sledge or in a vehicle?

Norris: No, it was actually by dog sled, very slowly because we only had the two dogs that were there and we camped out and chained the dogs outside. It was interesting. I have got the photographs in my photographic album there. While we were out in the tent, there was this massive big blow and apart from the top twelve inches of the tent, that was all that was poking through the snow. We had to dig our way out and keep digging the dogs out as well. But yes, that was quite an adventure in itself and not always in radio contact. And once we had done that and found our way through the Hinge Zone, they sent a vehicle out for us, but we decided to use the dogs and save ourselves a couple of hours by meeting it a bit further down the track. So we put the sledge and the dogs on one of the big sledges and came back like that, so that was quite good.

[Part 2 0:03:00] Tolson: I guess a long moment of anticipation because the ship is now arriving for its once a year relief. What are people really thinking when it's in their minds that the ship will arriving in a week's ...

Norris: Well there's also a great tendency to think 'Oh, I don't want to leave.' If somebody looked up to me and said 'Your relief guy is not coming. Would you stay another winter?' the tendency is to say 'Oh yes please.' But yes, there were people packing up their stuff way in advance of the ship arriving. There were a couple of guys that being at Halley, even for one year, it just didn't suit. You could tell that. They just didn't like what they were doing.

[Part 2 0:04:06] Tolson: How did a base commander like Kenn Back deal with people who didn't like being there?

Norris: I can't ...

[Part 2 0:04:21] Tolson: Was it something that people just had to jolly well accept and do their job and hopefully not become too antagonistic?

Norris: I think that is basically it, and not become antagonistic. I don't think we had much in the way of that problem. I think one of the ways was: say once a week you would get around the bar on a Saturday and let steam off that way and I think people like myself, Kenn Back and Ken Lax, who were probably the oldest, oh and the doctor Eric Harvey, we were the oldest ones that were on base, so we were I think quite stable as people. And Eric Harvey who was the doctor cum dentist at Halley and the youngsters like Andy Allman, they were involved in the saga of the loo pit which figures quite a lot on the Z-Fids website, and to be there when that happened was quite something, I must admit – this massive big turdicle!

[Part 2 0:05:43] Tolson: So the ship is now here; all frantic activity?

Norris: As always with Halley relief, because not only you are wondering where the ship is going to berth, where it's going to be near to: to the base or further down at N9 (a long way away). It just becomes one hectic round of working, getting very little sleep, driving vehicles and getting stores, and trying to do it all in good weather. Now in my last relief at Halley, it ended up being an N9 relief and I was driving one of the old bulldozers, which was nothing less than walking pace, and that was a long way to go in a bulldozer. Then of course when you got down to the *Bransfield*, you had to wait for the sledges to be loaded and hooked onto your bulldozer, and so you just managed to get a bit of kip on board the ship before getting on and doing that slow drive back again.

[Part 2 0:07:02] Tolson: You weren't there on the occasion when the ice cliffs collapsed?

Norris: On the *Bransfield*? I think that happened just as we were leaving, and yes that was interesting. It crushed that side of the ship in. That was after the relief, when we were just about to leave, yes.

[Part 2 0:07:27] Tolson: When the stores are coming off the ship, to the base, one of the priority items surely must be the mail.

Norris: Oh most definitely. In fact that was always the first thing. I always remember, one way or another, the sacks of mail would come off first and would be immediately taken to the guys on base. Yes, that was always a priority.

[Part 2 0:07:57] Tolson: There must have always been a few 'Dear Johns' amongst them?

Norris: Well there were. In fact from my point of view there wasn't anything like that because I didn't have a girlfriend at that time. But yes, I always remember one guy that we had, who I used to take the mickey out of quite a lot. I shan't mention him by name because it became quite tragic, but he was chuffed to bits because I always said to him that he would get a Dear John, but he showed me the letter from his girlfriend and he rubbed it in my face that no he didn't get a Dear John. I was just trying to prepare him for the worst, just in case it did happen. But he came back to me and said 'Look, I have got this letter. She is still my girlfriend.' He had another year to do at Halley when I was leaving and so when I was back in Southampton, a year later, I actually went down to Southampton to see the ship in and see him reunited with his girlfriend. He was really chuffed to bits and said to me that he was with his girlfriend, and a few months later [REDACTED] they broke up.

[Part 2 0:09:34] Tolson: Well we'll come back to clean Steve. You left Halley, Steve, and before you actually got back to the UK, I know via South America, you did a short run down the Peninsula for Dad Etchells?

Norris: Well again, Dad Etchells said, 'Instead of getting off the ship straight away, would you fancy a summer down the Peninsula?' I think when someone offers you that, you just jump at the chance, and it was really again very spectacular. My job was to go down and do some reports, electrical reports on the state of bases, for Dad Etchells and whether these bases were worth keeping and or whether we were going to get rid of them or demolish them. One of the things I also had to do was commission the first generator down at the brand new base at Rothera. In the mean time they were closing the original base at Adelaide Island and moving around the corner to Rothera, which was then to become a massive big base with an airstrip. But at the time they just built one hut. The generator was already installed; it was just my job to go in and connect it up to all everything and to get it running, to give them their first ever electrical supply. So that was quite good, just to get done, not realising at the time how big Rothera was going to become. Every time I went back to Rothera after that, I always went back to the chippy shop just to remember where it all started.

