

GORDON HOWKINS

Edited transcript of a recording of Gordon Howkins (with his wife Olga) interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 14th September 2003 at his home at Worlaby, near Brigg, in Humberside (North Lincs.). BAS Archives AD6/24/1/16. Transcribed by Ken Hill and Andy Smith, 16th February 2015.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Gordon Howkins, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 14th of September 2003 at his home at Worlaby, near Brigg, in Humberside. Gordon Howkins.

Howkins: I am Gordon Howkins, date of birth 3rd of October 1919.

[0:00:21] Lee: So you're going to be eighty ...?

Howkins: 84 next month.

[0:00:30] Lee: Where were you educated?

Howkins: I was at Mexborough Grammar School and in what was then called the A levels I got a County Major Scholarship for four years and I went from there to King's College, London. I can't remember a great deal about that. I was there for only one year, because the war broke out in September of '39. Two of the things that happened there was the Lord Mayor's Show. The parade took place along the Thames, and King's College overlooked this. At that time they had a number of elephants in the show, and some fool threw some firecrackers in amongst them. Fortunately nothing happened. But it could have been very dangerous.

[0:01:33] Lee: What year would that be?

Howkins: That was my first year – it was actually the second year of university because I was exempted from the first year, provided I took I think Inter B.Sc. in the first term, separately from the course.

[0:01:50] Lee: But it was 19....

Howkins: That would be '38/'39, and war broke out of course in September.

[0:01:58] Lee: What was the course you were doing? What was your subject?

Howkins: It was a general science course – maths, physics and chemistry. As I say, I went into the second year, and when war broke out I remember filling sandbags at the local hospital, and then we were evacuated to Bristol, and I lived near the suspension bridge there. The only recollection I have of that is that I did volunteer for the Fleet Air Arm, and rather foolishly I dropped mathematics and started engineering, which didn't do very much for my course – and did nothing at all as far as being a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm was concerned. But there were so many volunteers that we were allowed to stay there until the finals in June of 1940. Then I was called up and went to St Vincent, at Gosport. We had three months square-bashing there. I was nearly

thrown out of there even because I'd got quite a lot of damage on both eyes from cricket balls.

[0:03:24] Howkins: The M.O. looked at this and said that my visibility would be limited in those two directions, and that wouldn't be very good if I was engaged in a dog-fight. However he let me through and I had three months square-bashing. The two things I can remember was Chief Petty Officer Willmott, who used to stand at the far side of the parade ground and shout across to us. His favourite shout was "If a lion licks the starboard side of your arsehole you will stand still!" The other thing I remember about him was if people got leave and he found people in the barracks, usually they didn't have any money to go home, and he would lend them a couple of pounds to go home, on condition it was paid back on the next pay day. That's the sort of fellow he was – a real disciplinarian, but basically a very kind sort of person. Which impressed me a lot.

[0:04:28] Lee: And his name was ...?

Howkins: Chief Petty Officer Willmott.

[0:04:33] Lee: Did you find out what happened to him?

Howkins: Well, when I was being demobilised in 1946 I was on the ferry going from Portsmouth back to St Vincent, and sitting in the bow was Chief Petty Officer Willmott, and I recognised him. Then before I could say anything he stood up and he said: 'Mr Howkins sir.' I said: 'Can you really remember all the people you trained in six years?' And he said: 'Every one.' So I said: 'There must have been some pretty poor performers for you to remember them, including me!' But no, he could, and he took an interest. Wherever possible he would try to get knowledge of what they'd done. Of course that was very limited because during wartime nobody would have that sort of information publicly. After three months training at St Vincent I was posted to Luton Airport for flying training and that would be about November/December, and we were under canvas. They were allowing just nine hours of flying training before you were out, because there were so many volunteers and so few aircraft to fly at that time. Well I failed, and I was sent back to Lee-on-Solent to train as a meteorologist.

[0:06:07] Lee: Did you want to be a meteorologist?

Howkins: A met observer.

[0:06:12] Lee: Did you want to do that? Was that something ...? Was that an ambition of yours, doing meteorology work?

Howkins: No, no, I didn't have any particular... well it was interesting. I had basic scientific training anyway, and I went there for three months training. Almost the first thing that happened was that there was a Stuka dive-bomber which hit a house where our trainer, Lt Commander Westwater and wife, were living. The whole thing collapsed and they were sitting on a sofa in front of the fire. The chimney came down across it and didn't break. It propped itself up on the back of the sofa, and we were able to dig them out, with a few scratches. That was amazing.

[0:07:02] Lee: Did you see any action at all? Were you ...?

Howkins: There was only very limited bombing going on at the time, mostly from single Stuka dive-bombers. I expect you know that they were fitted with a siren in the front and as they dived this made a tremendous whistling sound. But they were not very effective – they could carry only small bombs. Neither was the defence for that matter – we were given 303s to shoot them down. One amusing thing I suppose was that I was following a pilot balloon, which rises at about 700 feet a minute, and the record for the station was just over 60 minutes, which is over 40,000 feet, and that was achieved by Lieutenant Harman, who was in charge of our training. And he was watching me doing this, and I could see him getting really uptight about this as I approached sixty minutes, and eventually couldn't resist and he came rushing out and he said: 'You still haven't got that ruddy balloon have you?' Well I was just losing it, so I switched on to a barrage balloon, and I said 'Yes – it's as big as a barrage balloon!' Not the appropriate way of dealing with ships' training officers. But he was quite friendly.

[0:08:25] Lee: Did you find you had an aptitude for meteorology?

Howkins: Well I always enjoyed it, yes. And from there of course I got a posting. I didn't know where I was going, but I was sent to Scapa Flow to join the *Rodney*. After a few days there she put to sea, and we joined a very large convoy going across to the States. There was the *Rodney*, I think a couple of cruisers, as far as I can remember, and a whole flotilla of destroyers. But the weather got so bad that the destroyers were having their ships' boats ripped out of the davits, and the admiral in charge ordered them back to port. It was really dangerous for them. Shortly after they'd gone, the *Hood*, and I think it was the *KG5*¹ intercepted *Bismarck* in the Northern Approaches, several hundred miles north of where we were, and the *Hood* of course was sunk, and *Rodney* was ordered to intercept, where possible, because they assumed – and correctly – that the *Bismarck* would head south for a French port.

[0:09:58] Howkins: Eventually she was intercepted. Before this happened the First Officer came down and spoke to the passengers, not the crew, the people like myself who were being taken over to Halifax, and asked us whether we would like to have a post, and I was put in the cordite handling area. I don't know whether you know the system, but there was a cordite room, and there is a bulkhead below, between it and the hoist that takes the cordite up to the guns. In that partition there is a cylinder that is cut in half and welded like that, so the people in the cordite room can put the cordite in there, spin it round, and then it goes out to the handling area.

[0:10:53] Lee: Like a horizontal egg-timer.

Howkins: Yes. The reason for that of course is that sometimes you get a flashback from the guns, which if it went right through to the cordite room would be very serious. I saw nothing of the action. All I can remember of it was that she was firing full broadsides of 16in guns and travelling at full speed. The effect of the guns firing

¹ *The King George V*. The ship concerned was actually the *Prince of Wales*, a King George V class battleship. (Source: www.hmshood.com).

actually stopped her. She really slowed right down by several knots – enough to make you lose your balance. And this happened while I was swinging one of these things and I lost my balance, and I lost a piece of thumb. Afterwards I think there was one small injury to someone on the deck from something falling, and myself. We were the only two casualties on the *Rodney*. Incredible isn't it. So she took no direct hits at all from the *Bismarck*.

[0:11:56] Lee: Did you see the consequences of the *Bismarck*?

Howkins: Nothing, nothing. But we were down there half an hour or more after the action was over, and *Rodney* was ordered away because there were cruisers nearby and submarines by that time, and aircraft, and they were left to finish her off. She took an awful lot to sink her. If you have read about her – an incredible construction. We continued across – I don't know whether they ever caught the convoy up. I didn't know anything about that - but eventually I ended up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We were put ashore there, and we were transferred to a boat called the *Lady Drake*. Although there was a war on, she was still making her usual journey all down the West Indies, calling at all the islands on the way to Trinidad. It was a wonderful journey, just like a peacetime holiday.

[0:13:10] Lee: Were you on it?

