

DAVID MITCHELL

Edited transcript of a recording of David Mitchell interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 29th October 2011. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/145. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 22 July 2016.

Part One

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is David Mitchell, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. David Mitchell, Part 1.

Mitchell: David Mitchell. Place of birth is Bridgend in South Wales. 9<sup>th</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> '63.

[Part 1 0:00:17] Lee: So you are now forty ...?

Mitchell: Eight.

[Part 1 0:00:20] Lee: 48 years old, yes? What was your education like, Dave?

Mitchell: My dad travelled around. We travelled around with Dad in his work, so basically I consider myself to be Welsh, much to everybody's annoyance at work. I do follow Welsh rugby and Mum and Dad are both Welsh. In fact the whole family are Welsh but we moved away when I was about five. Dad went to work in Iran, working on a dam, so we travelled with him for a couple of years and then we came back and we lived near Bristol. Then we ended up in Scotland. Dad worked on the Hunterston nuclear power station when it was being built. So I ended up, most of my education was effectively in a place called Ardrossan, which is where you catch the ferry to Arran. It's probably what it is most famous for.

[Part 1 0:01:18] Mitchell: I spent from 6/7 year old to 15 in the Scottish education system and then when Dad moved down to the Lake District, I ended up in a position whereby I had one more year of my education to go before I did my O-levels. It turns out when I came down here, all the subjects I had been doing in Scotland I couldn't do in England. So my educational results were poor to say the least. Dad was an electrician and I thought 'Well it's done him all right. I'll do the same.' So I ended up in an apprenticeship then at Sellafield, at BNFL, just on the coast there. And I guess that was my education as it were. So there was the apprenticeship and obviously then the college after that. Certainly in terms of school stuff, it was fairly mixed to say the least, really.

[Part 1 0:02:19] Lee: So no university for you then?

Mitchell: No nothing like that. I guess I could have chosen any trade under the apprenticeship scheme at the time, because obviously Sellafield was a big employer and we had virtually guaranteed a job when you came out at the end of it, and people were kind of ... Once you had a job at Sellafield, that was it, supposedly for life. But Dad had moved around a lot and I knew that I wasn't intending to stay there long term. So I did a four-year apprenticeship and an extra year at college. Then I wasn't really looking for anything else but Mum had seen the advert in the paper for BAS, electricians wanted. She says 'That will be all right for you. Apply for that.'

[Part 1 0:03:19] Lee: Most mothers don't want their sons to go that far.

Mitchell: It's funny isn't it? She definitely found the ad and put it in front of me and said 'You might be interested in that.' I had very little interest in the outdoors. Although living in the Lake District (we obviously had it on our doorsteps), the peer group I hung around with, my friends, we were into a bit of canoeing maybe and windsurfing, that kind of thing. But I really wasn't into climbing, mountaineering, wilderness type things. I used to go camping with my grandparents all the time. Whenever we went back down to Wales, we would always go camping, and I really loved camping but nothing that was really pushing me to the wilderness experience to be honest. More that it was just enjoyable, so why on earth my mum thought I would be interested in the Antarctic, I've got no idea.

[Part 1 0:04:19] Lee: Did you know much about the Antarctic?

Mitchell: I knew nothing about the Antarctic.

[Part 1 0:04:22] Lee: You'd not read about Scott and Shackleton?

Mitchell: No, nothing at all. It was a completely open book. I had no pre-conceptions or anything. It was just 'Well, it looks interesting and I will give it a go and see what happens.'

[Part 1 0:04:39] Lee: So that must have been a bit of a handicap at the interview then, if you didn't even know anything about it?

Mitchell: It was quite interesting because Eric Salmon interviewed me, who was the HR man at the time, very much a character. At the interview, I do recall that it was quite a short-term lead up to going South. I know now, looking back, because I think the interview was in October and it was due for immediate departure. I think the electrician they had at Signy had, for whatever reason, come home or something had happened. So they were looking for somebody short term, on short notice. The following day Eric Salmon rang me up and he said 'Medical notwithstanding, we would like to offer you a job.' That was a big surprise to me because it is one thing applying for a job in the Antarctic but the next thing is 'Do I want a job in the Antarctic?' That's two totally different things, knowing nothing about it. But it turns out that I failed the medical.

[Part 1 0:05:50] Lee: On what grounds?

Mitchell: When I was 12 I had a stomach ulcer, which has never given me any problems since, but it was a tick or a cross in the box, if you like, of the medical examiner, and there was no time to do any follow-up because the departure was going to be fairly short afterwards. So he rang me back and said 'I've got some bad news. You've failed the medical and I don't know what it is, because obviously the medical practitioner wasn't going to tell Eric what it was. But he said 'With your permission, I would like to look into it.' So I said 'Yes, no problem.' He said 'Aye, we've got this issue. Unfortunately we can't offer you a position immediately but would you be interested in next year's intake?' (which obviously was going to be in June/ July

time). That suited me much better because I had time to think about it and really think about what I wanted to do and what was going to happen.

[Part 1 0:06:53] Mitchell: So yes, I said in principle I would take it and six months later I started with BAS. I don't recall reading up much on the Antarctic, to be honest with you, in the meantime. It may have been my poor memory but I don't recall researching a great deal, other than I did work at Cambridge for a few months which for electricians was unusual. It was mostly the mechanics, that worked in the garage downstairs and got everything ready. For some reason they had me there for a few months. I guess in that period from June to September, that's when I picked up most of the knowledge. I had no idea what base I was going to or what the differences between the bases were. He just said 'You are going to Base F.' I said 'Fine.' I didn't know what Base F was. 'Yes, that will be great. I sure it will be great.' And that was it.

[Part 1 0:07:49] Lee: Did you have to re-apply or was the post held open for you?

Mitchell: No, I believe it was held open for me. I don't recall going for another interview. I don't recall that.

[Part 1 0:07:58] Lee: So the clock ticked round. They rang you up and said 'Are you going or not?'

Mitchell: Yes, it ticked round. He said 'Yes, I would like to offer you a position.'

[Part 1 0:08:03] Lee: Were you still at Sellafield?

Mitchell: I was yes. When I handed my notice in, everybody was like 'You will never go. Nobody leaves here.' I said 'Well I am leaving.' Because I guess at the time people thought 'It's a job for life. Why would you want to throw it away?'

[Part 1 0:08:20] Lee: So they didn't know how to organise a leaving party then, at Sellafield?

Mitchell: We did have a leaving party. I recall having a leaving party and being the worse for wear after it. But I had a lot of good friends there and I enjoyed working there, but I don't know what it was, I just wanted something different.

[Part 1 0:08:34] Lee: So you went to the Cambridge Conference then, I presume?

Mitchell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:08:37] Lee: How was that? Because that was the first time you were mixing with people you were going to work with?

Mitchell: It was. I was working with some of the mechanics obviously at Headquarters because there was a lot of people there who were going South, mostly mechanics. Plus, because I had been working in Cambridge, you tend to mix with the people who have just come back and the people who were going to be there during summer if not the winter. So I was fairly well, I wouldn't say established but I knew

my way around before the conference. But the conference was great because you get to meet the people that you are actually going to be wintering with. Because at the time when I applied when they said to me 'You will be going for two years.' It was like 'What's two years?'

[Part 1 0:09:23] Mitchell: I couldn't really get my head round that because I thought it would just be you go for six months, a year, you come back and then go down again. Obviously that wasn't the case but no, I enjoyed the conference and the intake for that winter was only going to be: I think there was only three of us anyway, who was adding to the number that was there. It was a small intake for Base F. Yes, there were no real stand-out moments at the conference; it was just good to mix with people really I think and just get a feel for who else was going down. A lot of people were sailing down but I was flying in.

[Part 1 0:10:04] Lee: Why was that?

Mitchell: I don't know why. I am trying to recall why, but a lot of people were sailing down. There must have been some work going on in Cambridge that I had to finish off, I suspect.

[Part 1 0:10:17] Lee: Because that was later?

Mitchell: Yes. Well I went later but got in earlier because I think I flew something like the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, or something like that, picked up the *Biscoe* in Stanley, then obviously went straight down from there.

[Part 1 0:10:37] Lee: You were able to fly because of the Falklands War?

Mitchell: Yes. Prior to that there were no flights to the Falklands. In fact I think it's true to say that we were on the first commercial flight to the Falklands, Tri-Star flight. It had been a military operation before that, on VC-10s but it wasn't open to the public, and I think this was the first time that the Tri-Star had landed at Ascension Island, certainly the first time it had landed at the Falklands. So I guess, unbeknown to me at the time, that was a brand new route in, which at the time I wasn't aware of. You had to go via Montevideo or Rio beforehand.

[Part 1 0:11:26] Lee: Did you spot a welcoming party?

Mitchell: It was very bleak. I remember it being very bleak, because there was no terminal building like there is now. It was just a hangar. It was very windy and it was wet. We just turned up at Mount Pleasant, got in a bus and we were taken directly to the ship, the *Biscoe*, which at the time was docked in Port Stanley itself, which obviously does not happen anymore. But I do remember getting off the bus, looking over the edge of the dock and thinking 'That can't be the ship' because it seemed so small. Obviously the tide was out, so that was why it was way down. It just seemed really really small.