[Part 2 0:11:10] Tolson: Then Dad also had a task for you at Faraday, or the Argentine Islands?

Norris: Faraday as it was, yes. He wanted a report because there was a lot of electrical cables that went over the ground, were getting cut and chipped, and the generating station. And I think the idea at the time was whether to shut it down, demolish it, or as happened in the end, we sold it to the Ukrainians for I think the princely price of £1, rather than shut it down, and it is still kept now by the Ukrainians. It was interesting

that the Fids on board Faraday, on the base at Faraday, when they took photographs of themselves lowering the Union Jack for the last time, the Ukrainians used those same photographs in silhouette, so totally black, as Ukrainians raising the flag at Verdansky⁸ as they now called it. And they put it on their postage stamps.

[Part 2 0:12:21] Tolson: So you were now reaching the end of your Fid career and you headed off to home via South America?

Norris: Yes, I arrived back home. At the time I was writing up notes of my trip through South America, and I actually had some things to tie up. So I went to Cambridge, just met a few people there, came back home to Portsmouth and very quickly the telephone rang and I think it was Eric Salmon at the time asking me if I was interested in the electrical engineer's job on board the *John Biscoe*. The guy that was on board the *John Biscoe* was transferring over to the *Bransfield* and there was a vacancy. Of course I jumped at the chance to go back to the Antarctic and to go on the *John Biscoe* which was at the time getting on a bit but it was still a lovely ship to be on.

[Part 2 0:13:35] Tolson: Any troubles getting on in your new life as a ship's officer as opposed to a Fid?

Norris: Not that I recall, although there were comments made, not so much on the *John Biscoe* but certainly years later when I went back as the officer on the *Bransfield*. But not so much on the *John Biscoe*; that was quite good.

[Part 2 0:14:10] Tolson: And how did Fids take to you when they met you again as a ship's officer? Did they have any ...?

Norris: No, I think I had a ... because I had seen both sides of it, I thought I was a great liaison between both, because I not only had the work ethic of being all things to all people, besides my responsibilities as the electrical officer on the *Biscoe*. Especially with new Fids coming down, you were able to instruct them and tell them how to behave and what's expected of you.

[Part 2 0:14:54] Tolson: I think probably on your first trip on the *Biscoe*, you actually had some quite interesting occupations. There was the wool run for a start, wasn't there? Tell me about that.

Norris: Well it's interesting. One of the things I didn't expect on board the *John Biscoe* was also being the film projectionist as well. But, yes, that was interesting. I suppose in those days, before the Falklands War and you had all this communication, a lot of the responsibilities of where you were going, how long you were going to spend in a certain place, was down to the captain of the ship. And it turned out that we had a prolonged period in Stanley Harbour and we were basically twiddling our thumbs and I think it was the first time that the new governor of the Falkland Islands was coming out as well. But we were there, basically alongside, and the *Monsunen*, which was the Falkland Islands Company's ship, that used to go around the islands collecting all the wool, actually had an engine-room fault, and it meant that there was

⁸ Actually it is called Vernadsky.

all this wool at all these different stations around the Falklands waiting to be collected.

[Part 2 0:16:27] Norris: I think it was Chris Elliot who volunteered the services of the *John Biscoe* and the weather was absolutely superb so we jumped at the chance to go all the way around these little places that you would never normally see, around the Falklands. So we took on the skipper off the *Monsunen* as a pilot to show us around and it was a great couple of weeks, going East Falklands, West Falklands, called in at all these stations, getting all this wool off by scow and then loading it on board the ship. It was one of the things that stays in your memory because the weather was absolutely superb and we were doing something entirely different and totally unexpected out of the blue. I think it took longer to get permission to do it from BAS. The Falkland Islands Government wanted us to do it but it took longer to get permission from BAS than it did to do the trip I think.

[Part 2 0:17:40] Tolson: I think another interesting little exercise that you were involved in on the *Biscoe* again was the official scrap run that we did on the *Biscoe* at South Georgia.

Norris: Oh that's right.

[Part 2 0:17:54] Tolson: Do you remember that?

Norris: I remember that, yeah.

[Part 2 0:17:57] Tolson: We did that on behalf of the Falkland Island Government.

Norris: But also, one of the other things I remember, being on the *Biscoe*, and I think it must have been round about 1980/ 1981, was: there was a lot of problems with the Russian fishing fleets coming down and scooping up the krill. Now the irony was that on board the *John Biscoe*, we had this five-year Offshore Biological Programme that we were doing, which meant that for all the seasons we were down South, we were doing marine biology research to see what the capacity of fishing around South Georgia was, to safely take out krill and other fish from the sea, and not diminish the stocks. And of course, while we were doing this scientific experiments on the sustainable yields, the Russians were coming down in big factory ships, just scooping up whatever they could.