Howkins: Yes. When we got to Trinidad we were put ashore and sent to Piarco Airport, and we were stuck there for several weeks. I still didn't know where I was going. After several weeks there one of the things I had to do was: I told to teach some of the local volunteers simple English and arithmetic. The amazing thing was that they couldn't do the simplest of arithmetic, but they were local fishermen, and if you said you've got ten pounds of fish which you're expecting £5.50 for in English, what would that mean in dollars? Oh, straight away because they were dealing with English and American visitors. And they could do this mentally but I never really understood how it happened.

[0:14:16] Howkins: Anyway we left on a Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker. I don't think we knew then where we were going, and halfway down to the Falklands – which is where our destination was – we fuelled a cruiser at sea, one of the British cruisers working in the South Atlantic. We tied up alongside her in quite heavy swell and they put steel hawsers between the two boats while they passed the fuel lines across. I remember one of these shearing, and it came back and hit the side of the tanker, and scored a mark all the way down the steel decking, Nobody was hurt. We eventually got to Stanley; there were myself and one other met office rating, and about a dozen or more wireless operators. We were put ashore in Stanley and I worked there as a met office rating for about eighteen months, when I met Olga.

[0:15:30] Lee: What year was that?

Howkins: That would be ... We must have got there late 1941?

Olga: Yes.

Howkins: And I was there for the whole of '42 and part of '43, taking obs there, with two lieutenants in charge doing shifts, and the obs were coded of course, and sent off from the Naval Air Station there to help forecasters on HM ships in the South Atlantic. And after about 15–18 months I was sent back to the UK for officer training.

[0:16:16] Lee: Let's pause there. How did you meet Olga?

Howkins: Well, the main amusement there was dancing. Dances were held in the local gymnasium.

Olga: Town Hall.

Howkins: And that's where we first met. It was at the Town Hall, that's right. The Town Hall later was burnt down. Olga was at the time working in the telephone exchange and we got to know each other very well in that time, and by the time I was leaving, we got engaged before I left.

[0:16:57] Lee: Gosh!

Howkins: She was very trusting wasn't she?

[0:17:03] Lee: How many thousand miles is it?

Howkins: Six thousand?

Olga: Eight.

[0:17:09] Lee: Eight thousand.

Howkins: With no obvious way of me getting back, or Olga getting home at the time.

[0:17:16] Lee: Before you talk about leaving again, just describe the work you were doing at Port Stanley, and the room you were in.

Howkins: It was just routine met observations which were done every three hours.

[0:17:28] Lee: Stevenson screen, and ...?

Howkins: Yes, and maintaining the recording equipment of course, and that took place in the Government Agricultural Department because they had previously in peacetime been taking observations for their own purposes.

[0:17:48] Lee: And you were sending these back to Britain...?

Howkins: No, we were coding them up and they were being broadcast to HM ships working in the South Atlantic.

Olga: And there were plenty of those around at that time.

Howkins: We used to have to use one-time pads, so that you couldn't break the code. Once you'd used a particular page, it was torn out and thrown away. It was virtually impossible to break it.

[0:18:13] Lee: Were you sending the signals yourself? Or was the radio station sending them?

Howkins: No no. We sent them up to the radio station and they transmitted them.

[0:18:21] Lee: So you were picking up weather coming from the south, were you?

Howkins: Well that was the problem there of course. Because Chile and Argentina were not at war they were still broadcasting in plain language their obs, so we got obs from there. And the two lieutenants, we had to plot the charts for them and they did the forecasts, mostly for local use really. Must have been early 1943 that the West Yorkshires arrived, a huge contingent of West Yorks troops, with Bren Gun carriers, QL lorries and all sorts of things. I never quite knew why they were sent. I don't think it was anything political at that time. I think they were just sent for training in rough country. Not that they ever seemed to do very much, did they?

[0:19:16] Lee: Were the Argentinians not huffing and puffing a bit?

Howkins: No, there didn't seem to be anything there – well there was nothing in the Falklands that you could tell. I don't think there was any particular incident then. We used to do quite a lot of walking.

Olga: There was a contingent of Argentine volunteers who arrived in Stanley, to help.

Howkins: Oh yes, British-born people working in the River Plate and several of them became cypher officers, coding messages. Nothing really stands out, does it, for 15–18 months?

Olga No.

[0:20:07] Lee: Apart from falling in love? So why did you leave the Falklands?

Howkins: I was sent back for officer training.

[0:20:19] Lee: Apart from getting engaged, what plans did you have to see each other again?

Olga: After the war.

[0:20:26] Lee: Whenever that was?

Olga: That's right.

[0:20:31] Lee: So broken-hearted Gordon – shipped back to the UK?

Olga: Yes.

Howkins: When did I come back?

Olga: I don't know how you came back; I don't know what boat you were on then. But you went to Greenwich.

Howkins: Yes, I was sent to the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, for training. That's quite an awe-inspiring experience, there. You have a large top table in the dining hall with the Rear-Admiral and captains down to two and a half ringers sat, and then there were two lower tables here, starting perhaps with a very junior lieutenant commander at the head of each, going down to the subbies at the bottom. That was really below the salt!

[0:21:21] Lee: That was not meteorological training; that was Navy training was it?

Howkins: Oh yes, I was still in the Navy. This was 1943, you see. The war was far from over. After training I was sent to the Royal Naval College (the Naval Met Branch) in Berkeley Square of all places, and stayed there for a short while, writing up a report on the Falklands weather. One day the Lieutenant Commander, a very interesting man called Commander Southern, he invented a technique for taking photographs of wave formations on the coast, and from it he could tell where they were disturbed – where the underwater obstructions had been placed by the Germans. They used these techniques for finding holes for the D-Day landings, to avoid these. He was a very interesting person. Anyway he came to me and he said 'Would you like to volunteer for a top secret expedition? All I can tell you about it is that it could involve two days in the Falklands.' So I said, 'Thanks very much, I'll go!'

[0:22:47] Lee: Did he know....?

Howkins: He knew that I was engaged to Olga, yes. And that's all I was told. I had to get the stores to assemble equipment for two bases and for a ship as well. But I wasn't personally involved in it. They just took their standard stuff and assembled it all. We were eventually posted to Tilbury to join the *Veslekari* renamed *HMS Bransfield*. As you probably know.... I think she was a Greenland² sealer ship, wooden built, but she was loaded so much that she was below the normal waterline, and of course her planking had shrunk above sea level, and when they overloaded her she started to leak badly. We only got to Portsmouth, and off Portsmouth they decided they just had to abandon her. I didn't know this at the time, but apparently: she was wooden they sailed her through all the minefields without any problem.

[0:24:17] Lee: They were magnetic mines were they?

Howkins: Yes, because she was wooden. She was examined there and one of the Naval people just condemned her.

[0:24:32] Lee: You'd guessed that already I presume, had you, they were going to condemn her?

² Norwegian according to the BAS website.

Howkins: Not really, no. We just thought she might have been going in for repairs and we'd be going on. But she was condemned, and we had to offload all the gear again and put it into a special train. One of the potentially serious things for me, but quite amusing really: mercury barometers are very carefully turned upside down to transport them, to put the mercury into the tube as opposed to the reservoir – so the reservoir's up here. The reason for that of course is that if you stand them this way up, and they move a little bit, the mercury will move. Having an SG of 13.5 it shoots itself through the end of the tube and breaks it. So you store them upside down. Two of them were mounted in what are called doolies – obviously from India – shaped like this with two handles on.

[0:25:48] Lee: A pyramid, yes?

Howkins: Yes, so that it's difficult to turn them upside down. But we had a very careful porter working on this, and he saw three of these, you see. So he put one there, and he put one there, and was about to turn the other one upside down to sit neatly between them until I shouted at him! Anyway, all that lot went off to Avonmouth with the main party. And for some reason which we never established, Andrew Taylor, who was a captain in the Royal Canadian Engineers, and was a surveyor, and I, were sent to Liverpool to join a coaling ship which was going out to the River Plate. When we got there they'd been loading coal, and the decks were six or eight inches deep in coal dust and we were in a deck cabin. The steward came to us and said: 'Do be careful to shut your door, close the portholes, and don't come out until we've been fifty minutes out. By that time all this will have blown away.'

[0:27:01] Lee: So you didn't go to Avonmouth?

Howkins: Eventually, yes, because after about half an hour after leaving the dockside there was a nasty crunch, and we hit a wreck that had been sunk in the Liverpool Roads. So we were holed and we had to go back into port again. Andrew and I had a day in an hotel there and presumably he being the senior man, got into touch with, probably, Marr, who was already in Avonmouth, and said: 'What do we do now?' And he said: 'Well you'd better get yourself down here fast.' Because they were going out on the *Highland Monarch*, and there was a spare room there. Why on earth we were ever sent to Liverpool I'm not sure. Anyway, we went down to Avonmouth and joined the main party there, and we went on her to the River Plate, to Montevideo.

