

## NEIL MARSDEN

Edited transcript of a recording of Neil Marsden, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2011. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/144  
Transcribed by Maggie Russell, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Neil Marsden, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2011. Neil Marsden.

Marsden: I'm Neil Marsden; I was born in Bolton Lancashire in 1942

[0:00:19] Lee: When's your birthday?

Marsden: 16<sup>th</sup> November, next week or next week but one, something like that.

[0:00:24] Lee: So you are going to be sixty?

Marsden: nine

[0:00:26] Lee: What was your education like?

Marsden: I went to the local primary school which was fifty yards away from our house. It was a three storey primary school which is fairly, fairly substantial and I got an eleven plus, passed the eleven plus and got a scholarship to the Bolton School which is purportedly the snob factory of Bolton. I mean, both my parents were working class, they worked in the cotton mills and I was a latch key kid from an early, early stage because my dad went out at seven in the morning, my mother went out about half seven and didn't get back until half five at night you know. But I went to Bolton school, they scrimped and saved, and managed to buy a uniform, and really that, the education there was superb and I am still in touch with quite a few school friends and they had a Scout, big Scout troop there and I got heavily involved in the Scouts and I suppose that that, I spent most weekends out building rope bridges or camping or doing something and that probably stood me in good stead in, or set up the what, the idea of going to Antarctica later.

[0:02:06] Lee: So the outdoor life was the life for you?

Marsden: yeah, I mean I, the odd girlfriend I had, used to get quite upset because I couldn't go out with her at weekends because I was too busy going camping [laughter], playing at Scouts. We used to come up to the Lake District quite a lot, we would go for night hikes on the moors around Bolton and all sorts of things, so yeh quite an active outdoor life and I cycled everywhere as you did in those days, that was your mode of transport, the cycle or the bus.

[0:02:43] Lee: Did your formal education stop at A levels?

Marsden: No, I didn't apply for University because I assumed that I wasn't going to pass A levels however I did and I went back to school for one term, applied to University, got accepted at three to do Civil Engineering and left at Christmas and then I became a... Well the school sent me up to the Lake District actually on an out a type of out, to an outdoor centre, to Brathay Hall at Ambleside. It wasn't quite outward bound, it wasn't quite as tough as outward bound but in January and February it was still pretty tough. We used to get woken at seven and have to run down to Windermere and go for a swim at seven in the morning you know and if we didn't do

that we used to go for a run and then we would have a cold shower when we got back. Yeah, so for a month I was up in Brathay Hall, courtesy of the school, which was good because I had already left school. It was an interesting time because there was a group from Ford works at Dagenham, there was a group from Sunderland dock yards and a group from Derbyshire iron works and me, oh and one guy from a public school in Salisbury, he lasted about a week, because everybody took the mickey out of him but what I found amazing really was that I was the only one who could understand what everybody was saying. The other groups couldn't understand a word that they were saying, they had never been outside their Ford works at Dagenham area, Sunderland dockyards and Derbyshire ironworks and they just couldn't, the dialects were so different and it took them a good week to come to terms with each other, you know and we had. That was a good time, we went on a couple of mountain rescues in the snow and things, so January and February was quite a hard time to be up here but I used to come back later and take groups out for a walk on the hills and things if the instructors didn't want to go if I rolled up they were quite happy for me to take the groups out.

After that I became a bus conductor which was fantastic, I really enjoyed being a bus conductor on Ribble, they were out of town routes from Bolton so it wasn't the local corporation so I mean we, I even went from Manchester to Edinburgh and Manchester to Glasgow on expresses. Holiday periods, because Bolton was a mill town it used to have these, we didn't call them wakes week, it was just Bolton holidays but the whole town shut down for a fortnight, everywhere shut, corner shops, everything it was amazing. The newspapers used to be delivered to the corner of the street where the shop was. The shop was shut but somebody would collect the newspapers and then sit there selling the newspapers to people but these days the idea of a town shutting down for a fortnight just doesn't exist you know or even a corner shop shutting but the whole town used to go on holiday to Blackpool and Morecombe, the Isle of Man, wherever Southport and the bus company just put on all the buses it had, some of them were single deckers, really old but they would drag every bus out to clear the backlog on the bus station you know.

[0:06:43] Lee: Where did the Antarctic start appearing in your life?

Marsden: Well I went to University, went to Nottingham University doing Civil Engineering and I got very interested in surveying, I was always interested in mathematics anyway and I had a survey lecturer there who, when the exams were coming up I was actually doing a pass degree which you could in those days, because it was easier than doing an honours degree, I didn't like overworking!, but you could actually, I did an additional honours paper in surveying and so the survey lecturer said one day "Marsden, there's an advert here for surveyors with British Antarctic Survey, you might be interested" I said oh, right, so he gave me this advert and I wrote off and applied.

[0:08:42] Lee: Did you know much about the Antarctic at that point?

Marsden: not particularly,

[0:08:45] Lee: Had you read about Scott and Shackleton?

Marsden: The crossing, yeh, well, not really, mainly the crossing of Antarctica had happened when I was fifteen, fifteen to seventeen so it was a fairly big thing at the time so I had read "Crossing of Antarctica" so that was really all I knew about it. And I got offered a job with some council or other, can't remember, oh no Taylor Woodrow it's a Civil Engineering firm, I got offered at least one job, one with a council, one with Taylor Woodrow. Taylor Woodrow

offered me £1100 a year and British Antarctic Survey offered me a job £450 a year plus £50 for having a degree which was the standard rate, everybody got paid £450, if you had a degree or any special qualification you got an extra fifty quid and on base everybody did the same sort of job. So I turned down the job at £1100 a year and signed on for BAS at £500 a year.

[0:08:54] Lee: What were your parents feeling about this?

Marsden: Well I didn't really give them much choice I suppose; I just announced I was going, I don't think my mother was overjoyed. I'm not sure my girlfriend was either! [Laughter] We had only been going out a year and, yes, I don't know, I never really discussed it with them you know, I just announced I was going and that was it.