[Part 2 0:19:08] Norris: But what happened then was: the Russians were also, without permission, calling in at different whaling stations, derelict whaling stations, and looting them of all kinds of different stuff. They were also landing on the Peninsula near Sörling Valley and actually shooting reindeer and taking them back on board their ships for meat as well, again without permission because they hadn't called in at KEP to register. But one of the things that became a bit scary was the fact that at the manager's house at Stromness, was the 3-piece suite that Shackleton actually sat on when he finally made it across the island on his epic trip from Elephant Island in the *James Caird*. We had warnings on the ship that this looting was going on. So I think it must have been '81 when it was decided that from the *John Biscoe* we would go in on the scow and go to the manager's house and get this 3-piece suite and take it on board

the ship. And then that 3-piece suite would go to the nautical museum in London where it still is to this day.

[Part 2 0:20:49] Norris: In fact years later, a friend of mine who a curator at the museum, they were putting on an exhibition about Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen, and I told her then, I said 'Don't forget the 3-piece suite.' She looked at me rather quizzically. I said 'You have got it in your basement somewhere.' and she actually found it. So to see that on display at the nautical museum was really good. But it was quite funny because obviously the stony beaches of Stromness saw us as ship's crew, lifting this 3-piece suite onto the scow – it looked a bit strange, and someone did come up with the idea that we would get these T-shirts printed with 'Shackleton's 3-piece suite expedition' written on them.

[Part 2 0:21:42] Tolson: Steve, going now to the major refit of the *John Biscoe*, which really started up in about 1979/ 1980 wasn't it?

Norris: We were up in Liverpool.

[Part 2 0:21:57] Tolson: You were fairly heavily involved in that?

Norris: Yes.

[Part 2 0:22:00] Tolson: Tell me a little bit about your perspective, what your involvement was. And then some of the personalities who were strongly involved in getting this to work.

Norris: Well the idea was that the whole ship of the *John Biscoe* would be re-fitted, especially for this Offshore Biological Programme, which meant that we had to have this big cantilever crane thing for dropping the nets over the back end of the ship. And the whole of the back end of the ship had to be redesigned and updating the old laundry that we had. It was all DC: big DC motors and this posed a problem, because a lot of the newer equipment that was being installed on the *John Biscoe* was all AC, and so we had not only the DC side of things to be looked after but also now these new AC alternators being installed.

[Part 2 0:23:10] Norris: And that was good for many reasons, because obviously I had to then wire up everybody's cabin for AC so they could have their ghetto-blasters and things like that installed, which was before used to run off countless batteries. So the idea for me was to get involved with the installation of these big crane things on the back, for these big fishing nets, and make sure, because we were living and working around South Georgia for so many months of the year, to make sure that we had all the right spares, and the amount of spares required to keep us going. So basically I think that was my main job and of course working with Chief Engineers like Stan Jolley who was on board for quite some time doing this refit as well, and the different captains that we had on board.

[Part 2 0:24:17] Tolson: You had one very very good Chief Officer, Andy Baker?

Norris: Andy Baker was an amazing guy. He was one of these guys that could be absolutely mad as a hatter at one stage and then be very professional and very serious

the next. And he was a top class diver as well, which was very very good for something that happened a bit later when we lost one of the blades off the propeller. But Andy used to like his boat work as well, and if ever I had an opportunity to go in the inflatable boats with Andy, I used jump at the chance. Great jollies, no matter how cold it was, and I always remember Andy had this incredible concoction that he insisted we all drank, and I loved it at the end of it. But at the end of any cold boat trip that we did and we got out of all our wet weather gear and we got on board and stowed everything away, Andy would get all this Bovril, hot Bovril and rum⁹. That was his drink, and we all started to drink this hot Bovril and rum, and when you have been out in the boats all day, it was absolutely brilliant. I used to love it and even when I was on the *Bransfield* years later, I still had hot Bovril and rum.

[Part 2 0:25:58] Tolson: The *Biscoe* finally got through its big refit, went off, did a trip and something rather awful happened?

Norris: We started off really well, apart from this big crane thing on the back of the *John Biscoe*. We also has a variable-pitch propeller which the captains actually loved because they could go forward or astern just by altering the blades on this variable-pitch propeller and also the different speed. And we started off really well. I mean we left to go down South and called in at Montevideo and that was fine. And then we started to go across the Drake Passage, and all of a sudden there was this almighty bang and incredible vibration throughout the whole ship. We were all thinking ‘What the hell was that?’ So everything stopped and we were bouncing around going nowhere in the Southern Ocean. Andy Baker, bless him, he decides to put all his deep sea diving gear on, all his SCUBA gear with his tanks and things like that, and went over the side of the ship and went down and saw that we were a propeller blade missing. It had just broken off and disappeared into the depths. So we were now down to just two of these propeller blades. When he came back and told us that, we realised then that that was the end of our season. So we had to limp back into Stanley and of course all the Fids that we had on board at the time had to get off and then get on board the *Bransfield* and the *Bransfield* had to change its schedule so it could drop all the Fids off that we were going to carry.

[Part 2 0:28:04] Norris: We stayed alongside in Stanley for quite a few weeks until it was decided what they were going to do with us. There were ideas that the ship would beach itself in Stanley Harbour just to have a look at the damage or whatever at low tide. It was getting near Christmas and I must admit from a personal point of view I thought ‘Great, Stanley at Christmas. Maybe New Year we could go to the horse races.’ I suppose I was quite looking forward to that but on Christmas Eve, it came back that the *HMS Endurance*, the older one to the one that had the accident off Chile a year or so ago, the older *Endurance* would then tow us to Montevideo where we would go into dry dock to have a look at the damage and then to see if the damage could be corrected with flying out a new propeller blade from UK, or that we limp back to UK and go into dry dock there.