[0:28:06] Lee: There's a chap called Alan Carroll: does that name ring a bell? He's writing a history of Port Lockroy.

Howkins: The name rings a bell, but he wasn't with Operation Tabarin. He'd go down later³.

[0:28:25] Lee: He says: 'Would you be kind enough to ask Gordon about the train trip of about 130 miles across the West Country. This trip took 24 hours...' You weren't on that train?

³ Carroll wintered (at Port Lockroy) in 1955 and 1956 – much later than Tabarin (source: Keith Holmes database of winterers).

Howkins: I wasn't on it. How on earth we got to Avonmouth I'm not sure – it must have been by an ordinary passenger train. I can remember that because I seem to remember that nobody had had any food. We'd been loading this gear, everybody was put on the train, and it was stuck about 100 yards from a station. It was a special train commissioned for the purpose. Eventually somebody decided that they'd better make a rush for it, dashed over to the restaurant, grabbed some food and some drink and went back before it pulled off.

[0:29:20] Lee: So train travel was...

Howkins: We didn't make that at all. I seem to remember our train was hours and hours late and just kept stopping. It was a pretty miserable journey. But no, I can't recall anything about the journey from Liverpool down to Avonmouth. It must have been just a fairly ordinary train journey, I should think, otherwise I would have remembered it.

[0:29:46] Lee: There's something about stopping outside signal boxes and going over to the signal box with a billy can. Was that something you did, to get tea?

Howkins: That would be this train journey we didn't take.

[0:30:02] Lee: OK. Taff thought you had a tale to tell about that. Fair enough, OK. So you had two train journeys – one from Portsmouth to Liverpool, and then from Liverpool to Avonmouth?

Howkins: Avonmouth, yes. They were not particularly eventful at all. We all went out on the *Highland Monarch*. I didn't get involved in this but all the people who had never crossed the Equator of course had to meet Neptune and go through the usual ceremonies. I have got some photographs over there.

[0:30:42] Lee: Meeting Neptune in what way?

Howkins: Well, you got plastered with soap and shaved with a great big wooden razor, and then hosed down. Then you had Crossed the Line, so you didn't have to have that done again next time round.

[0:31:01] Lee: The ship going south was that ...?

Howkins: The *Highland Monarch*. It used to belong to Royal Mail Lines. They ran regular services with the Highland boats, some with the larger boats, the *Andes*, from the River Plate.

[0:31:24] Lee: I see. [Looking at photographs.] Oh gosh! You are all in fancy dress as well.

Howkins: That's the whole party.

[0:31:30] Lee: These are photographs of the ...

Howkins: That's the whole of Operation Tabarin. The three ship's officers from the *William Scoresby*, Marchesi and Graham, and.....

[0:31:45] Lee: Apart the fact that you might meet your fiancée again, how much did they tell you about Operation Tabarin?

Howkins: Nothing. Nothing at all. It was just said to be top secret, so there was nothing to say.

Olga: That was Marr.

[0:32:01] Lee: Oh was it? So you got to Montevideo – then what?

Howkins: Then we were transferred to the *Fitzroy*, and she took five days to get to Stanley.

[0:32:32] Lee: No German ships on the way?

Howkins: No, nothing.

[0:32:36] Lee: Had you been able to tell Olga you were coming back?

Howkins: No. I don't think you knew at all did you?

Olga: Yes, I think I did through Jack.

Howkins: That was highly illegal.

[0:32:52] Lee: Come on, tell us....

Howkins: Jack was courting Olga's sister Bessie.

[0:32:57] Lee: Jack?

Howkins: Jack Williams; he was the cipher officer. So he broke all the rules presumably, and told Olga about some message that he saw in decoding, which was probably intended for the Governor.

[0:33:16] Lee: And what was your reaction?

Olga: Oh well... At the time I must have been delighted mustn't I.

Howkins: But not any more though! [Laughing]

Olga: Oh No... [Laughing]

[0:33:29] Lee: And did you get your promised two or three days in Stanley?

Olga: Yes, two days; that's all we had. And you stopped off in Montevideo and you bought yards and yards of cream satin so as I could have a wedding dress. That was good, because you couldn't buy anything in the Falklands.

Howkins: And I bought some shoes that you couldn't wear because they were too small, and I bought American nylons didn't I?

Olga: Yes.

Howkins: Which you couldn't get anywhere in the UK during the war.

[0:34:07] Lee: So that was a bit presumptive wasn't it really, because you arrived in the Falklands with all this cream material and you had to explain why you bought it?

Olga: Ah but we had been corresponding. I could write to him from the Falklands while he was in Greenwich. So I knew something was going on.

Howkins: We exchanged letters for the whole time I was away, but I wasn't able to say anything. I didn't know where Operation Tabarin was going.

[0:34:41] Lee: So you had two or three days in Stanley; this was in 1944?

Olga: End of 1943, beginning of '44....

Howkins: December '43 we got there, didn't we?

Olga: Yes. Oh no, you had Christmas on *Monarch*; it must have been early January.

Howkins: Oh yes.

[0:35:00] Lee: Christmas on the *Monarch*? How was that celebrated?

Howkins: I can't remember a lot about it!

[0:35:10] Lee: Then you had to leave Olga again because you were heading off again. At what point did they explain to you and what did they say about where you were going?

Howkins: I don't honestly think we were told anything even at that stage. I think I travelled on the *Fitzroy*, because I think Marr and Flett and one other person travelled in the *Scoresby*, and the rest of us were on the *Fitzroy* because *Fitzroy* meanwhile had been chartered from the Falkland Islands Company to accompany the *William Scoresby* down South. We arrived in Deception if I remember rightly very early in February. There was no ice at all; it was all clear, clear sea all the way down. The rest of the party were there for only two or three days while we landed our part of the stores. In fact some of them were still I think in stores marked for the other base.... and we never saw them! But we were very fortunate really because the whaling accommodation was in perfect order. There were two large dormitories, really, and they were in perfect order. They had been sealed up, and the snow hadn't got in. All

we had to do was to find some bedding and settle down. We had no hut to build, unlike the base at Port Lockroy.

[0:36:51] Lee: But when you set off from Stanley were you not aware they were packing meteorological equipment for you?

Howkins: Yes I knew that meteorological equipment was going of course because I was to use it. On the way down we were told that Flett and Jock Matheson, Smith the cook and Layther the wireless operator and myself, we were told we were going to Deception Island. That's when I got hold of Surgeon Lieutenant Back, who was the Medical Officer, and said 'Look, what about doing the obs for me when you get to Port Lockroy?' and he agreed provided I did the medic at Deception Island, which was all very presumptuous of me! He did a very good job with the met; I'm not sure what I did with the doctor's work. [Laughs]

[0:37:48] Lee: So you were the first meteorologist to work at Deception Island?

Howkins: Yes, yes, well, the first of this whole party, yes.

Olga: February the second, because I still have all the letters and the stamps from when he wrote to me.

[0:38:07] Lee: Could he tell you where he was?

Olga: Oh I must have known, yes; I must have known. But of course the letters came in batches because he would write several and then the FIDS ships would go round to the other bases and come back and pick up more mail.

[0:38:25] Lee: And you read them in order?

Olga: Mm. [Laughs]

[0:38:30] Lee: And you could send a batch to him presumably?

Olga: No, no, because they didn't come back to Stanley until they had unloaded and settled all the people in the bases, and then they came back to Stanley, and they didn't go back again.

[0:38:41] Lee: I see, so you couldn't reply?

Olga: No.

Howkins: I was left on the second of February and we all had specific jobs to do. Flett was the Leader and he was the Postmaster; he was the Registrar of Births and Deaths; he was the Harbourmaster ... all these silly titles that were given by the Governor to impress any possible visitors. Jock Matheson was the real man of the moment because he was extremely practical. He had come from Islay, and I'm pretty sure he had been a member of the crew on probably the last Shackleton journey to South Georgia, but I can't be sure of that. Jock wasn't one to tell you all the things he'd done, but he was a

wonderful person. He liked his whisky 'as it grew' as he put it ... he didn't want it diluted. [Laughter]

[0:39:46] Howkins: He had a very amusing story about getting salmon when he was in Islay. They used to go out with muffled oars and go and catch salmon in the nets and get them back before the bailiffs found them. He was a wonderful chap. Nothing beat him. He put bogey stoves in all the rooms. You see there was so much room in this; there was a dormitory with about twenty or thirty rooms, and a big kitchen at the end. Jock went round the place and found little bogeys and built them in every room and we all had a separate bedroom but a work room as well. I mean I did the met work from my own bedroom and the wireless op lived in his radio shack and so on. Flett had a separate room because he had all this stuff to do for official purposes. There was very little we could do as a party except help to erect things which needed more than one hand. We couldn't travel anywhere. The most I think... I think Layther went about two or three miles on skis on one occasion, but there was just nowhere to go.