[0:09:26] Lee: And you chose the lesser paid job for the excitement?

Marsden: Yes, well if I had gone into civil engineering, once you get into a job or a profession it's very difficult to then take two years off whereas if you don't go, if you don't join in the first place you can come in two years later and you are no worse off than you were but you can't take a two year gap very easily so I decided that going down to Antarctica now was, I could always become a civil engineer when I came back.

[0:10:01] Lee: yeh and I suppose also actually, it wasn't that worse a pay rate because you weren't spending any money.

Marsden: Well supposedly not, I didn't come back with a lot so I must have brought quite a bit of camera gear and stuff, just like everybody else did you know.

[0:10:14] Lee: OK. But in fact it was upped to £900 wasn't it? Fairly swiftly.

Marsden: Well yeah, we got, we went to Directorate of Overseas Surveys at Tolworth for three months training, something like that where the surveyors who had just come back were drawing up their plans, so we met people who had just come back from there. There were, they also had a New Zealander who had just come back from being down south with the New Zealanders and he was a surveyor and they got him to train us in Antarctic surveying and there were three of us. We didn't know where we were going to go but after about a month we got a letter saying "your salary has been increased to £900, do you accept?" Well it was a bit of a strange question, you know, so we instantly signed these bits of paper and sent them back. So yes it was a nice big pay increase, totally unexpected and quite welcome.

[0:11:22] Lee: OK. But you still managed to spend it all on cameras?

Marsden: Pretty well, yeah, yeah, cameras and tape recorders, yeah, hmmm.

[0:11:30] Lee: You went on the "*Biscoe*"?

Marsden: I did, I arrived by taxi at Southampton and the taxi driver said "you're not, where are you going?" I said we're going to Antarctica "what in that tiny tin tub?" because the "*Queen Mary*" was about two berths further along and you could just see the tops of the "*Biscoe's*" masts over the edge of the quay, the tide was out, and this taxi driver was incredulous that anybody would contemplate going anywhere in this thing, never mind to Antarctica.

[0:12:05] Lee: How did you feel about it?

Marsden: It didn't really worry me, nothing does particularly, I just sort of accepted that it had been there before and it had just come back so presumably it would get there again you know. There were twenty of us on board the "*Biscoe*", twenty Fids going down. We had a fairly rough passage, going through The Bay of Biscay a couple of the rails got smashed in and a window smashed but after that it was quite calm, got flying fish coming in through the porthole occasionally. We used to have films on deck, set up a screen and there would be films on deck. Yeah, lived in swimming trunks for I don't know, three weeks or so until we got across to Montevideo which was quite a, Montevideo is quite an experience.

[0:13:00] Lee: Did you sample the wares?

Marsden: No but we found a rather nice bar where we used to go and frequent, young ladies, or not so young ladies and it was quite an eye opener really, yeah. We used to take bottles of Whisky out to exchange for money, you weren't supposed to but you could get through the gate without any problem so we would get Uruguayan money in exchange for a ten and sixpenny bottle of Whisky and in fact we got marooned onshore for some reason, I can't remember now, but we were actually marooned in Montevideo for eighteen hours, I think the "*Biscoe*" was anchored off and it was too rough, that's right the "*Biscoe*" was anchored off and it was too rough for the boat to come in and pick us up and so for eighteen hours, we were sort of, overnight, floating around Montevideo you know. Anyway we then headed off to The Falkland Islands which was yet another revelation.

[0:14:10] Lee: How do you mean?

Marsden: Well, very like the north of Scotland and very English, incredibly English, at the time it had two miles of paved roads I think, The Governor's car was a London Taxi, the doctor had a Rolls Royce and there was a brand new Ford Anglia and apart from that all the other vehicles were Land Rovers, more Land Rovers per head of population in The Falklands than anywhere else apparently and I think there still are. People were really kind, really friendly, and they had this wonderful selection of small stores which no longer exist there, well in fact that's not true, they exist, but not selling the same stuff and each one sold a vast, or would get a range of cameras or tape recorders, record players, whatever you wanted these, I think there were five or six stores in Stanley, would be able to get it for you and of course the Fids brought lots of money, lots of equipment there. We had to fill sand bags, we went to fill sand bags to take down for building projects on the various bases so off over to this wonderful beach with penguins popping up out of the sea and seals on the rocks and we are digging sand up and filling these bags, you know, but it was a great place, I like Stanley.

[0:20:47] Lee: You went to Signy with "*HMS Protector*" to do some surveying work?

Marsden: I did, I went down to Signy on the "*Biscoe*" and I was there for two months helping a Royal Naval party do, update the map of Signy which wasn't particularly good at the time but also the "*Biscoe*" was doing some HiFix work which is a positioning system, Decca HiFix, and so we set up little camps all on Coronation Island, which were the base stations to send out signals for the ship which then steamed up and down, got its' position and was taking soundings so I was, I got flown around in "*Protectors*" helicopters which was good, I had never been in a helicopter before, magic you know and I, oh they were also building a oil tank at Signy, a huge oil tank. Signy was the biological base, not quite sure what they call them these days, but it had

a new hut, a two storey fibreglass hut, which had only been in a year as opposed to all the wooden huts which I came across later further south and they were a good crowd there, they were building this, they had some welders down from Northumberland I think, building this great steel tank and we actually fixed up a railway to, a line to pull stuff up from the, where the ships landed it up to the site of this tank and I had to make sure that every day, just go out and make sure the base was level, when they were laying the cement and things. In fact interestingly enough the tank, they filled the tank up later in the year after I had gone south and it leaked, they never, I think they blamed it on the welding rather than the levelling of the base, but I don't think the tank ever got used to its, for what it was due to do. But at Signy we had the use of one of their boats and outboards and really, it was very free and easy in those days, you could do, providing you told people where you were going, you could go and do pretty well anything you wanted on your own. Two of us took the boat all round Signy Island, we went on a total tour of Signy Island, stopping off at various rookeries and things, the scenery was superb, Coronation Island, there's a glacier across from Signy called sunshine glacier because the sun, for some reason always seems to shine on it, come through the cloud and bumph, and it was a wonderful time, there were fur seals, ordinary seals, penguins, leopard seals around.