[Part 2 0:29:16] Norris: So the *Endurance* had this massive big tow-rope supplied by the *Biscoe* and we slowly made our way out on Christmas Eve, December the 24th, from Stanley Harbour to make our slow way across to Montevideo and Uruguay. I

⁹ Known to mountaineers as ‘Mummers’ blood’.

always remember the newspaper reports at the time because my father would save them for me back here in the UK, and the *Endurance* hogged the publicity by saying it was the 'world's longest tow' and in small letters under the headlines, 'by a Royal Navy vessel'. Because the longest tow was the tow of the *SS Great Britain* from the Falklands to Bristol, but the Royal Navy made a lot of headlines by calling it the world's longest tow by a Royal Navy vessel.

[Part 2 0:30:26] Tolson: So you did finally limp back into the UK and that's where you paid off, of course?

Norris: Yes. We got into Montevideo. It was quite obvious that it couldn't be repaired there so it was then decided that we would limp back to UK and that was a slow old trip because the vibration going through the ship, on that long journey, it was a slow agonising trip back, it really was.

[Part 2 0:31:06] Tolson: And this is the point at which you left BAS for a period and you went and worked in ...?

Norris: Well that's right. It was round about that period that I decided that I'd had enough of OBP and actually I was married at the time and my wife at the time wanted to do things, see other places. So I then moved to working for the Sultan of Brunei, looking after his maintenance crews, based in the Royal Brunei Navy but as a civilian, but also doing the maintenance around some of his other military bases, at the Air Force and the Army bases and I quite liked it. I mean I was out there for five years and it was a good opportunity to visit other places like Singapore, Hong Kong, places like that around the Far East. But the company I was working for was a company called Worldwide Helicopters and the only reason I got the job was the fact that the head guy, who was interviewing for Worldwide Helicopters, was up in Cambridge. So again I had to travel to Cambridge to get this job and when I was speaking to this guy, he turned out to be a helicopter pilot for the *Southern Voyager* which was one of the whaling ships that went down around South Georgia with – what's the name of the company that used to do a lot of whaling?

[Part 2 0:32:57] Tolson: Salvesens.

Norris: Salvesens, and of course if you go round you still see Salvesens refrigerator fans. But he was a helicopter pilot for Salvesens. So I was at this interview, didn't mention anything about the job or what it entailed but I got the job, purely for the fact that I had been on South Georgia. So I did that for five years but the Brunei government owed my company, Worldwide Helicopters, millions of dollars and again it was so corrupt that when the company complained to the government, the government stopped their contract. So you had a choice: you either worked for the government in Brunei or you left Brunei. So I then left Brunei with my wife and family, came back to UK, and it wasn't long before the phone rang offering me a similar kind of job but this time in the Sultanate of Oman. It was a rotational job so I was in Oman for a while and home for a while. My wife was OK with that.

[Part 2 0:34:07] Norris: So I went out and started this love affair with the Sultanate of Oman, a beautiful country, beautiful people, and had a great job which again I did for five years, looking after these generating stations round the country. And after my

fifth year in Oman, which I was quite content in carrying on, my wife phoned me when I was working out in the desert in a little place called Verhoud and she said 'You won't believe this. The British Antarctic Survey are looking for you again.' I said 'What?' So I phoned up BAS from Oman and they said that the Electrical Officer on board the *Bransfield* had failed his medical and was I interested in going on the *Bransfield*? And they asked me a couple of questions which I obviously answered OK and when they told me it was 4 months on/ 4 months off, I thought 'I have got to do it.' So I resigned my position in Oman and re-joined the *Bransfield* in Cape Town in the beginning of January '94.

[Part 2 0:35:27] Tolson: Now Steve, for you rather like for me in some respects, going back to BAS, you left it as a fairly old-style BAS, perhaps not quite as old-style as when I left it, and you have come back in the mid-nineties. What sort of changes hit you? What did you like and dislike about what you would find?

Norris: I think the amazing thing that ... I started with BAS in the '70s as a Fid and BAS was very very low budget for what they did, and when I re-joined in January 1994, and I think it was purely because of the Falklands war, the amount of money that was being pumped into not so much BAS but that area which included BAS, was just absolutely amazing. The communications: they had satellite communications. They had satellite dishes. There was a whole jump in technology from when I left BAS in the early 1980s to where it was when I re-joined in '94.

[Part 2 0:36:51] Tolson: And you were perfectly comfortable with this change, were you?

Norris: Yes, I think I was quite comfortable. I had a very steep learning curve, I must admit, to take it all in, but it was good the fact that some of the older people that had continued their career with BAS, were still there. People like Alan Allison, people like Stuart Lawrence, people like Chris Elliot, were still around, and Simon Taylor and stuff like that. So that was good to still be around people like that. So that was quite a good learning curve, to pick up things from those people.