[0:41:07] Lee: You had no boat?

Howkins: We had a small pulling dinghy from the Navy, a terrible thing. It just had two pairs of oars and it was very flat bottomed. Jock, again, stepped a mast in it, made sails from canvas, and he couldn't fit a keel at all, and without a keel of course she crabbed everywhere. So he loaded the bottom of the boat with pig iron from the factory, to make her sit further down. Even so she crabbed. And he made a tent, just from canvas.

[0:41:55] Lee: Did you raise the Union Jack?

Howkins: Yes, Layther went up the mast. The *Carnarvon Castle* I think had been there the year before and taken down most of the Argentine paraphernalia and put up the flag. But either the wind had brought it down or somebody had cut it down but the halyards had been torn, and there was no halyards in the top to hoist a flag. Layther shinned up the mast and rigged a new set of halyards.

[0:42:33] Lee: There were no other bases at that time on Deception Island? You were the only ...?

Howkins: No, there was nobody else there. One incident I can remember, I think it was when the *Fitzroy* came back again. She was bringing more gear to us and they were using a motor boat and a big scow. When they were about 30 or 40 yards off the beach, the motor broke down. There was a fairly strong wind and they were being blown on to the shore. We saw this happening, and of course everybody started to rush down to see if they could help. But not Jock. He goes into the store and gets a great coil of rope, and he got there before everybody else as well. But that's the sort of person he was. He could see what was necessary and just did it. The other people were so inexperienced that it's amazing there wasn't an accident.

[0:43:39] Howkins: As a matter of fact one of the bogeys did catch fire. But it was amazing that it ever happened, because Jock had cut a hole about three foot square in these wooden walls. They were two and half inch thick pitch pine. He cut a great hole

in them and packed it with insulation from the factory, and he put metal sheets on each side so that there was no question of the chimney getting in contact with the woodwork. I think possibly somebody might have dried some socks or something on one of the chimney posts. I don't think that was ever recorded. It was spotted and put out very quickly, but it showed how dangerous it was. After all, Deception was burnt down in a later year; they had a small fire at Stonington Island when Fuchs was there, and Hope Bay was destroyed completely when Sladen was there by himself⁴ when Frank Elliott and a party were away. So you can see how dangerous fire can be on these bases. Nearly all the buildings are wooden.

[0:45:03] Lee: Andrew Taylor says 'We did some very foolish things'. Is that what you're thinking of with your socks, or were there other examples?

Howkins: No, You see we were molly-coddled really, having these wonderful buildings to live in. I nearly did one stupid thing. In the winter a very big snowdrift formed between this building where we lived and the met station which was a couple of hundred yards away on the beach. I went out in sealskin boots as it was calm, and took my obs, and before I had finished the wind was increasing, and it blew down this drift as you can expect because that's how the drift was formed. Very strong. I found that I just couldn't get any purchase on the clean ice; you see it was blowing all the loose snow away and it was just glazing it. I went and gathered my wits in a building on the shore there – I think it was an old laboratory. The wind eventually subsided and I was able to walk back. But I seriously thought of taking my sealskin boots off and going in my bare feet. Because I couldn't see any way of getting a grip on the ice. If I had taken an ice axe with me it would have been simple. But for 200 yards you don't think it necessary. [Laughter].

[0:46:35] Lee: I've got some questions about the story so far, so we might go back a little bit, because you're now on Deception Island. When you went down to the Falklands for the second time, with Operation Tabarin, who was actually on the boat with you. Do you remember who was on the boat with you? Was it all the party?

Howkins: The whole party – there was a picture taken.

[0:47:01] Lee: Twenty or thirty people?

Howkins: Yes.

[0:47:03] Lee: Who stands out in your memory from that party?

Howkins: I can't think of any one person that struck me as being very special. Marr was a rather curious sort of individual.

[0:47:20] Lee: In what way?

Howkins: He almost seemed withdrawn at times. He would wander off by himself, and almost talk to himself. But he was a very competent leader, I believe, and again we saw little if anything of him. He went off and tried to put up a base at Hope Bay

⁴ Oliver Burd and Michael Green perished in the fire.

which was abandoned, and eventually they had to go down to Port Lockroy for that season. No I can't think of any one person ... I think everybody was looking forward to doing it when they got a feeling or an idea what was happening, but no idea where it was. In fact as it turned out nobody knew at all where we would end up, because Hope Bay turned out to be impossible.

[0:48:18] Lee: Did they at any point tell you why you were doing all this? Did they give you the bigger picture?

Howkins: No. No.

[0:48:28] Lee: Why on earth take me?

Howkins: It became fairly obvious when we got to Deception and saw the Argentine remains, and that I think was what really so amazed us. I think later on, a long time later, I think we were told, and this was not in that first year, but after I'd been back with FIDS, that it was Churchill himself who had decided that something should be done to ensure that we had a measure of sovereignty there. This was in 1943 when the war was far from over. It had hardly begun in terms of.... The D-Day landings hadn't even taken place. That really amazed us, that a man could have the foresight to deal with that sort of problem which anyone else would have felt was too trivial to bother with. But no, we knew nothing at the time.

[0:49:30] Lee: Did you ever see the Argies?

Howkins: No. No. Nothing. It's as well they didn't come because there were all sorts of things in Flett's report about what he should do they come. We had one .303!

[0:49:48] Lee: When you arrived at Stanley on the way down to Deception – in December/January 1944 wasn't it? Did you meet the Governor?

Howkins: No.

[0:49:58] Lee: You didn't meet the Governor? Who did you have anything to do with, apart from Olga? Who did you relate to?

Howkins: I think I just went up to your house.

Olga: He probably did.

[0:50:12] Lee: Were you born in the Falklands, Olga?

Olga: Yes.

[0:50:14] Lee: You were? What was your father? A fisherman?

Olga: No, no, he was a..... [laugh] what was he dear?

Howkins: A cabinetmaker.

Olga: A cabinetmaker. He did his apprenticeship with the Government.

Howkins: And a very good cabinetmaker.

Olga: He was, he made us a lot of furniture.

Howkins: Where's your jewel box that was made from....?

Olga: No..... My grandmother came from Nettlebed, and my grandfather came from Henley.

Howkins: Near Henley.

Olga: And they went out in about 1880, I should think, and settled in the Falklands. My grandfather apparently couldn't get a job in England. He sent for my grandmother after he got to the Falklands. He went out to the camps, doing shearing and that sort of job. He sent for my grandmother, who wasn't very old...

[0:51:25] Howkins: She was eighteen wasn't she?

Olga: Yes. She had to get herself from Nettlebed down to Tilbury with all her goods and chattels to go out to the Falklands to marry this... [Laughter]. She had some courage didn't she?

[0:51:41] Lee: She did, yes.

Howkins:on a sailing ship.

Olga: Yes, on a sailing ship, and they didn't call anywhere. He knew she was coming and so he arranged for the wedding. And being in the camp, isolated, he invited everyone who was in near distance, and they all came in on horseback to this little settlement. All the women cooked the cakes and the men got the booze in all ready for the wedding when my grandmother would arrive. But of course there was a storm, and she was delayed. So what did they do? They had the wedding! [Laughter] They couldn't do anything else. They had to get back to their farms, to their animals.

Howkins: And they wouldn't come in for the wedding either. They were too busy.

[0:52:26] Lee: Well I hope when we get to yours, ??? [inaudible] So who was organising things on the Falklands? Before you went out, down to Deception for the first time, who was actually planning and organising on the dockside? When you were preparing to go to Deception for the first time, you were in Stanley preparing to go to Deception, who was doing all the organisation?

Howkins: I don't know. I wasn't involved. We were only there, I think it was two days wasn't it?

Olga: Two days, yes. Somebody must have had to do all that trans-shipping of all that cargo on to the *Scoresby*.