[Part 1 0:12:19] Lee: Apparently it looks small when the tide is in as well.

Mitchell: Yes. It's not a big ship. I think however you get to the Antarctic, you tend to have an affinity with the ship, with the vessel that you have been on, and I have been on most of them in my career, certainly from the *Biscoe* and beyond anyway. I have always got a great fondness for the *Biscoe*. It's a lovely little ship. Actually a few years later, when I came back down again, I actually sailed all the way down on the *Biscoe*. Yes, I am very familiar with that vessel.

[Part 1 0:12:55] Lee: How soon was it, once the *Biscoe* had left Port Stanley, how soon was it before you realised you were hooked on the Antarctic?

Mitchell: I think before I got on the *Biscoe*. I think the moment I got on the *Biscoe*, to be honest with you, I realised that this was something quite special. I was never seasick but I do remember in the first few days sitting on the back of there, because obviously wooden decks on the *Biscoe*, sitting on the back looking out, just keeping my eyes on the horizon, just to make sure that I wasn't going to be sick. I just sat there for hours, looking out the back and the albatrosses would come and I just kept thinking 'Yes, this is fantastic!'

[Part 1 0:13:41] Lee: First iceberg?

Mitchell: Yes. It's in the diary, 'seen the first iceberg today' but I have no real recollection of it. To be honest with you, the first recollection I have is: we dropped off a field party at James Ross Island, which is interesting for me because I got a chance to go to James Ross Island a number of years later, in a field party. And it just so happens that the people who were on that field party are good friends of mine now and are here today. I didn't know them at the time but I ended up in a cabin with a couple of guys who have ended up being lifelong friends. They had already done seasons before so I was very much the greenhorn. But then these guys got dropped off on James Ross Island, on the sea ice, with skidoos and sledges, and I kept thinking 'Fantastic. That's for me. What do I need to do to get on a field trip?' Even though I knew very little about it, it just really .... I don't know what it was about it, just being left to your own devices for periods of time, and it just so happened that the sledges, the following day the skidoos went through the ice. Brian, a friend of mine, I keep reminding him about that. I don't know what happened there but obviously the ice wasn't great. That also brings it home to you really how fragile the whole thing is between having an existence, having supplies to exist, and suddenly having nothing.

[Part 1 0:15:29] Lee: So you learned quite quickly how dangerous it could be down there?

Mitchell: Yes, but funnily enough, I never really thought of it as dangerous. When I think back now, about some of the stuff we used to do, I think it would frighten me more now, because of the amount of experience I have. At the time it was just 'Well, this is what we do. This is how it is.' I didn't really have that feeling of danger, but you are very aware of your surroundings and the wilderness. I think from James Ross Island, we called in to Palmer Station, which is the American base close to ... Actually I think I first went to Livingstone Island, dropped off Ash Morton.

[Part 1 0:16:24] Lee: He's here.

Mitchell: Ash is here yes. I know Ash well and he was part of a field trip that was on Livingstone Island. But again to me this is all new. It didn't really mean anything; it was just field parties on islands. Then ended up at Palmer Station having a few beers with the Americans. Palmer Station and Base F, because they are only 30 – 40 miles away as the crow flies, tend to have quite a rapport between them. So I met up with some of the guys who would be wintering at Palmer Station.

[Part 1 0:16:58] Lee: I know we are leaping ahead slightly because you haven't got to Faraday yet, but was there a significant difference in the culture of Palmer Station and Faraday?

Mitchell: Completely.

[Part 1 0:17:08] Lee: In what way?

Mitchell: Completely different. The Americans seemed to have everything and we had nothing. It was that kind of effect, and obviously they didn't ... They only did restricted tours, so whereas we were wintering for two years, they would do a summer, or they would do a winter, and very rarely would do a summer and a winter, certainly not more than one winter at the time. So the base was very modern, obviously relatively recent.

[Part 1 0:17:46] Lee: Well provisioned?

Mitchell: Very well provisioned. Over the years at Faraday they used to send lots of food down for us, things we couldn't get hold of, and we had a great relationship with the guys at Palmer Station.

[Part 1 0:18:04] Lee: What was Faraday like when you got there. You had seen one or two other bases on the way down but when you suddenly came face to face with the facilities at Faraday, knowing you were going to be there for two years?

Mitchell: Fell completely in love with Faraday. We came through Lemaire Channel. I remember thinking 'This is just unbelievable.' We went past Petermann Island where Charcot wintered and then an hour or so later we were in Meek Channel. I do remember seeing the base, thinking it was just an unbelievable setting. Got off because we were allowed to go ashore first because we were wintering. We were dropped off at the jetty and went up to meet guys that were leaving from that year and the guys that were staying on for another year, which was the first time obviously we had met them. I was just blown away by the whole thing. It couldn't have been any better as far as I was concerned. It just looked great, perfect, yeah.

[Part 1 0:19:08] Lee: So what happened? It wasn't exactly an enormous hut you were going to live in, was it?

Mitchell: No, I guess by modern standards it was probably quite small but there again, historically, it was probably quite big. It's where you sit in the whole scheme of things isn't it really? It had obviously been extended within the last four years.

[Part 1 0:19:29] Lee: Was it dormitory style in those days?

Mitchell: It was yes, it was four people to a room. It wasn't like it was for example at Bird Island – I went there later – where everybody was in the same room. It wasn't like that. It had been improved in 1982 and now this is '85. So it had a relative upgrade between the start of the '80s and '85. It was a nice base. It wasn't too big; it wasn't too small. It was just nice. I fell in love with it straight away, really.

[Part 1 0:20:08] Lee: What were the electrics like?

Mitchell: Well from my point of view it was poor, because I had to come from an industrial, nuclear background, where things are a bit more stringent, so for me there was a lot to go at. I love being an electrician. I enjoy the hands-on stuff so it was great for me and what I really liked about it was I was left on my own. I could do things how I wanted. I wasn't restricted by people telling me what to do or other people there influencing what I could do, so I just set about rewiring the whole place, virtually from top to bottom.

[Part 1 0:20:51] Lee: Where did you get the resources from? Had you ordered them and brought them down with you?

Mitchell: It was Tony, Tony Escott, he was an ex-winterer at Rothera and he recruited me. He was in charge, the electrical engineer back at BAS and he just said 'Whatever you want, just ask for it the previous year and I'll get it sent down.' It just so happened that there was plenty of stuff left over from when it had been extended in the '80s. The electricians previously, for whatever reason, had left well alone. So there was lots of stock there so I had plenty to go at. I just worked my way through that, obviously with all the things from other bases or get things sent down.

[Part 1 0:21:43] Lee: Were you being innovative?

Mitchell: Yes, I like to think so, because things were very primitive in terms of how the electrical system was put together and I had come from a more automated background. So I set about automating things that could be automated.

[Part 1 0:22:03] Lee: Such as?

Mitchell: Well it was a time where they had just put sea-flush toilets in. They had gone from Elsans that year, and there was all sorts of problems with the water supplies to them and the pumps and everything else. The pumps would burn out once every couple of weeks, so I just automated it so that if anything, if any fault came up they would trigger alarms and that kind of thing, so that rather than replacing pumps, you would be able to do something beforehand, before an actual failure came on. So I spent a lot of time doing that, and I really enjoyed it. As I say, I enjoy doing what I do and I started at one room and I just worked round all the rooms until they were virtually all rewired or I did what I could with them.

[Part 1 0:23:03] Lee: Were you having to put heating wires round pipes and so on, to keep the water flowing? Was that your job or was that the plumber's?

Mitchell: Yes, there was no plumber; it was just me and the diesel mechanic. It was Steve Eadie. He was very experienced. He had come from Halley. He had done three winters at Halley<sup>1</sup>. He had obviously been at F. The trace heating stuff which you get now is very efficient, whereas back then it was really in its infancy and you would get a lot of potentially quite dodgy situations with it catching fire because it would overheat because there would be a short circuit. So I designed a system whereby it would monitor the heat trace and if it came up with any faults, ... Because what would happen is: you wouldn't know whether it was on or off because it would be buried in snow and the first thing you would know was that the pipe was frozen.

[Part 1 0:24:04] Mitchell: So I came up with some kind of circuit whereby the guy who was on nights or whatever would be able to look at a control panel and say 'Oh yes, the heat traces are fine. No problem.' But if they went off for any reason, it would bring up an alarm which would then mean we could then knock the pumps off, drain the pumps out, drain the pipes out so that we weren't having to then defrost huge lengths of pipe which ... Sometimes you would spend days digging pipes out just to defrost them, put them back together again and a week later they would be frozen again. So I did quite a lot of stuff like that really, which is nothing now, but at the time it was, certainly for Faraday it was quite a jump forward.

[Part 1 0:24:52] Lee: I was just wondering how reliable the generators were, because that's the other bugbear of electricians and Fids generally?

Mitchell: The generators were very reliable. They were Volvo Pentas and Steve looked after the mechanical side of things and he was very very good; he knew his stuff. We very rarely had any problems with generators at all. I could probably count on two hands the number of power cuts we had in two years.