[0:23:47] Lee: What's all this about you being you being marooned on "*HMS Protector*" with limited clothing facilities?

Marsden: Oh "*Protector*" was getting on, she was quite old at the time and on the way down to Antarctica they had been painting the hull and they had actually chipped through the hull, the hull was that thin in places, when they were chipping the old paint off they had actually put a hammer through the hull so. She was approaching retirement age and because she was getting on they were really quite scared of ice and I was on board for a meeting with the Naval surveyor, I had been flown on board, when this iceberg started moving in on us so "*Protector*" instantly upped anchors and off and I was stuck there for seven days with just the clothes I stood up in and I hadn't dressed for the occasion or anything, it was just standard Fids clothes you know and I was in the Ward room because I was a scientist. It was, that was an experience, I had the run of the ship, I could go anywhere I wanted from the bridge with the Captain down to the ratings mess and that was good, I enjoyed that as well.

[0:25:05] Lee: Did they not find you some clothes?

Marsden: No

[0:25:08] Lee: No? [Laughter] not even after a week?

Marsden: yeah, yeah, it was, not that I recall, they might of done but I don't actually recall.

[0:25:17] Lee: There's a story about your cabin mate not surviving this trip?

Marsden: Ah well, this yeah, it wasn't just him in actual fact and that comes a bit later when we got down to Adelaide really. After we had left Signy, went down on the "*Biscoe*" I mean all the BAS ships do is resupply the bases so we stopped at Deception Island which reminded me of nothing more or less than a Wigan slag heap because there was no snow there at the time, there was just this volcanic ash and I thought good God I have just come away from slag heaps like this in Lancashire and we put in a new fibreglass hut, a single storey hut, we left everything there, we didn't assemble it but we out all the parts there. Interesting story about that is that they built this hut, whatever and after the eruption it was left there and then it vanished and I went

down with John Tate at a later date and we went round and he said I don't remember a green hut and I said well come on we'll go and have a look and we found this concrete base and there was a toilet and an Aga on this big concrete base yeah, [laughter]and in one corner there was a piece of green fibreglass which they, whoever had taken the hut hadn't managed to unbolt this particular corner and that was all that was left of this fibreglass hut. Somebody had come in and taken it you know; I don't think it's ever been located. So we put the fibreglass hut in there and then we went off to Argentine Islands and just overcome by the scenery, the scenery is unbelievable, going through Lemaire Chanel and the scenery at Argentine Islands was just gobsmacking you know. We had a superb calm evening there and the "*Shackleton*" came in as well and the sun was setting, really calm and I've got a slide, there was a little piece of rock, probably no bigger than the bed, right no bigger than that single bed, just sticking up out of the water and I've got a picture of four guys with tripods on this rock and the "*Shackleton*" in the background with the sun setting, they were trying to get a decent, a good photo of the two ships together you know. Fids will do anything for a photograph and then we went down to Adelaide and on the way down the survey programme that I'd been, gone down there to do, got totally rearranged because it relied on having two aircraft available and one aircraft had landed heavily at Adelaide and pushed a strut up through the cockpit so couldn't be used. The other aircraft for health and safety reasons, although it wasn't called health and safety in those days, wasn't allowed to fly anywhere where there wasn't already a dog team or a camp in case he couldn't take off again or whatever so the idea was that I was going to fly round from mountain top to mountain top putting in a control system for future aerial photographs so because we only had one plane that went out of the window and because there was only one plane this curtailed not only the survey programme but the geological programme, flying people around etcetera and so on the way down to Adelaide we had Bill Sloman and I can't remember who else, somebody else from head office on board, and there were great talks about how to reorganise everything and when we got to Adelaide some of the people who thought they were there for two years got told there wasn't anything for them to do because it had all had to be rearranged. My cabin mate was supposed to stay there, he came down on the "*Biscoe*" and he went back on the "*Biscoe*" because there was no longer a job for him and I should have been staying, I should have been at Adelaide being flown around, in fact I got shipped to Stonington because that's where, that became the sledging base then because from Stonington you could actually get onto the plateau and the mainland.

[0:29:48] Lee: Well you made a sledge trip with John Tait which was an interesting experience I gather?

Marsden: Yeah it was. This was really only the second time I had been out with the dogs. John had, it was John's third year down there, he had been a diesel mech at Deception and a diesel mech at Adelaide. He had looked after the dogs but he hadn't done much sledging and I knew nothing about Antarctic sledging of course so anyway and oh I didn't have a dog team the first year, we didn't have enough dogs for everybody to have a dog team and I was the one who missed out but for this particular trip I had actually borrowed a dog team off the Base Leader as it happened and we were going up the north-east glacier to look at, to set up survey stations, find previous survey stations, set up new ones for a local triangulation scheme and we went up the north-east glacier, we passed another couple of sledges going back to base on the way and we went across and we camped, the wind blew up and we camped at the foot of Sodabread. Now this is quite a story and while I was down there I wrote lots of letters to my girlfriend which worked as a diary as well and I found this in one recently and I thought I have got to read this out because this is.....