Howkins: Because the *Fitzroy* had been chartered, the *Fitzroy*'s crew and the dockside people would offload all that stuff and then reload it into the *Fitzroy* to go down South. I think she would probably take all the cargo. I don't suppose *William Scoresby* took anything. I don't know who was running the *Scoresby* when we arrived, but of course with us was Lt. Marchesi, and the Chief Officer, First Officer, the young fellow Graham....

Olga: Yes, Ian Graham.

Howkins: Three of them on that part. They took over the *Scoresby* for this purpose. But they had no special experience.

Olga: There was a lot going on in the Falklands at that time because they were transshipping all the West Yorks troops back on to the *Highland Monarch* to bring them back to England.

Howkins: The reason why the *Monarch* was going out was to bring the West Yorks back home.

[0:54:02] Lee: It all sounds a bit Fred Karno doesn't it, really?

Olga: It was, so there was an awful lot of coming and going and shipping, and...

[0:54:10] Lee: What was your first impression of the *Fitzroy*? Was it a smart ship?

Howkins: Well I knew her of course, having been there before – knew her very well.

Olga: 800 tons.

Howkins: My one recollection of *Fitzroy* was they had a steward who was called Johnny Baldrini, a Chilean. And she used to roll quite a lot on the trip backwards and forwards to the River Plate, and Johnny would come into the dining room with his arm out like that, about half a dozen cups of coffee on them.

Olga: He could carry eight!

[0:54:57] Lee: On a straight out arm, horizontal arm?

Olga: With the ship rolling, you see.

Howkins: He would be able to take that off without a fiddle.

[0:55:09] Lee: The arm was in harmony with the ship's roll.

Olga: Yes, that's right, so he kept the coffee upright.

Howkins: They had fiddles on the tables to stop things sliding off, when he was doing this, so you can imagine how difficult it would be to do it.

[0:55:22] Lee: Do you remember the Hooley family or the Poole family?

Howkins: Well, Tim Hooley was a wireless operator, along with three or four others. They oscillated between working in Stanley – this was civilian radio operators – and working in the camp. They had a station at Fox Bay and South Georgia. They were three Government stations, and they were Government employees, wireless operators. I think he might have been on that first trip, but I can't remember anything of it.

[0:56:06] Lee: Didn't his family go with him on one of these boats?

Howkins: Well yes, you see, he took his wife and his daughter down to South Georgia with him, and certainly...

[0:56:15] Lee: Via Deception?

Howkins: Yes, well.... [pause] how on earth was he going to get to South Georgia? The *Fitzroy* must have taken him.

Olga: Must have done, yes.

Howkins: I suppose the *Fitzroy* was making a journey to Deception because she had been chartered by the Government, and they would go on from Deception and Port Lockroy and to South Georgia. But a later trip when the Hooleys were on it, I was on that. There was Dawn, his daughter, and his wife, and Tim, and Tim helped a lot to put the wireless equipment in and erect masts and things like that.

[0:56:59] Lee: In the ship?

Howkins: Particularly at Port Lockroy I remember him doing that. But he was just one of four or five wireless operators employed by the Government.

[0:57:11] Lee: But it was the female members of the Hooley family who were the first women ever to set foot on Deception Island, is that right?

Howkins: Yes, purely by accident. They normally went from Stanley direct to South Georgia, but because the *Fitzroy* had been chartered they had to do the journey that way.

[0:57:29] Lee: And you were with them on that first leg down to Deception?

Howkins: I can't remember them on that journey.

Olga: Well, in those rough seas everybody took to their bunks the minute they got on the *Fitzroy*, and they didn't get up again until she docked somewhere. Nobody could withstand that, that motion. It was a very bad motion that *Fitzroy*, she used to toss and turn...

[0:57:57] Lee: She was a bad sailor was she?

Olga: Everybody were bad sailors on that boat – I don't think anybody ever stayed out of their bunk for more than half an hour! [Laughter] And she used to ply between Stanley and Montevideo once a month.

Howkins: It was a five day journey – a thousand miles took five days.

[0:58:16] Lee: When you were approaching Deception, you were being told what your job was to be. Were you given any instructions about what to do if foreign vessels did arrive?

Howkins: No. Well it's possible that Flett had instructions. But he never briefed his party at all. Certainly I never knew.

[0:58:39] Lee: And you said the buildings were in good nick when you got there?

Howkins: Oh yes, they were in perfect order. All fully glazed and nothing was broken. It was quite amazing.

[0:58:52] Lee: Any food?

Howkins: Well there was a cellar underneath the hut that we were living in. You couldn't get into it from the hut itself, you had to go outside and there were big doors which opened. Hanging up there was stuff which I would have called kippers, but it was what the Norwegians produced, something like that – a salted fish of some kind, and there were whole lots of them hanging up there. They were a little bit, hanging in sort of mould of some kind. But I guess if you had been really hungry you could have washed it off and eaten them.

[0:59:35] Lee: You didn't do that?

Howkins: No, we had plenty of food.

[0:59:40] Lee: Who left them behind – the Argentinians?

Howkins: No, I think they were left by the last whalers who were in there. I wonder when they stopped whaling? I suppose what happened: when the war broke out of course an awful lot of the whalers were sunk by our merchant cruisers. But I think they would certainly be working there in 1939/40.

[1:00:09] Lee: And your first priorities when you got to Deception were, because the buildings were already in good condition, your first priorities were the Post Office?

Howkins: Well, effectively Flett was the postmaster, I was the meteorologist, there was a wireless operator, and there was a cook, and there was a handyman. The four of us had specific duties and we all did them separately, they weren't connected in any way, and as I said, because we were so tied to the base, there was little if anything we could do as a party. It was only when something required more than one pair of hands that we worked together really.

[1:00:47] Lee: So how long would it have taken for the post office and the met station to get going?

Howkins: I would think that I was taking obs within a month certainly, as Jock was such a marvellous bloke to have. Nothing beat him from a practical point of view.

[1:01:17] Lee: This was wind speed, ...? What were the readings you were taking Gordon?

Howkins: Just the standard readings. We had an anemometer, and we had a wind gauge, and we had wet and dry bulb thermometers, and thermographs and hygrographs recording in the Stevenson screen, and they had a barograph inside of course, and a mercury barometer inside. They were all the standard observations that go into any full observation – clouds and wind speeds and the like. They were all coded up into six 5-figure groups and we had to put them into one-time pads when we first went there for the first two or three months. They were broadcast and picked up by some HM ships working in the south Atlantic.

Olga: And you didn't have an alarm clock, did you.

[1:02:14] Howkins: Oh yes. Crazy isn't it? I was trying to do obs every three hours, and I didn't have any way of waking myself up! [Laughter] You know what an ordinary recording instrument is like? So I took a spare drum and screwed it on to a base, and went down to the whaling station and found some strips of copper, I bent them into a right angle and then with a hacksaw cut out the middle. Then I dropped the clip on the bottom which holds the paper on to the drum down, and set it in this gap, pulled it over here. Now I built a little circuit with a spare radio buzzer which Norman Layther lent me. You pulled it over to this side and it would buzz, and two minutes later it had left that side and I gradually widened the thing until it was exactly three hours. So when I went to bed I could pull it on this side and in a couple of minutes it would stop and then three hours later it would wake me up. I had two, one for three hours and one for six hours, and that's all we could do for an alarm clock. [Laughter] But it worked!

[1:03:39] Lee: How did it feel when the ship left you behind for the last time?

Howkins: Well, I knew enough about the area from meteorology anyway that we were going to be icebound. In fact, surprisingly, I don't think we had ice until about May, and it was gone very early in the season, about October. So there was little fixed ice there that season – very different from some other seasons later on. But we were there, and we knew there would be no relief ship for about a year. I think everybody accepted that; nobody worried about it, except the other four people on the base. I didn't particularly worry because I didn't feel very well. It started about three months after we got there; I started having lots of tummy pains and so on. They lasted for about ten days or more, and I spent most of the time in bed. Then gradually got better. Meanwhile, Jock Matheson and Flett took the obs for twice a day to send back to Stanley. Then I got better and it cleared up and I went back on to a full set of observations, but when I got back to Stanley, it was diagnosed as appendicitis and I had the operation there. Fortunately it wasn't necessary in May. [Laughter]

[1:05:12] Lee: Was it dark for several weeks?

Howkins: It was never fully dark, because we were quite a long way north of the Antarctic Circle. Deception is about 62½–63 South, nearly five degrees north of the circle, so we always had some daylight.