[Part 1 0:25:18] Lee: Did you get out much?

Mitchell: That's why I took onto it really, because I just couldn't believe the opportunity that I had, to be able to pick up so many new skills. I was very fortunate that people that I hooked up with in the summer ... I think the base slept up to 24 in the summer. I think there was about 16 people there in the summer and there was 10 of us in the first winter. There were some keen people there who liked skiing and getting out and travelling, and that first summer I just recall at every opportunity putting skis on. I had never skied before but putting cross-country skis on and we had small 12 ft fibre glass dinghies called Tepcos with 3½ horsepower Seagull engines and we used to go everywhere in those, everywhere. And it comes back to that perception of danger, because there's no way I would ... Some of the seas that we were going out in, there's no way I would do that now.

[Part 1 0:26:43] Mitchell: We would go across to the mainland at every opportunity to climb hills and what-have-you. The water would be breaking over the front of the little .... We would only be doing 3-4 mph. That was a Seagull engine flat out. It would take us an hour or so to get to the mainland. We just did it all the time. I have gone back through my diaries just to have a look and I am astounded by how much time we spent out, skiing and climbing, and in the boats and ... Because it would

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<sup>1</sup> Eadie did only two winters at Halley: 1982 and 1983.

seem that you would do a full day's work, you would have dinner, then you would go out for another five hours. Or you would think 'The weather's good now. It's 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Let's go to the mainland, climb a hill and come back.' That would be a ten hour round trip. So you would be getting back at one or two in the morning. Obviously the sun was still up. Then grabbing a few hour's kip and you would be back up for work in the morning. I had forgotten a lot but when you actually go back, you think 'We did a hell of a lot of stuff.' All recreational. Don't get me wrong, nothing that there was a requirement by BAS to do. It was just purely recreational; it was because we wanted to.

[Part 1 0:28:02] Lee: Were you taking what you would now regard to be a risk, from time to time, when you were travelling?

Mitchell: Definitely, definitely.

[Part 1 0:28:08] Lee: Such as?

Mitchell: I think the riskiest thing was certainly the boats, for me any way was the boats, because they were so small. The engine was so unreliable. The water expanse to the mainland and all the other islands we used go to, it had a huge fetch to it. Sometimes, if you go in two little boats, they might be 20 metres apart but you would only see each other when you were on the crest of a wave. It was mad; but it was just an accepted thing. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary at all, whereas now, I think you would struggle to get me in that boat. When it got to the winter time and the sea ice travel, we used to do a lot of stuff there which with experience now I realise was foolhardy, but you get away with it. If you get away with it, I guess you keep on doing it. That's how you learn.

[Part 1 0:29:13] Lee: So the base commander at that time was not breathing down your neck, saying 'Don't do this.'?

Mitchell: He didn't really know, to be honest with you, and I am sure he would laugh, because in his own mind, he knew, but it was ...

[Part 1 0:29:29] Lee: It was unspoken?

Mitchell: It was unspoken, yes. We went to Petermann Island on one trip. In fact my first ever field trip: it was only for a few days. We never went for very long and I was with one of the second-year winterers and we traversed round the island on foot, and we were traversing above some cliffs, and bear in mind I had only been there three weeks. I had the wrong footwear on; I had no ice axe, and I slipped, and I slid down the slope for about 200 feet, and there was a cliff edge, literally (I have been looking through the diary) another 20 feet away, and that was 150 foot vertical. I just managed to stop myself with my fingernails. I remember somebody saying to me 'Always carry your Fid knife with you.' I took it out of my pocket and I just cut steps in this ice slope and got back up to safety. I think now, if I hadn't managed to stop myself, at best I would have had a couple of broken legs and fairly serious injuries, but I would have been taken home. I would have been flown home or shipped home. That would have been at best, really. I always wonder: if I hadn't managed to stop myself, with

that 20 feet to go, and it literally was that, whether anything that has happened since would have been there.

[Part 1 0:30:58] Lee: Did that change your approach to field work?

Mitchell: It made me think that I needed to be – I wouldn't say the word professional – that's not right, but I needed to think more about what I was doing and why I was doing it.

[Part 1 0:31:15] Lee: More circumspect?

Mitchell: Yes, because I was just basically following other people at that point, and then I thought 'No. That's not the way to do it. It needs to be a little bit more structured. It's OK doing those things but make sure you are properly equipped to do it.' So although we did a lot of travel in the summer and the winter that was considered to be out of travel limits and, in some people's eyes, very very risky, we were always as prepared, as best prepared as we possibly could be. I spent a lot of time going through lots of different types of kit to take and what the best thing was. Because what I liked about Faraday was (that wasn't on any other bases): there was no field assistants. You were virtually left to your own devices and there was no skidoos, so everything was on foot.

[Part 1 0:32:17] Lee: No dogs, huskies?

Mitchell: No dogs. They had gone before the late '70s, if you like. Probably about five years earlier. So all travel was basically on foot, on ski, under your own power, and I was keen to make things as lightweight as possible, but also as best prepared as possible, so that all the travelling that we did was (in my eyes at the time) as safe as it could be. But at the same time, obviously, you were just left to your own devices. There was nobody professional there who were climbers or anything like that. It was just a matter of picking things up, reading books. At the end of the first summer we had a visit from two field assistants from Rothera, who were coming in basically to show us a bit of field craft, which I latched onto straightaway. Fortunately enough I got on some really good trips with them. Bizarrely enough (this is slightly off the point), one of the guys, Alastair, where I work now which is on a wind-farm offshore on the Cumbrian coast, he turned up two weeks ago to do a job. He said 'I know you.' I said 'I know you as well.' We had seen each other once since 1986, and that was, again bizarrely, on a glacier in Chamonix, where we had a fleeting passing moment when we said hello. And he just turned up to actually do some work for me now, 30 / 35 years later. It's incredible, the people that you meet down South always turn up at other stages.

[Part 1 0:34:14] Lee: When you said 'travel limits', what did you mean? Was this some sort of regulation laid down by the base commander, how far you could go, or the kind of terrain you could go over? What do you mean by 'travel limits'?

Mitchell: There was always a limit as to how far recreationally you could go at various times of the year. So there were boating limits. So for example you couldn't go beyond the Berthelot Islands to the south, Petermann Island to the north, the Forge Islands to the west and obviously the mainland. They were limits but they were really

impossible to enforce because if Cambridge didn't know you were going beyond, then they would never know you were outside the limits.

[Part 1 0:35:05] Lee: Right, so they were imposed by Cambridge, rather than the base commander.

Mitchell: Oh yes. Imposed by Cambridge.

[Part 1 0:35:08] Lee: And were they arbitrary, or were they sensible?

Mitchell: Well looking back now, I would say they were fairly more than sensible. Quite a long way to go in those little boats. And in the winter time there was obviously skiing limits, how far you could ski on the sea ice, in those same directions and also on the mainland, how far you could go on the mainland. And what mountains you were allowed to climb and what mountains you weren't allowed to climb, and again they were set down by Cambridge as well.

[Part 1 0:35:38] Lee: Were they universally ignored?

Mitchell: No, not at all really. They weren't universally ignored. It would be unfair to say that I think. There was a few people who were keen to push ... Not to break a limit because there was a limit there, that was never the case, but because they wanted to see what was beyond the limits. 'If you are allowed to go to here, I just wonder what is round the corner.' And that's all it was, really. It wasn't to think 'Well we have got to go out and break the travel limits.' That wasn't really the case; it was really all to do with what's round the corner. 'What can I see from the top of that hill?'

[Part 1 0:36:14] Lee: But I gather you would have much liked to have been able to go further down the coast, wouldn't you, particularly down the Peninsula?

Mitchell: Well we were, but again, only to a certain point, which affected ...

[Part 1 0:36:29] Lee: Prospect Point?

Mitchell: Well Prospect Point, which was somewhere we always wanted to go, was way out of limits, way out of limits. But we always talked about, if we had the chance, would we go down to Prospect Point? That was always the thing, to get to Prospect Point, because it seemed such a long way away, based in what our limits were. So really it was (in a bar, Saturday night) 'Let's go to Prospect Point.' But that was a bit far even for us to contemplate going down there.

[Part 1 0:37:06] Lee: All this of course was man-hauling, and this is where you were introduced to the interesting art of man-hauled sledges?

Mitchell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:37:12] Lee: So how did you take to that kind of thing? As we will discover later, it became something of an obsession.

Mitchell: I just started to read every book there was on polar history and exploration. It was just the fact that it was just you and your sledge, or you and your companions and your sledge or sledges. It was just so pure, I just really thought 'This is the only thing that can really link what I am doing now to what Scott, Shackleton and all those guys did a long time ago, because the conditions were the same. The sledges at Faraday were virtually identical, so it really was: how much can you pull? How far can you pull it? And how long are you prepared to pull it for, and obviously within our limits, it was going to be very very restricted. But it did give you a flavour of what it was actually like 80 odd years ago. As I say, I just read up on everything I could possibly read up on in terms of ...

[Part 1 0:38:29] Lee: So very active man-hauling connected you back to the Heroic Age?