[Part 2 0:37:47] Tolson: In your time in BAS you've had some pretty nasty moments. You've had some very unpleasant fires: one at Halley and on board the *Bransfield* too. Tell me about the *Bransfield* and how this focused your mind. What happened?

Norris: Well there were two incidents. One was a generator fire at Halley, but as you say, the big one was the propulsion motor burn-out, literally on my first trip back. We got on the *Bransfield* at Cape Town and then went to Halley and had the Halley relief. From what I understand, the previous winter's personnel didn't have a particularly good year there and so the Director had come down and there were some quite strict changes being made. The guys that came out of Halley at the time were called the Halley Bad Boys and they were on board the ship. We just literally had moved away from Halley and were steaming away when all of a sudden the alarm bells started going off and smoke was seen pouring out of the propulsion motor room.

[Part 2 0:39:12] Norris: So obviously people like the bosun and the chief officer, and things like this, all got their fire protection gear on and went down to investigate and found that one half of the propulsion motor had burned out. I think it was mainly due

because a couple of years previously it had got rewired on a refit but they didn't go back to the company that originally installed it. They went to another company, maybe getting it done on the cheap I don't know, but it was a very bad burn out and we were in pack ice at the time. So once it was realised then that this whole thing had welded and mangled itself, all the big coils and things like this, obviously people like myself went down to have a look and it was a bit overwhelming.

[Part 2 0:40:16] Tolson: This is Tape 4 with Steve Norris. Steve, going back to the fire on the *Bransfield*, you've entered the propulsion motor room now and found a very very hot situation, literally?

Norris: It wasn't only the heat generated but it was all probably the chemicals and the nasties that were in the atmosphere at the time from all the burned out material so it did take a long time to ventilate before you could see the damage and the damage was really bad. I mean huge great coils that were massive and the armature of the propulsion motor, everything was burned out about it, and in all honesty at the time I thought 'Well that's the end of this season, and how are we going to get out of this?' So it took a couple of days at least, of contemplation, not only by me but of Alan Allison and the Second Engineer Derek Forward and you could see the amount of concentration that Derek Forward was giving to it. I must admit from my own personal point of view, I thought we were going to have to be towed out, and that's one of the things that got sent out by radio message to Stanley and to Cambridge, that we might have to be towed out either by the *Endurance* or by the *James Clark Ross*.

[Part 2 0:42:21] Norris: That was going around my mind. I mean the radio operator at the time was – I can't remember his name but he was quite a tall guy, very good, and he was told by Stuart Lawrence to fax everything off. So he sent a fax to Stanley, a fax to Cambridge, a fax to our agents in South Africa, and a fax to Uruguay explaining that we'd had this propulsion fire on board, and the ship was stuck in ice but luckily no-one was hurt and we might have to be towed out. So obviously when the message got to Cambridge, all hell broke loose as it was a HUSKY. That was a code word that BAS used for an emergency: a HUSKY situation. So that went into panic mode in Cambridge and obviously from Stanley and other people around, but Charlie was the radio op and he told this story that when he sent the fax off to Cape Town, he had to push these buttons and it was all on the fax machine, and he may, he said, have pushed the wrong button because he had a fax back from Cape Town that said something along the lines of 'Sorry to hear that you have had a fire on board your ship and you are stuck in the ice in the Antarctic, but very pleased to hear that no-one has been hurt or injured, but as we are a music publishing company, we don't think we can help you!' [Laughs]

[Part 2 0:44:35] Norris: Charlie Waddicor, that's it, Charlie Waddicor was his name. Anyway this couple of days of contemplation: it was more thinking more than anything, between Alan Allison, my little bit of contribution, but the main guy really was Derek Forward. He really thought things through and I think if it had just been the ship's personnel that were left on board the ship in a situation like that, it would never have worked and we would have had to be towed out, but because we had all these Halley Bad Boys on board ship, we had this incredible amount of manpower and they all volunteered, to a man, to help out in this situation. Again, Alan Allison and Derek's idea, and obviously my involvement, was to rip out the whole of this

burned out end of the propulsion motor and then using the bus bars to bypass the burned out motor, we could just operate then off the one remaining propulsion motor. And so the whole of this swung into action and it was amazing really.

[Part 2 0:46:06] Norris: We were only getting two or three hours sleep a night but working around the clock, hand dismantling the whole of this massive motor and again using the manpower from these Halley guys who were brilliant. I mean we were chipping out all these sections of old burned out wiring, removal of the coils, winched them out and of course Alan Allison's job, as Chief Engineer was to make sure that every last nut, bolt and coil was labelled where it came from. Because when this went back into refit, for a brand new motor, we knew exactly what came from where. So that was basically Alan Allison's job was to document everything and put it down where everything was and we and the Halley Bad Boys, we were just the grunts to go in and chip everything out. Then, once that was done, and everything was clear, and I had installed to connecting bars for the other motor, we knew that the *JCR* was on its way to tow us out of the pack ice, but there was one thing that Stuart Lawrence would have hated, was to be towed out by the *James Clark Ross*.