[1:05:39] Lee: Did you all get on OK?

Howkins: Yes, there was never any problem. Everybody was very busy. Jock, as I say, was the anchorman in the whole place; nothing beat him.

[1:05:58] Lee: Did you have much contact with the outside world? You were sending Morse signals and your weather reports...

Howkins: For about three months everything was coded and they weren't allowed to say where we were. Then I seem to remember that the information was released in the UK. Whether it was official or not I don't know or whether somebody got hold of it through a newspaper, and then we were told we could work in plain language. [To Olga] Did we ever send messages to each other? I don't think we did, did we?

Olga: No.

[1:06:35] Lee: And you couldn't write. Could you pick up radio programmes from the BBC?

Howkins: I don't remember listening to any. Probably the only radio that was down there was the one run by Norman Layther, and that wouldn't be very suitable anyway for voice. We had no radiotelephone system of any kind.

[1:07:12] Lee: So how did you entertain yourselves?

Howkins: Just kept busy! There were some books to read, and there were one or two records to play, not very many. But we had a whole lot of books left by I think it was Bobby Greenshields, the ADC, and Sandy sent a whole lot books down for us when we went down first time. I don't recall that there were any books belonging to Operation Tabarin. There might have been.

[1:07:47] Lee: So there were no concert parties, no drinking schools?

Howkins: I don't even remember celebrating – like they did at Port Lockroy – Midwinter's Day, but of course is Midsummer's Day anyway.

[1:08:03] Lee: And no real tensions?

Howkins: I can't remember any, no.

[1:08:11] Lee: Sounds a bit boring!

Howkins: It would have been, but I was very busy. When I was fit I was doing observations every three hours, 24 hours a day. Afterwards, Flett said I mustn't do it

when I was ill, and I stopped doing the night ones. I was doing six or seven a day but missing one out so I got six hours sleep. And there were pilot balloons to be done as well whenever the weather was suitable. You could always cook yourself a penguin egg in the ash! The ash on the beach was hot enough to cook a penguin egg.

[1:08:58] Lee: Really? All the year round?

Howkins: Yes.

[1:09:06] Lee: Were there many penguins? There must have been.

Howkins: No, they were just migratory. There was no real rookery nearby. A few did come and seemed to start a little rookery at one time, but I don't think they ever stopped. Quite a few seal would come ashore for a rest, and some of them showed signs of damage, as if killer whales or perhaps sea leopards had attacked them – great gashes in the side. I think they came ashore to rest and recover.

[1:09:41] Lee: You say the readings were routine, but the results must have been more than routine. You must have had some extreme weather.

Howkins: Well, I myself took an interest in them of course. I remember trying to decide how we got the kind of weather we got. I had a number of books with me which I had bought in Montevideo, still got them.... they were American. That's the only one.

[1:10:12] Lee: We'll look at those in a minute, shall we? So what were your remarkable readings, do you remember?

Howkins: I tried to imagine what synoptic situations would happen, and of course I'd been in Stanley. What happens usually is depressions come from west to east broadly, and when they meet the Andes everything gets squashed up. You get a warm front ahead and a cold front behind. The warm front gets held up, the cold front catches it up and occludes with it, and over the Andes all this bottom area dries out and the bottom several thousand feet has no cloud in it by the time it's gone over the Andes. And all you tend to get left with is cirrus cloud at high level from the remains of the frontal system. It all gets stuck there and the depression, which is probably south of Cape Horn, carries on, so it all gets bent in a curious sort of way.

[1:11:19] Howkins: Yet they can become quite active. I think what happens is: cold air gets sucked up from the Weddell Sea side and rejuvenates the whole system. So they can arrive in Port Stanley and in the south quite active, when having crossed the Andes they were virtually destroyed. I used to spend quite a lot of time trying to work out how this might happen I only had observations from Port Lockroy. We didn't even get observations from Stanley in many cases. We were sending out but they weren't sending anything back. We would have had to intercept the synoptic messages they sent out and we wouldn't have had a code to break them down anyway. So we were really isolated from that point of view.

[1:12:17] Lee: Part 2 of the interview with Gordon Howkins, recorded on the 14th of September 2003 at Worlaby, in Humberside. Gordon Howkins Part 2.

[1:12:28] Lee: Had you actually been just told ...? You were told you were there for one year, effectively, were you?

Howkins: I must have known that I was going to be posted from Deception back to Port Stanley because otherwise I wouldn't have known to bring down the things for the wedding. [Both laugh] So I knew I was eventually going to end up in Port Stanley for a period of time anyway.

[1:12:52] Lee: So when were you relieved at Deception?

Howkins: It was about February of '45. I did almost exactly a year there. I settled down there as one of the two forecasting officers in the Navy (it was still a Naval base then) and we planned the wedding for the 2nd of April, and because there were only two of us, I had to do the forecast for my own wedding day on the 1st. Well it turned out that I had completely missed what seemed to be a tropical hurricane and when I woke up on the morning of the 2nd I was living in the house about 300 or 400 yards from you on the other side of Port Stanley. The wind was blowing up the hills and I was walking across it.

[1:14:00] Howkins: To get across the hills I had to go crab-wise to get across them, and there were sheets of Nissen Hut iron that had been left by the West Yorks⁵, had been stored in several of the house gardens with large rocks put on them. But this wind was so fierce that it just vibrated the rocks off and these sheets of Nissen were going up in the air about 100 ft or more, then nose-diving back again because of the shape. There was an old sailing ship in the harbour called the *Fennia* and although there was no rain at the time, the spume in the harbour was so high that you could just see a mast and nothing of the ship. And eventually, later on, I found that the Met Office mast had been blown down but it had recorded a wind speed of more than 100 knots in a gust.

[1:14:58] Howkins: Well I arrived at August House and persuaded them very reluctantly to put off the wedding for a day because dozens of chimneys had come down and the roof of the gymnasium where we were going to have the dance after the wedding was leaking badly, and I had to go all round the town seeing the vicar and putting off the wedding and so on and so forth, and switching the arrangements for the wedding generally. I went down to the *William Scoresby* which was anchored off the jetty there, and spoke to Victor Marchesi the captain. I said 'Look we are going to put the wedding off.' He said 'You can't do it. We have booked the gym for a ship's dance, just because we are sailing on the 4th, and I daren't put that off.'

[1:15:58] Howkins: So I thought for a while and I said 'Well supposing we invited the ship's company to our wedding dance, would you let us have the hall?' And he said 'Delighted.' [Laughs] So we had to go and get an extra case of gin and an extra case of whisky to go with us, and the wedding took place on the following day. But of course I have never been allowed to forget the fact that I did my own forecast for my own wedding and it was such a disaster. He annoyed Olga very much by sending her

⁵ A battalion of the 11th West Yorkshire Regiment had been stationed in Stanley (source *Falkland Islands Defence Force* by Russell Phillips).

a letter. Her second name was Annie, which she usually abbreviates to Ann, and he sent her a letter addressed 'Dear ol' Granny Howkins'. [Laughter]

[1:16:48] Lee: Was there somebody called Niddrie?

Howkins: Yes, Lieutenant David Niddrie.

[1:16:52] Lee: And he was your best man?

Howkins: Yes, and he died some few years ago, and he must have been so fond of the Falklands, he had his ashes sent back to be distributed from Canopus⁶ in the Falklands.

[1:17:06] Lee: Who made the wedding dress then?

Olga: An aunt, who was a dress maker. She made the dress for me. But you see, if there was a wedding in the Falklands, we all knew each other, and the invitation was almost an open invitation for anybody who wanted to come to the dance, could, you see. So the sailors were delighted there was a whole lot of people to dance with, and free booze, and my Dad did it.

[1:17:35] Lee: Was it a drunken affair do you recall, or ...?

Olga: Well they usually were when the sailors ...

Howkins: A few of the local people had their way of storing their own liquor. They weren't allowed to take drinks into the dance, but one enterprising fellow had decided that he could take a reef in the halyards in the mast outside and hoist his bottle of whisky to the top and tie it up there. And he thought it would be quite safe there from other people, but somebody saw him doing it.

[1:18:10] Lee: The wedding was held in a church?

Olga: Yes, in the Christ Church.

Howkins: In the church, in the cathedral there.

Olga: In the cathedral in Stanley.

[1:18:17] Lee: At the reception was in the ...?

Olga: In the Ship Hotel.

Howkins: In the gymnasium.

Olga: Which is now the Upland Goose.