Mitchell: Definitely, without a shadow of a doubt. I really took to it. I liked the physicalness of it. I like the way that you had to be fit, and I also liked the games in the mind that you used to play about how far you are prepared to push yourself. But you can only imagine what it was like for Scott, Nansen and people like that, but it did give you a connection with it.

[Part 1 0:39:07] Lee: You did get to Prospect Point in the end, didn't you?

Mitchell: I did, yes. We did get there, just recently working for Morrison Construction, who were doing a clean-up of the old bases on the Peninsula and got fortunate enough to get to Prospect Point, and a number of other also famous huts as well, which was great really. It kind of lost its meaning a little bit I guess, because time moves on and you have a different view on the Antarctic and why you are there, and obviously you have got all your experiences in between, and it depends where it sits on that level, but it was great to get there and to think 'Well we are here at last' if you like. But equally, on that same trip, it was fantastic to go back to Faraday, because I hadn't been back since the early 90s, and it hadn't changed which was great, really great.

[Part 1 0:40:09] Lee: Out of chronology but whilst we are taking about this, what kind of work were you doing at these old bases? Was it just tidying up?

Mitchell: It was. There is a requirement now to remove all your rubbish from the Antarctic, unless it's designated as a Site of Special Historical Interest. Some of the huts are and some of the huts haven't been. It was just fortunate for me that we had a chance to get to a lot of the islands like Detaille. I went to Damoy as well actually, Prospect Point, quite a few of the wee huts up the Peninsula. It was great to visit them and be able to stay a few days.

[Part 1 0:40:53] Lee: Were they largely untouched?

Mitchell: No, I think those days have gone. What you really notice, especially late 80s onwards, is the number of yachts and tourists visiting the Peninsula. All those old huts tend to be a magnet for ...

[Part 1 0:41:13] Lee: They've been scavenged?

Mitchell: They've been scavenged yes. There have been visitors and they have been trashed and people have wintered in them and not shut the door and all that. So they tend to fall apart. So I think the advent of tourism *per se*, and I am talking about people in yachts as well because effectively if you come down in a yacht you can do what you like and go where you like. Then, depending on your view as to why you are there ... If people want to strip a building bare of historical interest, that's what is going to happen unfortunately. But that is one thing at Faraday, the number yachts we used to get in.

[Part 1 0:41:58] Lee: Even in the 80s?

Mitchell: Well mainly Sally and Jerome Poncet but also people on the *Cortique* [phonetic] and *Northire* [phonetic] and yachts like that. But we used to go out on the yachts then. We would go off for a day. Jerome would take us off down the coast and we would have the sail up. It was great, especially the regular visitors and those on *Pelagic* as well, You would get quite friendly with them, so you would look forward to them coming in for a few days and having a chat, catching up with people, maybe going off for a sail, coming back ... I don't think that was strictly kosher in terms of what Cambridge would like you to do but like I say, these things happen, don't they?

[Part 1 0:42:45] Lee: Were there scientists based at Faraday that year?

Mitchell: Yes, it was an Upper Atmospheric base.

[Part 1 0:42:50] Lee: Right, so you were having to supply them with the electricity they required to do their experiments?

Mitchell: Yes sure, and I embraced the whole thing and completely immersed myself. I was really into a lot of the stuff they were doing. I would help out with the VLF experiments. There was a guy called Mark Clilverd who I wintered with the first year who is still working for BAS now and we are very good friends and I used to do his obs for him. If you were on nights you used to do met obs and that kind of thing. I just got right into the whole thing. There was nothing about Faraday or the people I was with or the work that was done that I found to be a chore. I just loved every minute of it.

[Part 1 0:43:29] Lee: There is a story about the first mail drop, which didn't go quite according to plan.

Mitchell: No, because at the time, after the last ship left, whenever it was in March or whatever, then you used to get 50 words on the telex a month and the first mail, actual written mail, used to come here on the first ship which was going to be in December sometime generally. But the Twin Otters used to fly south to Rothera generally around October time, and there was always some mail on that flight for you. But on this occasion, the first flight down, Maurice who was the radio operator going into Rothera, he held his hand up afterwards and admitted his failings. Instead of kicking the mail out when the light turned green, he kicked it out when the first red light came on, so it ended up several miles away up the coast.

[Part 1 0:44:40] Mitchell: We were just on the island group waiting for the mail. We said 'Where is it?' on the radio. The planes were flying round. We thought 'What's going on?' Then the plane headed south for Rothera. 'What's happened?' Then Maurice came on the radio and said 'Sorry guys. I have kicked your mail out a bit early. It's somewhere, somewhere to the north.' But fortunately for us, we still had reasonably good sea ice, so a couple of the guys went off looking for it and I think we found it about three days later.

[Part 1 0:45:15] Lee: Dry?

Mitchell: Dry. Well it's in a plastic bag. It was fine. Yes, so we were quite lucky there really.

[Part 1 0:45:21] Lee: Had you left anybody behind?

Mitchell: Just my parents, two sisters.

[Part 1 0:45:27] Lee: So letters were important to you then.

Mitchell: They were, yes, and I think mail is important, full stop. Even now, with the advent of emails and the Internet, and constant communication that's available now, I think everybody likes getting a letter, don't they? Yes, it was important, and I used to make time and effort to write a lot of letters back to my parents. I used to keep a diary and keep a running log, and send that back to them, because it was really the only personal contact that they had. They had actually just installed satellite telephones into the base in 1986, which was the year I arrived but that was like £9 a minute and I think the weekly wage was something like £70 a week. So there wasn't a lot of time spent on the phone.

[Part 1 0:46:29] Lee: You did your two years at Faraday. Were you then due to go home again, or was there always a plan to move you on somewhere else?

Mitchell: I was due to go home.

[Part 1 0:46:38] Lee: What happened?

Mitchell: Well, what did happen? I just had a telex from Tony<sup>2</sup>, back at Cambridge, asking me if I would be prepared not to go home but to go straight to Bird Island and do a job there, which was only supposedly going to take a month or so. I thought 'Great. I will go there. No problem at all.' I had always wanted to go to Bird Island and ...

[Part 1 0:47:10] Lee: This was wiring the extension, wasn't it?

Mitchell: That's right, yes, and the chippy who with I wintered with the first winter at Faraday, he was going there to do the extension as well, so there would be two of us that would be there doing that. Yes, it was great, and at the time I thought 'Well, it's

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Escott

only an extra month. It's not going to make much difference really.' But it ended up being an extra three or four months. But it was great. I enjoyed it really.

[Part 1 0:47:43] Lee: You left Bird Island, it says here, on RFA (I am not sure what an RFA is) ...

Mitchell: Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel.

[Part 1 0:47:49] Lee: Right. Is there a story about that?

Mitchell: There is a story about that, because we ... The weather was pretty bad and I was due to ... What was happening was: I was quite happy to stay at Bird Island but Cambridge wanted me to come back and then go back down South again. So I said 'Fair enough, I will come back. I will go home and then think about coming back down again.' At that time of the year, July / August, then the only vessels around would be military supply vessels, up in the north obviously, sub-Antarctic island. Anyway they would come and pick me up. So we waited quite a long time for the weather to change. The weather became marginally better and the RFA was just off Bird Sound, and they came in in a semi-rigid inflatable with I think it was two officers and a Marine came in to pick me up off the foreshore.

[Part 1 0:49:04] Mitchell: It was very rough. Fortunately it was an onshore wind but as they were coming to pick me up, they went to put the RIB<sup>3</sup> into reverse to slow it down and the propeller dropped off. All we knew at the time was some frantic looking over the side, the oars coming out and then paddling through the ice and the swell to get ashore. We said 'What's happened?' They said 'The propeller has come off.' Effectively the weather was that poor then that they were stuck on Bird Island with us as well, until they could get another RIB out to pick us up. But the RIB that came for me the first time ended up sinking on the foreshore, and it is still there to this day. When I went back to Bird Island in 2005, I had a wander round to the beach and it's still ... It's fairly much buried now on the foreshore, but it's still there, so it has been there a long time. But yes, an expensive piece of military equipment lost for the sake of a propeller. But an interesting story.

[Part 1 0:50:20] Lee: They brought you back in July '88. I guess by that time BAS felt two and a half years was long enough, but it wasn't an awfully long time before you went South again?

Mitchell: No.

[Part 1 0:50:35] Lee: Did you re-apply more or less straight away?

Mitchell: They wanted me to go back to Bird Island, but I wanted to be a Field GA. I wanted to basically go and have a field trip. They were keen for me to go back to Bird Island and they said 'OK. If you go back to Bird Island early,' (I had been home a few weeks) 'finish Bird Island off and then you can go on the James Ross Island cruise as a Field Assistant.' That's what I did effectively, but this time I sailed down on the *Biscoe*. I sailed down from Grimsby, obviously through Montevideo and on to Bird

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<sup>3</sup> Rigid Inflatable Boat

Island, finished off there and then went on the James Ross Island cruise with 22 scientists and four Field Assistants, and we worked off James Ross Island for a couple of months. It was brilliant; it was great.

[Part 1 0:51:37] Lee: What was the pattern of the work? You were staying on the ship were you?