[0:31:20] Lee: Please do

Marsden: verbatim done possibly two weeks after it happened. We pitched camp in a gale close to the foot of Sodabread; we were both shattered after battling against the wind across the head of the north-east glacier, the wind steadily got worse over the next few days and we were bombarded with pieces of ice and rock, the dogs were squealing at one point as they were hit by them. We could do nothing but lie there and hope the tent wouldn't give, we strengthened the guys with nylon climbing ropes and piled all our dog rations and food and other boxes onto the valence of the tent, however, they didn't last long, the boxes weighed up to fifty pounds and were blown off and disappeared down the glacier. Eventually after three days battering the tent began to succumb, the back poles bent almost to right angles and one snapped, then the material began to go, it ripped in two places and soon the whole outer wall was in shreds. We decided it was time to leave the pyramid tent and take to the second line of defence, the pup tent which is a mountain tent with a sewn in ground sheet of a type seen at home however when we packed our personal bags and dressed against the cold emerged into the icy blast of who knows how many knot wind we found that the pup tent too had been blown away. This was not good, things were beginning to look quite black, still we had another safety device with us the Zarsky sac, just a thin nylon envelope into which you climbed and lay protected from the wind and drift but not the cold. We were climbing into the sack when suddenly it too tore. This was about four o'clock on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1965 and it was beginning to go dark, we then tried to form the sledges into a windbreak against the drift and flying ice, visibility was about ten yards, we climbed into our sleeping bags within the wind break and lay down to wait until the wind abated. It wasn't very pleasant there either and soon we were shivering away merrily, we then decided to try and find a crevasse that we could get into and at least be out of the wind. We left the sledges and set off towards a set of holes we had noticed when we first camped, after about ten yards we were blown off our feet. I hit the sledges and held on; John just vanished into the drift. I lay there shocked and shivering and wondering what the hell to do then I saw that the last gust had taken my sleeping bag with it. A frozen night loomed ahead, if I survived, anyway I pull myself together and peered about and low and behold there was John crawling back to the sledges, he had just managed to grab hold of a dog after about fifty yards and stop, he then crawled back along the dog span and then to the sledges. The loss of the sleeping bag was a major problem as if we hadn't enough anyway. John tied on a climbing rope and set off towards the crevasse again while I stayed at the sledges and belayed him; three times he came back for more rope but eventually made it to the crevasse which he decided was accessible and useable. We grabbed our personal bags and crawled away. It was heaven to be out of the wind, we worked our way down into the crevasse and found a reasonable spot about thirty foot down, there was plenty of drift in the air but the wind didn't penetrate and that was the main thing. We did another sortie back to the sledges to recover the Primus stove about all we had left as virtually everything else had been blown away including the Tilley lamp and the radio box. We settled in for a cold night, we sang and I can't sing, we talked, anything but sleep. John was in his double sleeping bag and I was between two sheepskins, the drift kept piling in through the entrance and we were getting covered. I spent most of the night walking about to try and keep warm up and down a four foot stretch of hard packed snow. We decided to get up about four o'clock in the morning and John was so drifted in that he couldn't move. I had to dig him out and drag him out of his sleeping bag, we were very cold. [Clearing of throat, sounding quite emotional] We made plans as to what to do within the crevasse to improve things if the wind didn't drop that day, we were going to dig out a sort of igloo and try and keep the drift out and also try and dry some of our gear so we might be able to get some sleep that night. As dawn approached the drift seemed to have almost stopped and we were hopeful of enough visibility to allow us to set off back towards base which was about thirteen miles away, we staggered out of the crevasse and found

that the wind had eased and the drift was not as thick and we could see enough landmarks to enable us to set off. We gathered as much of our gear as we had left, very little I may add, and harnessed the dogs and loaded the sledges. John led off and I followed, however, after about twenty yards one of my dogs collapsed, probably the after effects of a fight that had happened four days before and being battered by the wind-blown ice. I had to stop and strap him to the sledge, by the time I had finished John and his sledge had disappeared across the glacier and into the low drift, my lead dog refused to head into the wind and so I couldn't follow him, this was partly because it wasn't my dog team of course and so they weren't used to my voice, ermmm, that was the last I saw of John until I got back to base some seven hours later, what a trip. There were times, [breaking down whilst speaking, very emotional] there were times when I was wishing I had stayed in the crevasse, the sledge kept overturning and it took me all my strength to right it, the wind was hell and only five of the remaining seven dogs were pulling, eventually I had to let the other two off and hope they would return to base in their own time. One arrived at base a week later and the other was found living in a dilapidated Argentine packing case which posed as a refuge on the glacier. At one point I was weak and I had to stop and eat a bar of chocolate as I could hardly stand up, a sledge party some days later reported that my sledge tracks led right through a very heavily crevassed area which we would normally make a wide detour around. The team and I eventually arrived back at base two hours behind John; I was just about all in. The guys on base were preparing to send out a search party for me and were quite pleased to see me appear at the top of the ramp. I was very cold and was ushered into the hut and my hands bathed in warm water, I had frostbite on eight of my fingers and they went a worrying purple colour, after being spoon fed the evening meal I was packed off to bed and my fingers were dressed. For the next week I was virtually helpless, unable to do anything for myself, the others had been getting me dressed and washing me occasionally, we don't have a doctor on base at Stonington, the nearest one was at Adelaide and inaccessible however he did prescribe a triple rum every night to help get the blood in my hands circulating again which was quite handy [Lee chuckling quietly]. The blisters on some of my fingers amalgamated into one and were the subject of many photos, at night I had my hands in wire cages to prevent the sheets irritating the blisters this was quite inconvenient at times as you may well imagine. After a few days the blisters were punctured because they were very painful and the then started to dry up and eventually I could sleep with only dressings on. The weight of opinion on base was that I had been very fortunate not to lose any fingers. I'm sure this was down to the care which was metered out by the others on base and the doctors input although there was a slight misunderstanding occurred, my girlfriend at the time, later my wife, was a pharmacist and I can recall her saying codeine shouldn't be taken with alcohol, the others on base said I could have them after alcohol, about four days later the doc came on the radio and said he hoped he hadn't been misunderstood and they had not been feeding me alcohol while I was still taking codeine! Still no effects, only sensitive fingers, slightly bent or swollen to show that I ever had frostbite. [Deep sigh]

[0:40:08] Lee: Well done, that was clearly a tough, tough, tough time.