Howkins: Yes, that was in the Ship Hotel, but the dance was in the gymnasium.

⁶ Canopus hill, near Port Stanley, named after *HMS Canopus*, after the Battle of the Falkland Islands.

[1:18:15] Lee: Not the Town Hall?

Olga: The Town Hall had been burned down.

Howkins: The Town Hall had been burned down while I was down South.

Olga: Which was a tragedy for the Islands.

Howkins: Oh it was a wonderful old ...

Olga: Yes, my great grandfather built it.

Howkins: Norwegian pitch pine.

Olga: He was a master builder and he was brought out from England to build the Town Hall.

[1:18:44] Lee: What was his surname, Olga?

Olga: King. So all the functions had to be held in the gymnasium, which was just a big hall. No facilities or anything like that. It was a shame really but they built a new Town Hall in the end, which was a concrete box.

[1:19:03] Lee: Did you have music?

Olga: Oh yes. What would we have had? Most of the dances, people used to play the accordions and there was a little band, a four or five piece band. We didn't have recorded music, did we?

Howkins: I don't think so.

Olga: No I don't think so. So there was a four or five piece band.

Howkins: It was all live, after a fashion.

Olga: And the accordions.

[1:19:32] Lee: And they were playing the hits of the day?

Olga: Oh yes. So it was even boogie woogie in those days.

[1:19:45] Lee: And where did you go for your honeymoon?

Olga: Ah well, we delayed that.

Howkins: We went to the Lake District for our honeymoon, about ...

Olga: Six months after that.

Howkins: Six months?

Olga: You had to leave the Falklands first.

Howkins: It was 1947, I should think. At least 2 years too late.

Olga: Yes.

[1:20:08] Lee: So how much time did you have then, in the Falklands, at that point?

Howkins: Well the first thing that happened to us after the wedding was something that was a bit frightening for us. I was a very junior officer, a subbie, and there was a formal Naval - Government dinner at Government House which was very formal, all in full dress. The Governor sat at one end and the Naval Officer in Charge sat at the other end, and it went down in order of importance to the centre. The sub-lieutenant will be there and then opposite him or her would be a very junior clerk or something, from Government. The senior lady – in that case it was the Naval Officer in Charge's wife – would say 'We will now retire to the withdrawing room.' So the ladies went off and the men were left with the port. And never having been to one of these before, it was rather awe inspiring ...

Olga: A bit daunting, especially if I was an Islander, and Islanders weren't invited to Government House.

[1:21:31] Lee: Oh I see. So this was your departure?

Olga: No no, this was just one of these celebrations they had. I don't know what it was. It could have been ... No I can't remember. It wasn't VE-Day.

Howkins: It wasn't the D-Day landings or VE-Day, VE-night was it? It would be too early for that.

[1:21:54] Lee: But after you got married, you were on the Falklands, on Stanley, for about a year, weren't you?

Howkins: About 18 months I suppose we were there, weren't we?

Olga: We were married in April and we left in October.

Howkins: Yes it was 18 months.

Olga: No, in October because the war in Europe was over.

Howkins: Yes, and I was brought back to the UK to go out to the Far East because that war was still taking place, and everything happened that shouldn't. We ended up in Uruguay, in Montevideo, having gone up in the *Fitzroy*, and we were delayed there for two or three weeks and then we were sent up to Buenos Aires to connect with the Royal Mail Lines ship going home. And they did a stupid thing; they sent us up on the ferry on the morning that we were due to sail. And of course she sailed from La Plata

which was several miles away from where the ferry landed in Buenos Aires and we missed her. Then we had about four or five weeks in BA waiting for another ship.

Olga: We saw this ship out in the roads and we were standing on the quay in the Fray Bentos area and the manager from the Fray Bentos came and said 'There's your ship.'

Howkins: Lying out in the roads, on her way. Eventually it took us until November/December when we got to Tilbury.

Olga. The Navy weren't too pleased, were they?

[1:23:38] Howkins: No.

Olga: And while we were there, there was an uprising. President Peron was in power and there were ... I can't remember which uprising it was, but we were staying in a hotel in the middle of Buenos Aires, and at the street: there were the tanks and the mounted police, and the shooting and arresting people. So we just stayed put. But there was a reporter living in the hotel and he had been out trying to get some cover, and he came back; he had got a bullet in his foot. And staying in this hotel there was an English nurse, and she said 'I will get it out for you' because if he had reported this bullet, and gone to the hospital, they probably would have arrested him in BA.

Howkins: They arrested everybody who was injured, just in case they were revolutionaries.

Olga: But that was a bit upsetting, wasn't it?

Howkins: It was, yes.

[1:24:46] Lee: You had this period of six months on Stanley, after your wedding, and you were back in the Met Office, were you, at that point, Gordon? After your wedding, on Stanley, you had six months back in the Met Office at that point?

Howkins: Yes, I was still in the Navy of course, in Stanley.

[1:25:09] Lee: But were you back in the Met Office on dry land?

Howkins: Oh yes.

[1:25:13] Lee: And what sort of work were you doing then, because now you were based ...?

Howkins: I was one of the two forecasters. Lieutenant Niddrie was one and I was the other, and we just took shifts about, and somehow or other we managed to cover about 12 or 14 hours a day between two of us.

[1:25:29] Lee: But were you receiving forecast reports from the Antarctic?

Howkins: Not forecasts. We were receiving weather reports. We used to pick them up. They were broadcast from the Argentine and from Chile and from Uruguay.

[1:25:42] Lee: Not from Deception or from Lockroy?

Howkins: Oh yes, we were getting those of course but they were in plain language by that time. And South Georgia of course, and we had to make local forecasts and forecasts later on for the West Yorks. as well, didn't we?

[1:26:01] Lee: Where were they by now?

Howkins: They were just outside Port Stanley in barracks they had built in Nissen huts.

Olga: That was another detachment that came out after the West Yorks.

Howkins: Oh yes, the West Yorks. had gone already.

[1:26:26] Lee: So was that just very straightforward routine type of work or were there surprises; were there unusual events then? Was that all straightforward or were there unusual things happening at that point, at that time?

Howkins: No. There was never any actual action in the Falklands. There were no German raiders came at all. That was in the First World War.

[1:26:52] Lee: Captain Marr became ill, didn't he? Were you aware of that?

Howkins: He was taken ill in the second year and he handed over to Andy Taylor at Hope Bay, but I never saw him at all. You see when people came up from the bases, they had 24 hours at most in ... and we didn't even know they were coming.

[1:26:18] Lee: Were you involved at all in the incident with Mr Bonner who became ill? Somebody called Bonner became very ill. Were you aware of that? He was a Falklander. Sam Bonner was it?

Olga: There were a lot of Bonners but I think he was Sam, yes. He would have been the second year, wouldn't he⁷?

Howkins: Yes. He certainly didn't go down in the first year with us.

Olga: No he wasn't with you.

Howkins: He might have been part of the renewal for the second year.

[1:27:51] Lee: He became ill I think, didn't he?

Olga: I can't remember, sorry.

[1:27:57] Lee: It's all right. I don't know what you do know and what you don't know.

⁷ S. Bonner wintered at Base B (Deception Island) in 1945.

Olga: No, of course.

[1:28:03] Lee: OK, so you did your six months on Stanley and then you sailed back to the UK?

Howkins: Yes. By that time of course VE and the Far East war was over after Hiroshima.

[1:28:18] Lee: So because you missed the boat at Montevideo, Buenos Aires rather ...?

Howkins: I never did get posted to the Far East, fortunately, and I was eventually posted to a little airport at Stretton, the Naval Air station at Stretton.

[1:28:36] Lee: Which is where?

Olga: Cheshire.

[1:28:39] Lee: Cheshire, right.

Howkins: Yes and they were flying Seafires⁸ from there to Donybristle and putting them on Naval aircraft (carriers) and they were taking them out and dumping them in the North Sea. And that went on for some weeks. Eventually I was de-mobbed from there and that's when I was sent back to St Vincent to be demobilised. That's when I met Chief Officer Willmott, on the ferry. But after demobilisation, I still had two full years to use on my County Major Scholarship if I wanted to do it and I started work in the university, actually before I was demobilised.

Olga: In Leeds.

[1:29:34] Howkins: In Leeds, yes. Then I got a signal from Admiralty to say I was to attend a meeting in Victory House with the Air Ministry and the purpose of the meeting was to decide whether the Air Ministry would take over Port Stanley and in particular the Naval Met station there because some Government decision had been taken that the Navy wasn't to run any shore stations. The Air Ministry Met Office would run all the shore stations. Well I told them what I could about living there and the conditions that were there and so forth and they decided, almost a bit reluctantly, that they would in fact take it over.