Mitchell: No. We spent about half the time on the ship but we had about a month ashore on James Ross Island where myself and Crispin Day ... We actually had 4 × 4 ATVs (All Terrain Vehicles) because from the previous trip, where I talked about when they lost of skidoos through the ice, they realised that they had a ... Because James Ross Island, a lot of it is dry so there is no snow on it, so they fitted skidoos with a wheel on the front which was effectively a complete disaster because they just kept digging themselves into the ground. So they went back this time with ATVs. So we had these ATVs with, effectively, trailers acting as sledges on the back. We traversed to the other side of the island, Crispin and myself, and then we'd have different scientists come to stay with us for different lengths of time, depending on what their speciality was. Then we would take them around the hills so they could carry out their experiments. So it was a bit of a mixed trip but it was great and that was when the chap they called Gerry Hooker, he discovered a dinosaur, which at the time was only the second dinosaur ever to be found in Antarctica.

[Part 1 0:53:00] Lee: Did you see it?

Mitchell: Yes it was obviously with him. Tim Wickham was one of the other GAs and he was with him when they found it and then we all went over and we spent some time. To the layman he had a lot of 'bakers' baskets', if you like, stacked up maybe five or six high, with different degrees of filtering between them, different mesh sizes. It just looked like he was just throwing pebbles into this top basket, but what they were, they were bones, fossilised bones. And nothing, I don't think anything was bigger than the palm, well even smaller than that – thumb size really – was probably the biggest piece, down to something the size of your small nail, and he had bags and bags of these things which looked like pebbles to me, but obviously not to him. And it still remains to this day one of the most amazing things I have ever seen, to watch Gerry sit in the lab on the *Biscoe* and glue these bits together, and within a week he had the bottom half of a jawbone and the back of the skull of this dinosaur. From these bits which were unrecognisable as bones, he just knew exactly what he was looking at, and he could just piece it all together. It was incredible to watch somebody so skilled at what they do, do something like that. I have never been to see it and I don't know if it is still on display, but it was in the Natural History Museum in London. But I have never been down to see if it is still there.

[Part 1 0:54:50] Lee: Did you get the whole animal, or was it just the skull?

Mitchell: He got ... I would be lying if I said I could remember, but I think he had about 30% of it. It was about a six-foot dinosaur and I think they made the rest of it up with plastic components. But they had the real thing there on display.

[Part 1 0:55:13] Lee: Enough to get a good idea?

Mitchell: Oh definitely yes, and certainly most of the head was there I think. It's incredible to see.

[Part 1 0:55:20] Lee: The concept of the Antarctic having had dinosaurs is not an obvious one, unless you have studied plate tectonics.

Mitchell: Exactly yes.

[Part 1 0:55:32] Lee: So was it a bit of a shock to you to find out that underneath all this ice and snow there was vegetation and ??? [inaudible] dinosaurs?

Mitchell: It wasn't a shock to me because I had spent a couple of years there and I had picked up quite a lot from the people I was with. The people I was camping with at James Ross Island, they were all geologists so obviously they impart information to you, about ammonites and all sorts of stuff, so ... Another amazing thing, and I can't quite remember what island it was round James Ross, but the scientists wanted to get to the top of this island. It was fairly impenetrable all the way round but we managed to find a route through and at the top it was full of sea shells. It was a raised beach probably about 700 ft high. That sort of thing, it stays in your mind because you don't expect to see it. That's quite special really.

[Part 1 0:56:32] Lee: Tell me about meeting Steve Martin.

Mitchell: Got back from James Ross Island, that's right, Crispin Day who I had been with – him and Steve and another guy called Nick Cox were set up to go across the Greenland ice cap. Crispin had mentioned this to me when we were on James Ross Island and for me at the time, crossing the Greenland ice cap was the ultimate. That's what I wanted to do and I really wanted to manhaul across Greenland. 'That's what I want to do.' Because Nansen had done it a hundred years earlier. Brilliant. I thought 'I'd love to do that.' Anyway I was sitting at home with my parents. The phone rings and the chap at the other end of the phone says 'Hello. My name's Steve Martin. You don't know me but would you like to go to Greenland?' I said yes, I would like to go to Greenland and he explained then that Crispin and Nick were unable to go and Steve had asked Crispin if he knew anybody that would be interested. Crispin had said 'Yes, I know this chap, Dave Mitchell, who would like to go.' So Steve had rung me and then the following day ... Steve was living in Bristol at the time. He was training to be a doctor and the following day I went down, drove down to Bristol, met him and the rest is history really. We just hit it off straight away. The third guy that was going on the trip, we hit it off as well and we ended up putting an expedition together to manhaul across Greenland.

[Part 1 0:58:19] Lee: That was the summer of '89?

Mitchell: That was the summer of '89.

[Part 1 0:58:22] Lee: Was that a record breaking trip? Did you get into the *Guinness Book of Records*?

Mitchell: Not the *Guinness Book of Records* for that trip but it was a record in terms of it was the latest seasonal crossing of the Greenland ice cap at the time and we

wouldn't have gone that late other than Steve had his exams. So Steve had his medical exams on something like August the 28<sup>th</sup> and we flew to Iceland on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August. We then spent the next ... Well it took us 55 days to walk across Greenland and at the end of it we finished up on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. It ended up being the latest seasonal crossing and that really for me was the ultimate. I thought 'Wow, this is just fantastic to have been able to have done this.'

[Part 1 0:59:13] Lee: Is there a stand-out moment from that expedition?

Mitchell: There's a vast number of stand-out moments from that trip because it was bloody cold and we ended up really struggling. Because of the time of the year, we had a lot of fresh snow at the start and for those not familiar with Greenland, it's a gradual climb up to 10,000 feet in the middle and then a slope back down to the sea on the other side, over a 350-mile distance. And we really struggled with the snow conditions in the first half of the trip. Steve because of his exams was in, and he will admit it himself, was unfeasibly unfit to undertake such a trip because he had done nothing but study for the last three months but got gradually fitter through the trip. We had a few ... Looking back now, it should have been quite scary, but we had some very strong winds, 120 mph winds. I think one time it took us four days, spending one hour on, two hours off, just holding the tent down inside.

[Part 1 1:00:36] Mitchell: Just going out and digging it out, because the wind was that strong, just moving into the autumn / winter period, much as what we've got today, and it just got colder and colder. We were very well prepared, very well prepared. We spent a lot of time in the summer designing a lot of our own kit based on the experience I'd had in the Antarctic, because both Steve and Keith weren't as outdoor orientated as I was at the time because at that time I was right into it. Climbing, skiing, you name it I wanted to be in it. We spent a lot of time discussing what the best things to so would be and coming up with this kind of package of equipment and weights and food. We designed our own diet and everything else to get across Greenland. We took enough food for 55 days. It took us 55 days but we dumped ten days of food because when we got to the other side, because of the time of year, the crevasses hadn't filled in yet, and they were still very much open but with a lot of soft snow on them.

[Part 1 1:01:49] Mitchell: So we had to abandon our sledges about three miles from where the glacier ended and we just had constant crevasses to cover. So we ended up dumping 10 days food. We took six days food of half rations, I remember, split between us in rucksacks. So we had gone down from quite a hefty calorific intake. The temperatures at this time were generally around -40 and we were going with very lightweight kit so we had only got three miles to do to get to the rock and then we had about a ten mile walk then, into Sondrestrom which was an American Air Force base. It took us nine days to do three miles and that was a soul-searching period really because we had no contact with the outside world. We didn't have any radios; there was no mobile phones then, but we did have a satellite beacon with us. I do recall, on something like the eighth day, it was getting dark. We only had about four or five hours light at the time.

[Part 1 1:03:10] Mitchell: We couldn't travel in the dark on that glacier; it was too horrific, and I remember, after about the eighth day, looking across at Steve in the

tent, knowing that if we looked outside the tent we could still see the sledges from a week earlier on some crevasses that were further back. And he wouldn't look at me, and he wouldn't look at me because we were both asking ourselves the question 'Do we set off this satellite transponder?' And we didn't. We were all very hungry, very cold, but the following day we got onto rock. We had stopped crossing the crevasses by then. We decided to abseil into the bottom and walk along the bottom of the crevasses, so it was like being in this huge maze with hundred foot ice walls all around you. And we just walked on the bottom of these crevasses for two days and popped out in this rock expanse, and two days later we were eating fish and chips and drinking beer in the bar in the American base at Sondrestrom. That was an amazing trip, Everybody was really worried at home because they expected us to be finished by then. There was nothing but fortunately we managed to get a message back. Yes, and I was hooked.

[Part 1 1:04:48] [End of Part One]

## Part Two

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is David Mitchell, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. David Mitchell, Part 2.

[Part 2 0:00:10] Lee: Why did you, in the end, decide to go back South again? It wasn't that long, was it, you went back again?