[Part 2 0:47:36] Norris: So I'm busy putting all new brushes in our one remaining propulsion motor, polishing up the commutator, cleaning all out from the dust, maintaining, making sure it was all absolutely perfect. And Stuart Lawrence was coming down. I was the only one working in the propulsion motor room at the time and Stuart Lawrence was coming in saying 'Look, there's this iceberg bearing down on us. It's moving us. It could knock us in about an hour's time. How long have you got?' I said 'Give me twenty minutes. Twenty minutes – that's all I need.' He said 'OK'. So I'm busy polishing this, putting new brushes in, clearing it all up, and then I got everything finished and I told Alan Allison and Stuart that it had all been cleared away. I can't reiterate what a brilliant job Derek Forward, as Second Engineer, did on it. He was the main driving force as Second Engineer. Anyway, with minutes to go before this iceberg came down, bearing on us, we got the OK to Stuart and Alan Allison to fire up and then we moved out of the pack ice on our own steam just as the *JCR* was coming over the horizon. Absolutely brilliant it was; it was great. And then we very slowly had to cancel the rest of the year's programme and slowly then make our way back to UK to have a new propulsion motor fitted.

[Part 2 0:49:13] Tolson: You had another unpleasant experience at Halley then, with a fire?

Norris: Oh we had a fire at Halley. Yes, that could have been a lot worse than what it was. It was a Saturday night. I can't remember what month but I knew it was a Saturday night because everyone was dressed up and seated for their meal.

[Part 2 0:49:35] Tolson: What year would this have been, approximately?

Norris: That would have been '76. I was just getting up from the dinner table to go to the loo, and everyone else was sitting around, and I walked out to the corridor and I could smell burning. [Phone rings] Excuse me Jack.

[Part 2 0:50:02] Tolson: So you just got up out of your chair and you smelled ...?

Norris: I was off to the loo and I smelled burning somewhere; I didn't know where at the time. So I went down the corridor, past the labs and turned left down through the workshops towards the generator shed, and there was also one of the other Fids with me. I can't remember who it was now but we were both walking down towards the generating shed. When I opened up the door of the generating shed, I saw that this diesel pipe off one of the generators, off one of the injectors, had broken and was spraying fuel onto the generator and was on fire, and was alight and it was creating a lot of smoke and stuff like this. I had to assess the situation and I thought to myself 'Right, I can see what's going. If I shut that generator down now, then it would plunge everyone into darkness and create a lot more panic.' So the idea: I could see where the fire was. I had a fire extinguisher with me but I thought 'The best thing now is to get Alec Hurley down, start up the new generator, and then change over and then shut down the generator that was generating all these flames and smoke.'

[Part 2 0:51:40] Norris: So I said to the guy with me, I said 'Right. Calmly' I said 'go back to the dining room. Tell Alec Hurley that there's a problem and there's a diesel fire in the generating shed and get him to come down. And that's what we do.' So he said 'Right.' I found out later that he ran down and back to the dining room, opened the door to the dining room and shouted 'Fire! Fire! Fire!' which wasn't what I wanted. And again everything went into panic mode after that, but again, Alec came down and we changed over generators and shut everything down. But if it wasn't noticed at the time, it could have been a very nasty situation, because in those days you didn't have smoke detectors or fire alarms through the base. You were very much left to your own devices and you depended on the night met man to do his rounds, to check everything.

[Part 2 0:52:52] Tolson: So potentially, what could have happened in the worst scenario?

Norris: Well without doubt it could have led to the burning down of the genny shed, which was at this time thirty feet under the ice and that would have been it.

[Part 2 0:53:13] Tolson: And you, as a base, would have been left in isolation in the sense that you wouldn't have had any electrical power?

Norris: Any electrical power, yes.

[Part 2 0:53:20] Tolson: And within days you would have been freezing, literally? You were in winter, presumably?

Norris: Yes. Oh when you look back on it, it was quite a ... It had the potential to be a very nasty situation.

[Part 2 0:53:36] Tolson: I'm sure at the time, you look back on it and you probably were mulling it over between yourselves, thinking 'What if ...?' And what if that had happened? Where would the rescue, could it have come from? Could it have come from anywhere?

Norris: Errm. If so it would have had to have been an air rescue. I think that was the only way if things had developed into that situation, it would have had to have been

an air rescue. No other way in that time frame, But again, you had the people on base like Alex Hurley, myself, who were able to get the situation under control. In fact it was quite funny, interesting that whole Armco base because one of the things that to get an actual earth, all the Armco had to be linked together. So that was the earth for all the electrical equipment, was the Armco, so it all had to be big metal earthing things.

[Part 2 0:54:48] Norris: But every time we started a generator, the scientific instruments would ‘throw wobblies’ all over the place until the generator, after a day had warmed up and the scientific instruments would settle down and they would get readings. So this was a problem for the scientists and they said to me ‘What can we do to get rid of this?’ So with Jack Temple, I brought this big canvas cover to cover the alternator, and underneath put a big board with electric light bulbs on them, so all the time the generator was off and not being used, this lighting/ heating situation would keep the generator warm. So when we swapped over generators, it would then come on line without throwing all these scientific instruments in a wobbly. But that’s the kind of thing you learn by being there and seeing what the problem is and then correcting it.