Marsden: Yes and that upset the next bit of the survey programme that we had planned because my fingers were so tender I couldn't actually go out when it was really cold until they had recovered so after mid-winter the other surveyor nicknamed "The Vicar" after the Vicar of Bray changed his mind so many times in a day along with John Tait and another general assistant, they went out to do some reconnoitring up round Horseshoe Island and Lallemand Fjord where we were going to put in more survey stations in again as control for aerial photographs in the future and they decided to, it was, they had a spare day so they went up, I think it's the Hind Glacier and they could see that there was sea-ice in all the way to Detaille Island so they

decided they would go and have a trip to Detaille Island, I am not sure this was sanctioned by BAS or any, I think they just decided to go, in fact I am sure they just decided to go. So they got to Detaille Island which was an old base which had been evacuated very rapidly in I think 1957 and stuff was just left as the lads had had very short notice to get out and everything was still just left around. So they settled in for the night and when they got up the next morning I think it was the sea ice had blown out and it never reformed and they were there for 5 months or something, they managed to ship the "Vicar" and 12 dogs across to the mainland because there was a boat and an engine at Detaille Island, the idea being that they were all going to go across, so the first calm day, they went, took the vicar over and then the weather was never calm again so the vicar was over on the mainland with 12 dogs, Jimmy and John were on Detaille Island on their own and that was it until, I think it was 5 months or something until "*The Shackleton*" came and rescued them so I had to find something else to do, to survey [Lee laughter]. The plane had started to fly by this time and in fact it was decided that I'd go to Adelaide, we would fly across to Adelaide, I still had a general assistant with me and we would do some work on Adelaide Island. So we flew to Adelaide and that was good, it was a different base to go to, good group of lads. We went up the glacier at Adelaide and we got stuck in a blizzard for 30 days and so I achieved absolutely no survey work whatsoever in the first year because by the time, we'd run out of food anyway, by the time the blizzard had stopped it was time to go back and get on the ship and go back to Stonington.

[0:43:41] Lee: Let's take you back to the trip with John Tait because I want to, you just read about. Did you at any time think you weren't going to make it?

Marsden: Oooh yeah, erm, yes I think when me sleeping bag blew away, in fact in the crevasse probably because I am not sure we would have survived another night or two in the crevasse.

[0:44:09] Lee: So that was an act of genius wasn't it, to go and find the crevasse?

Marsden: Yes, yes it got us out of the wind which was the real problem.

[0:44:16] Lee: Was there any kind of discussion afterwards about?

Marsden: No, never

[0:44:21] Lee: The base leaders

Marsden: There's only John and I know what really happened there and that's probably a, that's a much longer report than we put in the accident report at the time.

[0:44:34] Lee: It bears a strong resemblance to what Fuchs writes in *Ice and Men*, did he have access to your letters?

Marsden: No

[0:44:41] Lee: no?

Marsden: No, so we must have actually done that, done the accident report pretty well soon after we got back.

[0:44:51] Lee: But there were no lessons to be learnt, really? It was just one of those things?

Marsden: Well, yes, not really, just be careful where you camp. [Lee laughter] John as I say, neither of us were particularly experienced in Antarctic camping at the time and we could probably have picked a better spot. We would probably have been better off not going, not heading off across the glacier but staying where we were, where we passed the other two who camped quite happily on the other side of the glacier, they camped that night and went back to base next day whereas we went across the glacier to the other side and that's how we ended up you know.

[0:45:31] Lee: Did you feel as though you were being given some help from somewhere, a higher authority?

Marsden: [sighs] I Don't know. Ermm, possibly, I am not very religious, but I think I did pray at one time, and going back down the, errr, I mean I took the shortest route ever across the north-east glacier, we were breaking, crevasses were opening up underneath the sledge, the dogs would go across them and there's a, I went cross on the sledge, there would be a big crack, I would look round and there'd be a crevasse had opened up and I didn't have much control over the dogs but they got me back to base which was good, yeah.

[0:46:17] Lee: Let's talk about the next season if we may.

Marsden: So that was the first year. [laughing]

[0:46:20] Lee: Yeah, an interesting but if not terribly fruitful season.

Marsden: Well the second year, right

[0:46:26] Lee: Was that better, the second year?

Marsden: Well, we had two aeroplanes but unfortunately one of the surveyors at Halley Bay had managed to throw his tellurometer, which is a distance measuring equipment, down a mountain or something and they decided that the survey at Halley Bay was more important than the survey at Stonington so they took my tellurometer off me and they took it round to Halley Bay so I didn't have the equipment to do what I had gone down to do in the first place so we had yet another plan which was that I went out with a geologist and I would do sledge wheel and compass traverse which is back to square one you know I mean we had all this modern equipment but we were back to Scott and Shackleton surveying with sledge wheel and compass.

[0:47:24] Lee: Was this with Keith Holmes?

Marsden: Yes, and err, yeah, so

[0:47:30] Lee: How was that? Because I mean, the old methods are often the most reliable methods aren't they?

Marsden: hmmm, well it was good

[0:47:36] Lee: were you getting decent results?

Marsden: it was back to basic surveying you know, It's what's all surveying is based on, that's what you learn because if can understand the basics of distance, sledge wheel being your

distance measurer and the compass being your bearing all survey sort of stems from that whether you're using very sophisticated equipment or not. That was later in the summer, I am just trying to think because, oh before, the next year, right. There had been an accident at Halley Bay the year before where three men had got killed when a Muskeg went down a crevasse, there was a fourth guy with them who was a geologist with a dog team, he was behind them and he couldn't drive the dog team particularly, they didn't do that much dog sledding at Halley Bay, it was more of a, they had big Muskegs and things and they took the dogs out, the dogs just followed the tractor in the main so he had spent two days trying to get back to a base with a radio, he didn't have a radio with him, it was on the tractor that had gone down.