Mitchell: No. I got back from Greenland in November. I thought 'I will stay at home for a while and get a job locally.' I think I got home something like the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, decided I would stay local, rang up a local company. They said 'You can start on Monday.' I rang him on Monday; I said 'Look, I can't start work. It's not for me. I am going to see if I can find something else.' So I rang up Richard Hanson who had taken over Eric Salmon's role at HR. I said 'Have you got any jobs, Richard, for the summer?' He said 'You can go to Halley next week if you want.' So I went to Halley on the Halley V rebuild. So I ended up flying down to Halley and spending the summer at Halley which I enjoyed because it was different. I had never been to Halley before. It's obviously very different to Faraday and South Georgia and everywhere else, in terms of the mountains and stuff, but it had its own appeal and I enjoyed it, and spent the season there working with a couple of people that I had worked with before but also met a lot of new people.

[Part 2 0:01:40] Lee: I was going to say: very different from the scenario at Faraday where you were your own boss. At Halley you were part of a major rebuild team and you were being told what to do, I imagine?

Mitchell: Yes, completely, but I knew it was going to be like that and because it was the summer, it didn't really affect me too much. I think it would have been different if I had been wintering but I had no intention of wintering at Halley so ... It was just a summer trip so I was thinking 'I need to earn some money and there's worse places to earn money as working at Halley.'

[Part 2 0:02:12] Lee: Were you impressed with what was happening down there?

Mitchell: I was more impressed with the old base, to be honest with you. People living underground. So many people from the past, Fids who have lived at Halley II, III and IV under the ice and that to me was more impressive than the base we were building that was going to be above the ground. A lot of it was obviously impressive, what was going on. For me who was interested in the polar lifestyle, if you like, it was much more interesting seeing how people were living 30 feet underground for a year or more. That was more interesting.

[Part 2 0:03:03] Lee: How did you cope with it, because you were staying underground as well, I guess?

Mitchell: No we weren't, no. We were in tents, big tents, very comfortable. Al Wearden is known for his cooking skills and he kept us well fed. No it was great. I enjoyed it. It's not something I would have rushed back to because it didn't have that Antarctic kind of exploration feel; it was more of a job.

[Part 2 0:03:28] Lee: More an industrial approach?

Mitchell: It was. It was, yes. But I enjoyed it and I met a lot of great people there and ...

[Part 2 0:03:34] Lee: What were the challenges there, wiring up Halley V?

Mitchell: Just the cold really. Yes, I spent a lot of time actually working underground in the melt tanks, so it was a constant -18 but you had a lot of wiring to do so cold fingers. There's nothing really that jumps out that was particularly hard or anything like that. It was just a way of life for a month or two really.

[Part 2 0:04:01] Lee: Did you go and see the Emperors?

Mitchell: I didn't get to see the Emperors. I did get to see some Emperors but not at the main colony. We were just too busy. We were working 12 hours a day.

[Part 2 0:04:13] Lee: Really? So it was seven days a week? Was it hard? I guess it was full on wasn't it?

Mitchell: It was full on, yes. It was full on. We did use to have Sunday afternoons off I think. I'm trying to remember now. But I tend to go skiing if I was doing anything like that, or do a bit of running or that kind of thing. So I never ventured too far. But no, nothing stands out, but enjoyable nevertheless.

[Part 2 0:04:42] Lee: You got into this kind of yo-yo scenario where you spent summers either South or North depending on which one it was summer at?

Mitchell: I did. Exactly. It was perpetual summer.

[Part 2 0:04:56] Lee: So you were back North again after Halley?

Mitchell: Well after Halley I went on a South American ... with some friends. I travelled up through South America but Crispin got in touch with me again and said

would I want to go up to Svalbard. So I ended up in Svalbard working with Brian and Elizabeth Harland who unfortunately have passed on now. They were the pioneers for geological explorations in Svalbard. I don't know how old Brian was at the time. Brian must have been knocking on 70 at the time when I was up there with him. But his knowledge and some of the things that he used to do when he was going out there in the '50s. It was just incredible really, some of boat trips and the ski trips. But we had a great time. I really enjoyed the season, I really did.

[Part 2 0:05:54] Mitchell: I went to Ny Alesund, up into Liefdefjorden, saw my first polar bears and we did a lot of mountain work, obviously not with Brian and Liz because they were getting on a bit, but going up and getting samples for them, and that kind of thing. I had a great time, really enjoyed it. It was different from the Antarctic because it was so much more amateurish, without being disrespectful. There wasn't the big operation; it was just four or five of us going up, chartering a boat, staying in Brian's hut up in Ny Alesund, doing a bit of geology, then jumping back on the boat again and going back. Completely different to the ... Similar aims as the James Ross geological trip but on a much smaller, family orientated version, if you like. It was great, yeah, great.

[Part 2 0:06:59] Lee: Geographically do you have a preference for one polar region over the other?

Mitchell: I will always remember Faraday and the Antarctic for what it gave to me, and the beauty of it, but going on to the Arctic Ocean to me is the stand-out wild place because it's so hostile. And much as I love the Antarctic, and most of my affinity is with the Antarctic and its beauty and where I effectively ... It shaped what I am. Nothing compares to walking on the Arctic Ocean really, nothing at all. It's an amazing place.

[Part 2 0:07:52] Lee: You were offered in 1990 the option to go back to Faraday as base commander. I think you were given a choice, weren't you?

Mitchell: I was. There was Rothera or Faraday, and it was no competition for me. I wasn't really interested in Rothera. It was too (without being disrespectful) ... I thought it appeared very commercial. There was a lot of mechanical aids and I really do tie in with the small scale, small base, sort-yourself-out, kind of environment.

[Part 2 0:08:35] Lee: So what was your preferred style as a base leader? Were you modelling yourself on somebody you had been under previously or did you have your own ...?

Mitchell: Not really and to this day I don't really know what people thought of me or how they thought it went. I just tried to be as fair as possible. Flexibility is in my nature anyway. I do try and see the different points of view. Everybody has got their point of view and I guess a lot of time it gets me into ... gives me more work than it doesn't, because obviously I am stuck in the middle of two or more points of view. But everybody has got their own argument. No, my take on it was: if people are doing their job to the best of their ability, then you couldn't really ask for any more, and as long as people weren't going out of their way to be particularly obnoxious or damage

other people's enjoyment of where they were, then ... To be honest with you, the base ran itself.

[Part 2 0:09:47] Lee: There were no crises?

Mitchell: Not personnel-wise, no. The first winter, the radio operator resigned the day before winter started, so we ended up doing the radio operator's job ourselves.

[Part 2 0:10:05] Lee: He went back then?

Mitchell: He went home, yes. He went home, so we ended up being radio operators as well and that gave me the sense of: everybody is expendable really. If I wasn't here, then things would still carry on because it is how you set up the routine. I enjoyed being BC because I like to see people if they are comfortable in their surroundings being able to express themselves and do the work that they want to do. Also I was more interested in the exploration and the skiing side of things but if you weren't into that, then so be it. Obviously you have an affinity with the people who were into similar things to yourself but that's the only thing really. I hope that people thought I was a reasonable person really and certainly there was no major issues that I can recall anyway. I am sure I would if there was any.

[Part 2 0:11:09] Lee: So you were South on that particular trip, you were down there for three years?

Mitchell: Only for the summers. The permanent base commander's role is one of the Antarctic summer in the Antarctic and the UK summer in the UK. So it would vary between four or five months down in the Antarctic and then come home, prepare things for the following season and go back down. Obviously the summer period is the more intensive work period, so you are preparing all the jobs that need doing back in the UK, and getting all the stuff ordered and going down and just making sure that that work was carried out in the summer. I loved it. In many ways it was a perfect job.

[Part 2 0:11:58] Lee: Well again, your permanent summer policy.

Mitchell: Exactly. When I was down there, I was very much of the opinion that if you have done your job, then go out and enjoy yourself. We would still go out on the mainland; we would go skiing. I had the excuse that 'I need to take you to the mainland to show you how to do this, and where this is, and where that is.' So I would spend loads of time out climbing and skiing.

[Part 2 0:12:23] Lee: Had you been running a relationship at this time or was this still your bachelor days?

Mitchell: No I was still free and fancy.

[Part 2 0:12:30] Lee: So no complications?

Mitchell: No complications. Life was so easy.

[Part 2 0:12:34] Lee: But it was about to get tougher because Steve Martin made you an offer you couldn't refuse and I would be interested to know how that came about. This is the idea of trying to cross the Arctic ice cap, via the Pole.

Mitchell: Well the full story of that is: Steve and I always intended to go back to Greenland. We had done east-west and we were going to do north-south – obviously a much bigger undertaking and that was always in the back of our minds. Back in the summer, I think it was '93, '92? I can't remember. Steve said to me ... We were talking about Greenland and he said 'Do you not fancy the North Pole?' And what you have to remember is: at the time, apart from people like Wally Herbert and Robert Peary, nobody had ever been to the North Pole without any kind of re-supply. (OK, Wally Herbert had re-supply as well, but he is a legend himself and he spent a long time on the Arctic Ocean.) But nobody had ever been to the North Pole without an air drop of some description to supply them with food and fuel and everything else. So Steve said 'Do you fancy going to the North Pole?' I said 'Well, if we are going to do the North Pole, we need to do it properly. We need to do it without any form of re-supply or air drops.