[Part 2 0:56:01] Tolson: Just as a thought, all bases have their winter jolly at some stage of the season, because it’s only right that people should get out and experience some sort of excitement. Do you think over the years sometimes these jollies have been a little bit too ambitious? People have been killed. Is it something that at the time you thought was quite all right to do and ??? [inaudible]?

Norris: It’s funny isn’t it? I’d like to think the fact that when you go to these places, you eventually become in tune with your environment and you know how bad the environment could get. But once you are in tune with your environment, you think ‘Yes, I can do that; I can do this.’ And so you don’t think anything about going out and doing it. But I think from the BAS point of view, we used to moan and groan about being told not to do things by BAS, but with some of the old BAS people, they knew you were going to do it anyway. But there’s some thought for the new Health & Safety side of things because we used to get away with a lot of things that weren’t controlled as much as they are now, and of course there’s that great thing ... When I started going back to BAS on the *Bransfield* from ’94 onwards, up to 1999, this great inclusion of all the brilliant women that started coming down. I mean I remember Bunny Fuchs saying that he wasn’t really keen on having women wintering down South. But they have been some of the most successful people down there including: I can’t remember her name now¹⁰, who became the base commander at Halley and then went on to become base commander at South Georgia and Bird Island. So, amazing people.

[Part 2 0:58:30] Tolson: So you carried on for a few more years on the *Bransfield* up until 1999? What was that reason? Why did you leave BAS in the end?

Norris: Sadly, I didn’t want to leave BAS. I was quite happy and I loved the job that I was doing and I was fully expecting to stay on the *Bransfield* until I was forced out through retirement. But in the latter parts of the 1990s, the *Bransfield* was in refit, up

¹⁰ Vicky Auld.

in Newcastle on the Tyne at Wallsend and I was staying in bed and breakfast in Wallsend High Street (which is another story). But the ship was in refit for so many months of the year and spending millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to renew a lot of the stuff. We had this sort of letter from BAS to say the idea was to have the *Bransfield* refitted and replace and update and renew and have all new equipment: (radar, ice navigation stuff, new bow sections, deck plates), all this new equipment installed, and the idea was to keep the ship going for another ten years.

[Part 2 1:00:06] Norris: And this would allow BAS then to put out for tender to all these different shipbuilding companies, a tender for a brand new ship to be built under NERC and the British Antarctic Survey, and this would take BAS into the 21st century. So we did, for I think it was about four years, we went up to Wallsend, up on the Tyne and every year we would do something new to refit the *Bransfield*. People like Stuart Lawrence and Alan Allison were very much involved in this, and during that period these companies that BAS had commissioned, and this was going to literally a competition between these companies, and then they would select one to build the brand new ship for the British Antarctic Survey. And these representatives from these shipbuilding companies would come up and obviously talk to people like Stuart Lawrence and Alan Allison, wanting to know about the ship's capacity, the amount of time it would be away from the UK, the hold space that was required, the refrigeration space that was required, what they needed on the bridge.

[Part 2 1:01:31] Norris: I had a very minor role, like Alan Allison and Stuart Lawrence would tell me 'Oh could you show them this, show them that?' I would go down and take them to different areas so they would get an idea of what we were looking for. Of course every year we would go back to Newcastle, do a bit more refitting and these people would go away and submit their designs to BAS for this brand new ship. Then all of a sudden, out of the blue, the goalposts were moved and it was then decided that BAS were going to lease under this PFI¹¹ Government project, or programme, they would lease in a ship from Riebers from Norway. I think it was something ridiculous – about £20 million a year or something. And that would replace not only the *Bransfield* but also this new build of the ship that was going to replace the *Bransfield*. It just came out of the blue and was quite a shock to everybody.

[Part 2 1:02:45] Norris: And of course a lot of people didn't like it but whoever the powers that be decided this thing was going through, and certain things became apparent, that for this leased ship, that would normally spend two or three months up in the Arctic, to spend eight months in the Antarctic, it didn't have enough refrigeration space so the powers that be said 'Oh that's no problem. We will just put refrigerated containers on the deck.' Then it was pointed out that the hold space on this new ship couldn't accommodate all the vehicles that were needed to take back to the Antarctic at the start of every season. They said 'Oh no problem. We will put those on the deck.' And of course it was pointed out that we already had the refrigerated containers on the ship. So they said 'OK, we will put them on the helicopter deck.'

[Part 2 1:03:42] Norris: Then it was pointed out that the crane on the helicopter deck didn't have enough reach to offload the vehicles on the ice shelf at Halley. So all

¹¹ Private Finance Initiative.

these things were being bandied around, but it became quite obvious that this was going to go through, whatever, and the *Bransfield*, despite having all these millions of pounds of taxpayers' money that was going to be scrapped or given to Riebers and Riebers were going to scrap it, even though there were a lot of interested people that wanted to buy this fully functional ship with lots of cabin space on it, if it was going to be used for Antarctic cruising. I believe even Robert Swan was interested in doing trips down to bring all the rubbish out from Antarctic bases and stuff like that. But it wasn't to be. As far as I know the *Bransfield* in the beautiful state that it was in, was given to Riebers and they scrapped it.

[Part 2 1:04:55] Tolson: Steve, as a final, final thought, if you could go back to BAS again, as a Fid or an officer, which base whatever, what is the one tough one? What is the one place you would want to be – ship or an Antarctic base?