[0:49:05] Lee: This was Ian Ross

Marsden: This was Ian Ross, and so they shipped Ian across to Stonington for his second year so we now had three geologists on base and two surveyors and the radio op came from, moved across from Adelaide, John Noel and we had a new diesel mech Tom Allan and it was, it was an accepted thing that on a sledging base the diesel mech and radio op would go and have a holiday if you like before everybody left base, they could go off for a couple of weeks and play at sledging so Tom and John went off and they went up the north-east glacier where John and I had been the year before and their radio didn't, radio communication was never brilliant in those days and especially up the top of the north-east so we didn't hear from them after three days but we didn't particularly worry about it, the wind blew up and there was a lot of drift around and things but it was nothing unusual to be out of contact. Anyway after about ten days it was decided that something must have happened to them so Keith Holmes and I set off to look for them and I think it was the second or third day we saw these black specks in the snow and we found Tom and John and they were both dead, all the dogs were dead.

[0:51:04] Lee: Describe to me what you saw, what did you find, if you can.

Marsden: Initially the big black speck was John Noel, who was, it was the top half of John Noel, he was buried from waist downwards, he was sort of looking out towards a rocky slope about a hundred yards away, two hundred yards away, something like that and at the bottom of this rocky slope was Tom Allan lying on his back sort of feet towards John and presumably, well we.....

[0:51:46] Lee: What did you conclude?

Marsden: well, we went straight back to base, having found them, we didn't actually, we looked around but we couldn't actually, there was no sign of a tent or anything so actually went straight back to base to report what we had found and a couple of days later four of us went back to dig around and see what had happened and they'd not actually pitched the tent, they had actually dug a snow hole and had used the tent as covering for the tunnel into the snow hole, the conclusion we came to was they must have run out of oxygen, the tunnel entrance was blocked off, they had dug up through the snow hole roof, because when we dug down round John, he'd only got a, he wasn't dressed in outdoor gear below the waist he had got his indoor gear on if you like so we dug round and there was this snow hole we found, they had obviously been living in this snow hole so we decided they had possibly run out of oxygen in there or something and so they had probably having in mind what had happened to John Tait and I the year before Tom had set off to look for a crevasse to, for them to get into and they must have been quite weak I presume because, I mean they were both fit climbers, they weren't just radio

op and a diesel mech, they were actually, I think Tom Allan had.... probably one of the reasons he had dug a snow hole I think Tom Allan had actually dug snow holes in the Alps and things and slept in them and John had just frozen to death in the hole waiting for Tom to return. All the dogs had died, they were buried about six foot down, the snow had just accumulated and so, I mean it is highly unusual for the dogs to die; they would normally chew their way off and make their way back to base so we lost two men and two dog teams so that wasn't a good start to the year and it didn't do Ian Ross a lot of good having just lost three friends on the previous base, he came across to our base and lost two more friends.

[0:54:21] Lee: What did you find in the snow hole?

Marsden: What you would expect to find in a tent really, the primus, the radio, the cooking stuff, sleeping bags, just what you would expect to find in the inside of a tent, it was where they had been living, you know.

[0:54:39] Lee: Terry Tallis who was Base Leader I think wasn't he, at that time?

Marsden: He was, yep.

[0:54:43] Lee: When I spoke to him yesterday he thought that perhaps the primus stove had kind of soaked up the oxygen.

Marsden: It could well have done yes, because if they had not got a vent then the primus stove would eat up the oxygen, you now and as I say the entrance to the tunnel was blocked, when Keith and I first got there we couldn't see the tent, we could only see John and Tom so we could surmise they had been living in a snow hole but we couldn't see any, the snow had accumulated so much, there was no sign of an entrance tunnel or anything so it wasn't until we dug out and found the tent and then dug underneath the tent was a bit of a gap and we followed the tent back and the tunnel entrance was just blocked. So, yes that didn't set the year off very well, didn't do Terry's' first year or Terry's year as base leader a lot of good either.

[0:55:40] Lee: You had to bring the bodies back?

Marsden: Mmmmm

[0:55:43] Lee: Was that, was that a straight forward process?

Marsden: Well, I mean they were frozen into the, they weren't laid out shall we say, Tom was easier than John, but John was a strange shape and it 's not very pleasant carrying dead bodies on a sledge, yeah.

[0:56:08] Lee: Where you delayed?

Marsden: Yes we, we stayed there for about three, two or three days while we dug around so we got these two dead bodies lying around while we dug around and tried to find out what had happened you know. I didn't sleep very well for the next couple of months when I got back to base, ermmm, yeah and whether we should have taken them back or whether we should have left them or what I don't know but they are buried at Stonington anyway.

[0:56:40] Lee: Were you aware of the debate that was going on between Stonington and London about what the bodies?

Marsden: No, no

[0:56:46] Lee: OK, there was a suggestion that the bodies should have been shipped back to Britain

Marsden: Was there?

[0:56:50] Lee: You should keep them all winter and then

Marsden: mmmm, yes

[0:56:55] Lee: Your Base Commander was protecting you from that experience I think?

Marsden: I think he probably was yes, yes. So we then didn't have a diesel mech or a radio op so Terry took over being the radio op and Alec Bottomley took over being the diesel mech and they should have been, they were two general assistants to go out with the teams so Keith and I went out together, a surveyor and a geologist, and we were out for four months. Keith collecting rock samples and me doing sledge wheel and compass traverse or where he had collected them from and we had a good time, it was, we sledged down south across the sea ice which, they weren't two good years for sea ice actually. The sea ice had blown out at Detaille Island the year before, it kept going in and out in Neny Fjord and in the second year there was, we used to drill down through the sea ice with a big brace and bit if you like, six foot long brace and bit to see whether it was safe enough to go travelling on but I mean we had fifteen inches at one time when two years before it had been five foot thick so it was, it was a bit dodgy which is why they moved the sledging base from Adelaide to Stonington because there was no guarantee that there would be sea ice between Adelaide and Stonington so they would have never have got off to get to the mainland to do anything had we been at Adelaide. But we sledged down up the Wordie Glacier to the Eternity Range which was an area that nobody had set foot in before so this was real unknown territory and in fact we camped at one point on a col between, the Eternity Range is Faith, Hope and Charity Mountains, and we camped between on a col between Hope and Charity and in fact Keith climbed Charity, that's not what I have put there but it was in fact Charity that Keith climbed, I got half way up and then sat and waited for him but I don't think that's registered anywhere as being a first ascent because nobody had been there before, there is a book out that lists first ascents, I must see whether I can check on that.