[Part 2 0:14:21] Mitchell: Not only were we going to go to the North Pole, we had got to get back again as well. So for me, this was really going back to the really early days. OK, it can never be that because we all know the situation now, that if things really did go completely wrong, then there is a chance that you could get picked up by an aircraft. But really the challenge was, for me 'We need to get to the North Pole and we need to get back again.' I think Steve said yes but I don't think for a minute he ever thought that it was ever possible. I mean people were telling me up to five years ago that was never possible and would never be done. But it's been done now. But to me it was always possible to do it and I said 'Rather than going there and back ...' I did a lot of research then into the Arctic Ocean, the currents in the Arctic Ocean, and a thing called the Transpolar Drift Stream which effectively flows from east to west. I said 'Rather than going there and back, why don't we start in Russia, go to the Pole and end up in Canada.

[Part 2 0:15:36] Mitchell: Follow this conveyor belt of ice that will make it so easy for us that you will wonder why nobody else has done it in the past. Nansen had tried it in the *Fram* in the early part of the century. He got frozen into the ice up at the De Long Islands. It was him that really discovered the Transpolar Drift Stream. But he got spat out somewhere to the east of Greenland. So anyway I ended up going back down South working the season as a BC again. I met up with some guys off a ... I met a guy on a yacht, because we used to get a lot of yachts in with a lot of very interesting people on, and I am embarrassed to say I can't remember the chap's name at the moment but he was the first guy to walk to the North Pole solo.

[Part 2 0:16:31] Lee: Ranulph Fiennes?

Mitchell: No. There was a lot of depots. French chap. Obviously he had a lot of depots and all the rest of it. I said to him what we were thinking of trying to do, and he looked at me and he said ... He had also been to the South Pole as well, and I always remember what he said. He said 'The South Pole was just boring, boring, boring but the North Pole, that was a real adventure.' I thought 'Yes, this is what I want to do.' So I handed my notice in at BAS, worked a last season at BAS. That was

in '93 and then made an attempt in '94 starting off very close to where Nansen left the *Fram*, trying to use this Transpolar Drift Stream. Getting to that point was amazing because Russia had only just really finished Perestroika and just getting to there ... Westerners had never been there before. It was an incredible trip just getting to that point in Siberia. We had a chap with us who was the 'official photographer', who wasn't the official photographer; he was the KGB man who would keep an eye on us whilst we were travelling across ...

[Part 2 0:18:05] Lee: What mischief could you possibly get up to?

Mitchell: Exactly. But you see I had \$50,000 taped to my midriff, because everything had to be paid for in cash. When you go to places like that, you realise that life means nothing to them. So we had to pay cash at various stages of the trip to ensure we'd get to the next point and if any of these pilots had known how much money I had taped to me, I wouldn't have made it back. It would have been nothing to them. \$50,000 would have been a decade's worth of pay at least. So it had all those kind of edges to them that made it a really fantastic trip. Steve and I were supposed to be going with a guy called Keith Burgess, who went across Greenland with us, the three of us, but he dropped out. At the time I was adamant that three was the right number to go with. So we ended up going with a guy called Clive Johnson who had also wintered at South Georgia and whose name had come up in conversation, and he joined us as a three-man team.

[Part 2 0:19:24] Lee: So Clive was with you for the first attempt?

Mitchell: The first attempt, yes, but he got very badly frost-bitten. We ended up having a lot of problems with our sleeping bags due to a manufacturing problem and he got very badly frost-bitten: fingers and feet. And that takes you back a bit actually, to a trip that we had from Faraday in my second winter. Three of us manhauled on the mainland and temperatures were down in the minus forties and we were manhauling. We were out for week or so and one of the chaps there got frostbitten on an attempt on Mount Shackleton and we ended up having to haul him back. We got him back to the tent and re-warmed his feet. He was a big guy and I have never seen a man scream so much but he got his feet back again, but we ended up then having to manhaul him back to the coast, close to a place called Rasmussen Hut which is a place that I love.

[Part 2 0:20:32] Mitchell: Of all the places in Antarctica, that's a great place. So I had already had this experience of frostbite and I knew that really there was no way he was going to be able to continue. If he wanted to save his fingers and his toes, there was no way we were going to be able to carry on because we couldn't leave him, and we were set up for a three-man team. And we had problems with the sleeping bags. It was so cold; it was the coldest I have ever been. You wouldn't go to sleep at night because you were scared in case you were not going to wake up because the sleeping bags deteriorated so much that we just used to lie awake. We had set up with the Russians that we had an emergency distress system in place and once the appropriate funds had been wired into their bank account, then they came out and got us.

[Part 2 0:21:31 ] Mitchell: We had been on the ice for about three weeks. But that's the first time I had been on the Arctic Ocean and I learned so much in that fortnight, or that three weeks, that I vowed that we would never make the same mistakes again.

It was on the way back through Russia that Steve and I, we made a pact that we would go back because however horrendous the trip had been, and it had been pretty horrific in terms of the cold and what had happened to Clive, that we felt that we had to go back really. We had a lot of things with the Save the Children and we felt that we let a lot of people down and we really felt that we let people down. We spent the next three years trying to raise money for the next attempt. I didn't work for that period. We were just constantly looking for sponsors who were prepared to fund the trip.

[Part 2 0:22:32] Lee: That must have been quite a challenge I would have thought, particularly as you had not made it once.

Mitchell: Exactly, it was and Steve and I, we are nobodies really. Nobody knows who we are. If you are Ranulph Fiennes, obviously you have got a huge name behind you. Of course you have and it's understandable, but the Royal Geographical Society supported us. They felt that it was something worth pursuing. By then somebody had reached the North Pole without re-supply so that was out, but this crossing, it was still the impossible journey really, so we thought we would give it another go.

[Part 2 0:23:14] Lee: The Aberdeen radio controller in the TV documentary, Channel Four's TV documentary *Floe the Pole*, said there was a 1% success chance.

Mitchell: If that, yes

[Part 2 0:23:25] Lee: So you knew that?

Mitchell: We knew that. Because you can prepare for a lot of things but you can't, you won't beat Mother Nature, that's for sure, and it relies so much on the ice conditions, bears, and the equipment you've got, and the food. It's just so tight. I remember before we went to Greenland, we were really worried. Because we were going to be really late getting in, into October / November, and there's no GPS system or anything like that, we taught ourselves how to use a sextant. I remember ringing up Wally Herbert (who is one of my idols) and saying ... I called him Mister Herbert and I said 'We've got this ... I'm really worried about going across Greenland because the sun is going to be so low in the sky that we won't be able to get a sextant sight, because it needs to be a certain altitude.' His words were 'Don't worry about it. Just go.' So I thought 'Well, if it's good enough for him, it will be good enough for us.'

[Part 2 0:24:35] Mitchell: So that's the principle we applied to the second North Pole trip, but we were absolutely scrupulous in everything that we did. We didn't take anything. If somebody was offering us something for free but it wasn't what we wanted to take, then we didn't take it. We just took ... Everything was as we wanted it and the biggest thing was the diet. People kept telling us that the diet wouldn't work, because we looked at all the expeditions that had gone in the past, and everybody came back emaciated, telling tales of starvation and disaster. So we thought 'We have got to try something different. We don't want to be in that position because the trip is going to be so long, 100 days. We've got to carry a hundred days food and we have got to have sufficient supplies.'

[Part 2 0:25:26] Mitchell: So we looked at the diet completely differently. Instead of going with what everybody recommended (all the experts if you like, were saying

‘Increase the carbohydrates; reduce the fat.’), we just went with massive amounts of fat – you couldn’t get much more fat in the diet – and protein to rebuild muscle loss, and very little carbohydrate, which is obviously completely opposite to what you would have anywhere else. I think I put a couple of kilos on.

[Part 2 0:25:58] Lee: There’s film of you with pots of lard, freezing lard, literally.

Mitchell: That’s what we had, yes. That’s exactly what we had. We had suet; we just ate pots of suet.

[Part 2 0:26:10] Lee: What struck me about that video was the almost hopelessness of the situation when you were on the road. You were doing less than three miles a day at times, across the ice and it was that balance between getting worn out and resting, and not resting too long in case you got too cold, So you were almost like being driven by the Devil, weren’t you?

Mitchell: Yes. We always walked 10 hours a day, every day, and we would stop for three stops of ten minutes each, because if you stopped any longer it was just too cold. Plus you had to keep walking. Because of the unfortunate circumstances we had with the wind direction, we had set off from Russia and all the ice was being blown back to Russia. So we might walk three miles during the day but we would lose four miles overnight. So we would actually be starting off in the morning a mile farther back than where we were the previous day.

[Part 2 0:27:10] Lee: This is negative drift, isn’t it?

Mitchell: Negative drift, yes, and it was just completely demoralising, completely demoralising. And the sledges were heavy. They were 200 kilos each.

[Part 2 0:27:21] Lee: Two and a half times your own weight?