Norris: I think ship because you get ... Every day, especially on the *Bransfield*, every day you would wake up and you would be surrounded by penguins, albatross flying in the sky, whales, dolphins. Personally I never ever got tired of that. Occasionally you would get a seaman who would come on board for just one trip and just look up and say 'Oh, it's just white.' but that never came home to me. It always came: there was so much variety in the wildlife. So that was what always drew me back I think, and I enjoyed ship life more so on board the *Biscoe* and the *Bransfield*, more so than I did with P & O. I felt that I didn't fit in with the social requirements that were expected of you on board P & O passenger liners. But I really felt that I enjoyed the *Biscoe* and the *Bransfield*. Again, I remember being on the *Biscoe*, calling in at Stanley and bumping into David Attenborough and one of his cameramen. They had just finished *Life on Earth* and they were doing *Living Planet* and I was jogging past the Upland Goose Hotel and bumped into them, so I invited them on board the *Biscoe*. So they came on board, I showed them around the *Biscoe*, they met Malcolm¹² (he was captain) and Chris, the motorman at the time, who became a ship's officer.

[Part 2 1:07:10] Tolson: Johnson?

Norris: Chris Johnson, yes, and as a Falkland Islander, they loved him They thought he was great. When they left, they gave me a signed copy, to me, signed by David Attenborough, the *Reader's Digest* version of *Life on Earth*. And me being me, I decided I couldn't be selfish enough to accept it, so I accepted it on behalf of the ship, and it was added to the ship's library. So I think whenever they scrapped the *Biscoe*, that thing disappeared and I would love to know where that signed edition of the *Reader's Digest* version of *Life on Earth* was. Maybe Malcolm's got it; I don't know, but that was really good.

[Part 2 1:08:00] Tolson: But something else that you came across, quite by good chance, in an antiques place, goes back to the *John Biscoe*?

Norris: Ah, that was another very interesting one. I was working over in Ireland and I came back home, in fact it was just this year, and I had a telephone call from a friend of mine. Now originally, he's a naval architect by profession, and during the Falklands War he was number 2 to the C in C Portsmouth Home Command. So he

¹² Malcolm Phelps.

was heavily involved in getting ships ready for the Falklands War. But when retired, he took his interest in antiques and he became a porter at Nesbitt's auction house in Southsea, which he does for I think one week out of every four, just as a part-time job.

[Part 2 0:08:56] Norris: He, on my behalf, he noticed at this auction house some polar memorabilia up for auction. He couldn't afford to buy it all, but this woman who bought the whole lot, who was an actual dealer, who was then going to sell it on, he did say to her there was this print of the *John Biscoe* that he noticed my signature was on it. And he said to this lady, 'If you can't sell this, could you please bring it back and I will buy it from you.' with this idea that he would present it to me. So when my friend Chas handed me this print of the *John Biscoe* with my name on it, John Tolson's, Stan Jolley's, Chris Elliott's, I was actually amazed because the date on it was 1977, and now to go full circle and have it back in my possession ... And I can't for the life of me remember why we all signed it, but it said so on the date was 1977, so it was very good of my friend Chas to buy it and then present it back to me. It's a nice bit of Antarctic memorabilia that's now come home.

[Part 2 1:10:18] Tolson: Steve, thanks very much for your memories of BAS.

Norris: It's a pity you didn't bring more tapes with you, Jack.

[Part 2 1:10:25] Tolson: That's the nature, yes. I'll cut you off now [both laugh] while I've got some minutes left for pictures.

[Part 2 1:10:32] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [Part 1 0:09:02] Helping Sir Vivian Fuchs erect a tent in Gillingham Street.
- [Part 1 0:19:48] In the Beagle Channel with both Argentinian and Chilean pilots.
- [Part 1 0:26:09] A hard day's work, cold showers and no dinner.
- [Part 1 0:42:58] Transporting live chickens to South Georgia.
- [Part 1 0:44:52] Origins of Scobie Pye's rat research.
- [Part 1 0:49:02] South Georgia visitors greeted by Scobie Pye's dentures.
- [Part 1 0:50:46] 'Bergar Hammold', the old blind Norwegian whaler.
- [Part 1 0:55:59] Conduit for new wet lab goes astray.
- [Part 1 0:59:14] Stromness and the 'Shackleton 3-piece suite.
- [Part 1 1:07:48] Hammering in screws. 'The slot is for taking them out.'
- [Part 1 1:13:52] Alec Hurley and the met balloon launch.
- [Part 1 1:15:36] ?20C in the bunkrooms.
- [Part 2 0:05:43] Frantic activity at relief.
- [Part 2 0:14:54] Wool run with the *John Biscoe*.
- [Part 2 0:19:08] Rescuing the 3-piece suite from Stromness.
- [Part 2 0:24:17] Hot Bovril and rum.
- [Part 2 0:25:58] The saga of the lost propeller blade.
- [Part 2 0:37:47] Burned out propulsion motor on the *Bransfield*.
- [Part 2 0:50:02] Fire in the generator room at Halley.
- [Part 2 1:01:31] Sad end of the *Bransfield*.
- [Part 2 1:04:55] Meeting David Attenborough in Stanley.