[0:59:43] Lee: There was rather an interesting descent of a glacier on one, the north east glacier?

Marsden: Oh, that was after John Tait and I, oh no that would be, that could well, so many interesting descents

[0:59:55] Lee: You and Keith

Marsden: Err, from Stonington, the way to get up to the plateau was to go up the north east glacier up soda bread slope which was fairly short but very steep to a place called the amphitheatre which was a big bowl, round the amphitheatre and climb up out of the amphitheatre onto the plateau and we spent the spring of the first year, the second year. We

spent oh two months sledging stores up there only to get to the top and get stuck in blizzards and start running out of food and whatever and have to go back to base and, so that, not easy working in the Antarctic (laughter). So, the amount of effort that went in to shipping stuff up there because we used to use either two teams, eighteen dogs to pull one sledge with half a load up this slope, two guys pushing or one, one leading the dogs, encouraging them and one behind the sledge or you'd have just one team on a sledge and a quarter of a load going up this slope so to ship a load of sledge stuff up you'd got to go up and down four times. It was hard work, satisfying, and if the weather was good it was entertaining especially coming down with empty sledges but Keith and I came back down that way after our four month sledge trip and we got to the top of the amphitheatre and there was crevasses that we had just never seen, the snow had blown away and there were just crevasses everywhere and we had been merrily sledging over this six months before and we sort of looked round and thought God, what are we going to do here? We didn't have much choice because there wasn't any other way back to base so we set off down these icy slopes, I'd had a new dog sent out to me, flown out to me, he was only a pup really, he wasn't used to being in a trace, he got dragged for the first couple of days, then he started sort of walking along in his trace and then he got, his pads got sore and I had him strapped on the sledge at this point and I must have overturned the sledge about five or six times going down the amphitheatre. Sometimes it was the only way to stop because you were over running the dogs, you brake, the brake on the sledge was a sort of flexible plank with a couple of spikes on the end that you stood on that dug into the snow and the ice. Well, if it's too steep or the sledge is going too fast it doesn't always work so you try and turn the sledge sideways across the slope and it turns over, so yes we had an exhilarating run back to base, but we got down and down and down soda bread as well, yeah.

[1:03:21] Lee: Were there any funny moments? There's a story about a coal bunker of some sort.

Marsden: Ahhhh, this was the Base Leader in the first year Mike Cousins who, really nice guy, quiet guy and he took it upon himself. The first year we had actually built an extension to the hut. When I arrived we spent the first couple of months building a serving geologists office extension to the hut basically from scratch, it wasn't a prefab job or anything, it came in as bits of timber and we built it and Mike decided he was going to build a coal bunker, now it took him all year to build this coal bunker and that coal bunker will still be standing when the hut at Stonington has blown away, you have never seen anything as substantial as Mike's coal bunker! (laughter) oh dear, I went to look at it when I went back in 2005, it's still there, looking a lot better than the hut, oh dear.

[1:04:33] Lee: I know the Gods were against you and you didn't get an awful lot of surveying work done and that was partly because of conditions but also the fact that you were being demoted, the surveying work was being demoted like transferring a theodolite to Halley rather than letting you have the other one,

Marsden: yeah

[1:04:48] Lee: did that make you wonder whether surveying was a prime function of being there?

Marsden: Errr, not really, I just accepted that you know that that's the way it was.

[1:05:00] Lee: In hindsight were you perhaps, today would you say the main reason you were there was not surveying but just part of the political scenario?

Marsden: No, I don't think so. I mean basically had everything had gone to plan we had a worthwhile surveying programme, part of it was, something was brought home when Keith and I were out on our four month trip. We were down round the Eternity Range and suddenly we're getting planes flying overhead, schooo, backwards and forwards, and the Americans were flying from Chile every day taking aerial photographs, (laughing) now I'm doing sledge wheel and compass traverse, so in fact had I had all the equipment and everything worked the control that I would have supposed to have been putting in could have been used for this aerial photography that the Yanks were flying but yes that was quite an interesting point when these planes started flying overhead.

[1:06:10] Lee: Did you begin to feel obsolete?

Marsden: Well it did make you wonder whether, whether it had all been worthwhile, however I had a good time and.....

[1:06:20] Lee: Well it sounds like you had a very rough time, I'm interested to hear you think that in the end that

Marsden: yeah, yeah, oh I enjoyed it

[1:06:26] Lee: on balance it was a positive experience?

Marsden: yes, definitely, yeah and it's shaped what I've done since I suppose. I went back and I did another survey degree, I did a post graduate survey course in London, I got a job in North Wales where, the three geologists I had been on base with were actually working for a geological firm in North Wales and they started a survey department there so Keith asked me if I was interested and I applied for the job and got it, second in charge of this new survey department and in North Wales out of, I was on base with roughly eighteen people, there were somewhere in the region of twelve of us ended up in North Wales and none of us came from North Wales but within a radius of fifteen miles from Betws-y-Coed there were ten of us who had been in Stonington for, over those two years.

[1:07:34] Lee: So is that how the Marguerite Bay Reunion started?

Marsden: Well the geologists used to operate out of Birmingham University before BAS moved to Cambridge and they used to have a get together every year and I suppose that the Marguerite Bay Reunion was an extension or came up as a result of this geological thing, we thought well let's have a get together and that's how come it was in North Wales because there was so many of us there, yes and we used to go to a place outside Bethesda called Ty'n-y-Maes, a motel there. Just like this morning, I don't know if you noticed they were all stood around in their anoraks watching the rain from inside, well they all, we all used to stand around with our climbing boots and ropes on looking at the mountains suffering from the hangover of the night before you know and so that started back in, it would have been 69 probably, 68, 69 I think, somewhere around there, that was the first one and it's been going ever since.