Mitchell: Oh yes. I’m not a heavy person. I’m 70 kilos, so yes. But it’s like we said: all we can do is get up in the morning and walk. That’s all we can ever do and as long as we can do that, then we will just keep on going until the food runs out. Our fortunes changed, unfortunately not soon enough so that we had a chance to get to Canada, because the ice was breaking up very badly around the Pole and it wasn’t possible to continue. But we got to the Pole and to me it’s not a failure because we did the best we could but it wasn’t what I wanted. We all wanted to walk from Russia to Canada. We got back and people were saying ‘Oh, it’s impossible. It will never be done anyway. It will never be done’ But five years later it was done.

[Part 2 0:28:22] Lee: Were you expecting to meet polar bears?

Mitchell: We hoped not to but we were prepared for it.

[Part 2 0:28:31] Lee: Sawn off shotgun?

Mitchell: Yes, we had a shotgun. Getting that and soft-nosed ammunition through Russia is a story in itself. If you’ve ever tried to smuggle arms into Russia, it’s not straightforward, and don’t get caught. But we managed it anyway.

[Part 2 0:28:53] Lee: You were not caught?

Mitchell: No no, we weren't caught. We managed to secrete the ammunition on our bodies.

[Part 2 0:29:04] Lee: Really?

Mitchell: And get through, yes. Once we were through Customs we were OK, because the guys on the other side who were helping us, they knew what we would have to do.

[Part 2 0:29:15] Lee: What were the Russians nervous about? Revolution?

Mitchell: Well I guess it's similar: if you try to take a sawn off shotgun and a few soft-nosed bullets through Heathrow, I don't think they would be too chuffed, would they?

[Part 2 0:29:30] Lee: In fact did you not take them through Heathrow, because if you took them into Russia, ...

Mitchell: We did take them through Heathrow, yes.

[Part 2 0:29:37] Lee: To take them out of the country? With a licence or not?

Mitchell: The shotgun, in its full length, was licensed. It was licensed for transportation only and I remember getting off at the tube station at the stop before Heathrow, arranging to meet a man there who would provide me with a double-barrelled shotgun. I would then put it in my bags and then go to Heathrow because it wasn't licensed for the UK; it was only licensed ... So the whole thing was a bit dubious to say the least. But it worked; I got it there. But as it turns out, very early on we encountered a polar bear and the outcome was very sad because we ended up having to shoot it which is not something any of us ever wanted to do.

[Part 2 0:30:38] Lee: Just the one incidence?

Mitchell: Lots of tracks, but the only incidence, yes. You would see tracks quite regularly, of bears.

[Part 2 0:30:48] Lee: Were there other unofficial measures that were taken like that? Unofficial events? Anything else you had to smuggle or lie about?

Mitchell: Well that was the big one really. It's always the money thing because you can't take large quantities of money so I ended up with the same thing again, with a lot of money secreted on us.

[Part 2 0:31:14] Lee: How did you actually know when you had got to the Pole, because if the ice is moving around all the time, the landscape is constantly changing?

Mitchell: By this time the advent of the GPS is a wonderful thing, so we knew roughly where we were. I will never say I have stood at the North Pole because I

probably drifted past it about fifty yards away or something like that, but for Steven and I, that was close enough.

[Part 2 0:31:46] Lee: And were you feted? Although you hadn't succeeded in getting across the whole of the Antarctic<sup>4</sup> from one land mass to another, what was it that you were regarded to have achieved?

Mitchell: For Steve and I it wasn't the achievement *per se* from anybody else's viewpoint; it was more for ourselves really. We were never really sure about what the feedback would be. There was a number of people who felt that there were issues with our trip and it shouldn't be recognised, but at the end of the day, we felt we had given it our best shot. We couldn't have done any better and it seems to be recognised as the first British successful attempt on the Pole.

[Part 2 0:32:49] Lee: So it was the first British unsupported polar arrival?

Mitchell: Yes. It seems to be accepted as that but I guess everybody will have different viewpoints, won't they really?

[Part 2 0:33:06] Lee: Achieved by an electrician and ...?

Mitchell: Yes, and a boatman. Steve was the boatman at South Georgia. It was great.

[Part 2 0:33:15] Lee: What did Sellafield make of all this? Did you ever hear about any of your Sellafield ...?

Mitchell: I do see people that I worked with previously. I don't know. I don't really talk about it that much. I guess people have their own viewpoints but to me, what that was was the collection of knowledge and experience that started that first day when I got off at Faraday. And all the times that I fell through the sea ice at Faraday led to that trip, and it was never the same going back to the Antarctic after that because it just felt so special, walking on the Arctic Ocean. The Antarctic after that was a great place to go and visit, but it never really had that wild appeal after that trip.

[Part 2 0:34:16] Lee: Well things had changed hadn't they, by the time you went back again. From the mid '80s to the mid 2000's the infrastructure in the Antarctic (for want of a better phrase) had changed enormously?

Mitchell: Of course it had, yes.

[Part 2 0:34:28] Lee: So what were the stand-out changes for you?

Mitchell: The food was a lot better.

[Part 2 0:34:33] Lee: And clothing?

Mitchell: And the clothing was ... You are moving away from natural materials to manmade materials ... but it's the same with every generation. Every generation,

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<sup>4</sup> He means Arctic.

there is always an improvement on the previous generation. That's the way of the world and that's how it works and that's how we get better at what we do. I never felt uncomfortable with the clothing I had in 1985, but I suddenly realised how much more comfortable I was with the clothing that I had in 2000. That's just the way it is, isn't it?

[Part 2 0:35:06] Lee: And instead of phone calls being £9 a minute, they were free?

Mitchell: Free. Time moves on, doesn't it? Just as I would imagine that the people who went down with BAS in the 30s<sup>5</sup>, the 40s and the 50s would never change the period they were in because the people in the 70s and the 80s had it too easy. You never change what you experienced. I never had the opportunity to go in 1940–1950 so you take the opportunity that you've got at the time, in the 80s and the 90s and it was fantastic. And the people who go now, I hope will feel the same despite the fact that they can go on the Internet, and watch a film or ring their loved ones at home.

[Part 2 0:35:48] Lee: You've been with some tourists, haven't you? There was one tourist ship that you joined at one point?

Mitchell: Yes, there was.

[Part 2 0:35:55] Lee: Signy to South Georgia in 2001–2?

Mitchell: That's right.

[Part 2 0:35:59] Lee: How was that, seeing all these grockles, these sightseers?

Mitchell: I enjoyed it, yes. Obviously they were quite interested in base life and I tried to impart some information to them to make it more interesting for them but that is the first and only time I have ever been seasick, was on that ship. Amazing! All the time I've spent on all the BAS vessels but that was the first and only time I have been seasick.

[Part 2 0:36:32] Lee: You've got a Polar Medal?

Mitchell: Yes.

[Part 2 0:36:34] Lee: Not too surprising, but this is the first time in a hundred interviews that I have to ask you which Pole you got it for?

Mitchell: It's for both. It says it's for Arctic and Antarctic. I'm mildly proud of the fact that it's a fairly special medal because it does cover both regions and there's not many been cast.

[Part 2 0:37:00] Lee: Exactly. It says on the back for both, does it?

Mitchell: It does yes. 'For Arctic and Antarctic', yes.

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<sup>5</sup> BAS and its predecessors did not start until 1943.

[Part 2 0:37:07] Lee: And are you now offshore quite a lot, because you are either working at or running a wind farm?

Mitchell: That's right. I work on the Robin Rigg wind farm off the Solway coast. It's a bit different but ...

[Part 2 0:37:16] Lee: On a platform?

Mitchell: No, we don't spend any time there overnight. It's only days we go out there for. We are only 15 km off shore, so we are in and out on a daily basis. But it's a different life. It's interesting.

[Part 2 0:37:29] Lee: Are you in charge of it or are you just ...?

Mitchell: I'm one of the managers. I am part of the management team, yes, so I look after the engineers.

[Part 2 0:37:37] Lee: Is it the future?

Mitchell: I think it is yes. I think where we are now with renewables, is ... If you think where we were a number of years ago with maybe some other aspects of power generation, in that it is too early to judge it because we're at such an early stage, the size of the machines that are available. In ten years' time, the machines will be of a sufficient size that it can actually provide much more power than what we deem possible today, and let's face it, we have to do something, don't we?

[Part 2 0:38:16] Lee: We do. It's been a real pleasure. Thank you, Dave.

Mitchell: No, thanks, that's been great.

[Part 2 0:38:23] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [Part 1 0:10:37] On first commercial flight to the Falklands
- [Part 1 0:17:08] Difference in culture between Palmer and Faraday
- [Part 1 0:18:04] First impressions of Faraday
- [Part 1 0:22:03] An early warning system for the toilets
- [Part 1 0:26:43] Recreational travel opportunities from Faraday
- [Part 1 0:29:29] A close call on Petermann Island
- [Part 1 0:34:14] Travel limits and their unenforceability
- [Part 1 0:37:12] Affinity with the Heroic Age
- [Part 1 0:40:53] Old bases scavenged by tourists
- [Part 1 0:43:29] A mail drop that went wrong
- [Part 1 0:47:49] Leaving Bird Island in bad weather
- [Part 1 0:51:37] Dinosaur fossil discovered on James Ross Island
- [Part 2 0:02:12] Impressions of Halley
- [Part 2 0:19:24] A case of frostbite at Faraday