[1:08:47] Lee: To your surprise?

Marsden: Well, yeah, we're not getting that many young people, recent return people coming back. We went through a bad spell when we didn't get anybody, basically I think because the system at BAS changed and they fly scientists in and out for the summer, for a month or even, I heard last night, two weeks. I mean we signed on for two and half years, you know, you didn't have any choice that was it, you couldn't get flown in and out so when you could fly in and out they no longer seem to have an affinity for, because they've not spent that long on base I suppose, they'd gone done to do a specific job and they didn't seem to have an affinity with Antarctica, it was a job, whereas to us it was an experience. Ermmm, yes so we, just trying to think, Terry Tallis, he's not been to one of these for a while but he was one of the original lot. Ken Doyle who is here this weekend was one, we had some good times and it sort of developed and grew from being in this little motel, we ended up trawling round big hotels and I ran it for about fifteen years after, I took over I think from Ian Willey was running it for a while and we were in Birmingham and then I started moving it around, there's a limit to where you can move it to, you want people from the south you can't move it to Scotland although we have been in Lockerbie which meant we got people from Scotland coming when it was in Lockerbie but you lost all the people from the south because it was too far to go so you've got to be looking for somewhere in the middle to try and get people who, who live in, who live all over the place, you know. I don't know if we've got anybody from the very north of Scotland this time, don't think we have.

[1:11:01] Lee: Tell me just quickly now, finally about the book business, how did that spring up?

Marsden: Right,

[1:11:06] Lee: You're an expert in polar books

Marsden: I am, hmmm, yes I also have a very good polar library, probably, certainly one of the best in private hands. When I came back I started collecting polar books. I soon discovered that I couldn't actually afford to collect Arctic and Antarctic so I started collecting Antarctic stuff, however, and that's what my, mines an Antarctic collection rather than a polar if you like. However, over the years I have amassed several thousand books, spares if you like and I set up my own survey company in 1978 with the object of spending 50% of my time being a surveyor and 50% of my time dealing in books. I ended up employing twenty people which didn't leave much time for being a book dealer and these books have sat around in a store room over the years until my current partner took a great interest in cataloguing them which is

[1:12:28] Lee: this is Maggie?

Marsden: what had been needed doing for ages, this is Maggie and she's done a brilliant job on it, all the books are now catalogued so we have, I now know what we've got, we have a semblance of order in it, we have a good website and business is slow but we're selling books all over the world, shipped one off to America a couple of weeks ago, one to Norway last week, Australia and UK so that's how the polar book business, I eventually got there rather some thirty years later than I anticipated getting there but we got there in the end and I've actually been back down to Antarctica several times.

In 1992 John Tait phoned me up and said did you see the paper yesterday? I said no but me mother did, there was an advert for a trip to Antarctica for two thousand pounds, flights and everything included. He said well I've booked on it you had better book quick so I booked and my wife and John Tait and his wife went down in 1992 on a cruise ship and saw places that we

had never seen because when you are down there with BAS you go to the bases and you sledge from your base or whatever but you don't actually go to the scenic tourist spots so in 1992 we saw these, all these wonderful places that we had never seen before and on board one of the lecturers was an American who an ecological safari company and he was going to start doing trips to Antarctica and he asked John and I. We gave an impromptu lecture because nobody on the ship had actually been to Antarctica, nobody had lived there, they didn't know what it was about, we gave an impromptu lecture in the coffee bar one day and as a result this guy said well I'm gonna set up this trips to Antarctica once every two years, would you come and drive Zodiacs and give lectures? I said yes and John said no and so for the next, until 2002 I think I went done every two years for a month driving Zodiacs and giving lectures which suited me very well because I was still running the survey business, I could take a month off quite easily whereas if you go on the cruise ships lecturing you've got, you're supposed to jump off one cruise, you dump one lot of passengers and you get your next lot in and you go off again. Well I wasn't that keen on that but this one month trip once a year was excellent and what they were interested in was as much time ashore as possible and I was driving Zodiacs which is absolutely wonderful, it's superb and I had a wonderful time, I really did and then we had Marguerite Bay 2000 trip which I was on the organising committee but had to opt out of because my wife wasn't very ill, wasn't very well and they didn't get to Stonington which I was secretly quite pleased about because I would have been really choked off if they had got to Stonington! (laughing) so we did another one in 2005 when we did get to Stonington which was excellent and I took my children down to show them what had shaped my life to a certain extent and we had wonderful days at Rothera and Horseshoe and Stonington and thereafter the wind blew up and we got blown out of virtually everywhere else except Deception I think. My daughter spent two weeks being seasick, however they did get a taste for it at least they realised what, what it was all about.

[1:16:56] Lee: Thank you very much indeed.

ENDS

Possible Extracts:

- Snob factory of Bolton [0:00:26]
- Brathay Hall, Lake District - Early morning swims in Windermere, dialect interpreter [0:02:43]
- Advert and application to join BAS [0:08:40]
- Boarding the "*Biscoe*" [0:11:30]
- The "Englishness" of The Falkland Islands [0:14:10]
- Marooned on "*HMS Protector*" [0:23:47]
- Vanishing hut at Deception [0:25:17]
- Loss of one aircraft at Adelaide leads to total rearrangement of first years surveying and geological programmes [0:28:00]
- Sodabread incident, nearly died. [0:31:20]
- Marooned at Detaille Island [0:41:50]
- Death of Tom Allan and John Noel [0:49:05]
- First ascent of "Charity" in the Eternity Range [0:59:00]
- Interesting descent of North-East Glacier [1:00:00]
- Mike Cousins Coal Bunker [1:03:30]
- Start of Marguerite Bay Reunion [1:07:34]

- Antarctic book collection and business [1:11:10]