[1:30:21] Howkins: Senior Officer Johnson, who was chairing the meeting – he was in charge of the Met Office – said almost despairingly 'Well we had better do it but I don't know how I am going to man it.' And jokingly I said 'I'll go for you.' and I forgot about it immediately. About a fortnight later I had a letter saying could I get into contact with the Civil Service Commissioners who would like to see me before I took up service in Port Stanley in the Air Ministry. I said 'How do we get out of this?' Well at the time we were living with my parents in Horsforth, near Leeds. They were

⁸ The Naval version of the Spitfire.

talking about modifying the house so they could have a place for ourselves there, and I was back at university. We realised then that Jean was on the way.

[1:31:17] Lee: Your daughter?

Howkins: Yes, and we decided that we would accept the offer. So that's how we ended up back in Port Stanley working for FIDS. But I was sent out, you see, by the Air Ministry, to run a station which they were taking over, and my instructions from Senior Officer Johnson was that the priority was to get the radiosonde station which we were going to establish going first, and the radar unit that was attached to it, that was the top priority, to get that going. When I got out there the first thing the Governor did was to say 'You are to advise me on meteorological matters affecting the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, so I want you to go down to all bases as soon as possible.' Well I sent a signal back to the Air Ministry saying 'How do I deal with this? The instructions I am getting from you and from them are conflicting.' The reply I got was 'You are in the best position to make the judgement locally.' So I decided to go along with the Governor because I was going to be there for three years.

[1:32:38] Lee: Who was actually employing you then and that point?

Howkins: The Air Ministry at that time, yes. And as I say I was only there to run the Air Ministry station and to advise the Governor on any meteorological matters he cared to consult me about.

[1:32:52] Lee: Not proper work then?

Howkins: He couldn't really give me instructions to go to the bases because I wasn't working for him. That was my problem.

[1:33:03] Lee: So you did another tour of the bases?

Howkins: I did eventually go but meanwhile we had come out on the ...

Olga: The *Drina*.

Howkins: The *Drina*, yes, and been picked up in Stanley in the *Fitzroy* and without our knowledge a huge gun-laying radar set, called the DL712 I think it was, had been loaded in Tilbury onto the *Lafonia* which was a new ship being brought in by the Falkland Islands Company. And of course the ship's derricks weren't used. Dockside put the thing on the deck and it came down to Stanley and when we got there the *Lafonia*'s derricks couldn't lift it and there was nothing on the jetty that would lift it. So eventually the *Lafonia* went to the *Fennia* which was this old sailing ship in the middle of the harbour and these old wooden derricks there lifted it, just took its weight, lifted it about a foot off the deck, and very carefully, I think it was Captain Johnson in charge, got his ship out from under and we put two big scows underneath it, lashed together, and gently dropped the radar set onto it.

[1:34:26] Howkins: And the next problem is: how do you get it on the land? So they towed it to the government jetty and waited for the tide to come up to the right level, and then ran it off. And we all heaved a big sigh of relief and went off for some ... a

meal. A member of the public rang me and said 'Is that your gear on the jetty? Because we think the jetty is sinking.' [Laughter] So I had to rush down there with some 4" x 4"s and 6-inch nails and nail them behind the wheels in case it rolled off because it didn't have any brakes. The next day, the colonel in charge of the Public Works Department, Colonel Woodgate, borrowed a big Army QL lorry and we put a lot of gear on it so that the lorry was on the land, not on the jetty. Tied this gear to the radar set and gently rolled it off. And when we got it off, they looked underneath the piers and the piers were about 2 inches below the decking of the jetty.

[1:35:33] Howkins: Now 'How do we get it up to the Met Office?' which is up the hill about 300 or 400 feet higher than the harbour. Well a fellow called Jack Sollis solved that one for us. He got a QL lorry and he got a tractor and he got a baulk of 12-inch cross-section timber with chains, which he tied at the back of the radar set, so that when he wanted to have a rest, he could fall back on this and wouldn't run down the hill. And the lorry went on to the verge and the gear came round pulleys like that and back up to the tractor. The tractor went ahead and hauled it up until we had got no more gear left. He eased it back onto this 12" by 12" baulk of timber and let it rest. Then the lorry went ahead and then they started again. So eventually we got it up like that and I had to get on top of the radar set with a wooden pole and lift the telephone poles out of the way.

[1:36:45] Lee: The wires, yes. When you get it up there, was it useful?

Howkins: Well the first thing that happened was with the range because we didn't have any technicians. We had arranged with the National Physical Laboratory, Dr Smith-Rose was in charge at the time, that two of his technicians who were there at the ionospherics station to service it for us and to make it ready for use. This bloke came over and got the rotor free and started it up and it was working fine. We had three or four useful ascents, then it wouldn't work anymore. Well we didn't know what was wrong but we found that the inside of the rotors were going green. Obviously water was getting in and neither I nor my partner Don McNaughton (who was the radiosonde officer who had come out with us) knew what to do about it but I got the maintenance manual out and on the first page it said 'After releasing the four bolts that hold the rotor unit, don't forget to put them back in position and seal them so that the weather can't get in.' So we did that and it stopped any further decay but we had to wait until new equipment came out to service it, because there wasn't anything like that in the spares that had been sent out, because it wouldn't normally have been required. So that was it.

[1:38:27] Lee: A classic case of 'If all else fails, read the manual.'?

Howkins: And then of course the Governor sent for me and said that I had to go down South. I was away about six weeks. Olga meanwhile had gone into hospital because Jean she thought was on the way. She had been there a couple of weeks I suppose.

Olga: No, not as long as that. A short time, anyway.

Howkins: I was travelling up with Stuart Slessor and got quite friendly with him. You may not know this but his specialism was just this.

Olga: He was a gynaecologist. [All laugh]

Howking: He was in the Navy, called up you see during the war, but he was a gynaecologist.

Olga: So he delivered Jean.

Howkins: So I said to him 'Could you have a look at Olga and see that things are all right.' He went to see her and he said 'Well you can go home for a month.'

[1:39:34] Lee: Paternity leave? I have just got a few more questions really to ask you. Perhaps about ten more minutes if we may.

Olga: Yes, it's nearly six o'clock.

[1:39:43] Lee: That's all right. Don't worry about that. So FIDS-MS⁹ was separate from FIDS, was it? Who ran it?

Howkins: This was a real problem. I had virtually no contact with the FIDS organisation in the UK. I had plenty with the SecFids when he was appointed there. First of all it was John Huckle I think, and then it was Butler¹⁰ and finally it was Frank Elliott, and I worked very well with them. But nobody had defined how FIDMS would work with FIDS and when you think about it, the prime problem must be to appoint people who can work in the Antarctic, physically, and have enough interest to be there. But I wanted technicians who could do the meteorology well and nobody ever really got round to sorting this problem out.

[1:40:46] Howkins: You see it wasn't a responsibility of the Air Ministry to have enough staff to send down there, although they did send a number of volunteers down, but they didn't have any responsibility to provide the staff, and there was always this difficulty I felt. I think Bunny Fuchs resented it really, I think with some justification. It never was properly sorted out. I wonder now if it still is. He had the same problem, you remember, when he did the Antarctic Survey because the scientific committee at the time was Roberts¹¹; they wanted to get aircraft down to do aerial survey and to some extent there was a lot of competition for money to do both things. I think that was always rather a problem for me anyway, that I never quite knew how to deal with that one.

[1:41:48] Lee: You never knew who your boss was?

Howkins: Oh yes. It was the Governor. Full stop.

Olga: Then you were seconded, weren't you? You were seconded in the end.

Howkins: Yes. Well what happened: when this proposal was made by the Governor, the details were sent Air Ministry and they recalled me to discuss what the situation

⁹ Lee incorrectly uses the acronym FIDSMS. The correct one is FIDMS, as Howkins spells out. Falkland Islands Dependencies Meteorological Service.

¹⁰ Ken Butler.

¹¹ Brian Roberts.

would be like. I went up to Montevideo and caught a British South American Airways aircraft, which was a converted Lanc. I don't know whether you know them, Lancaster bombers. We flew up from the River Plate to Rio de Janeiro and after we landed the skipper said 'Well I am sorry, we were only intending to be here a few hours but a tropical beetle has gone through one of the radiators and we need a new radiator before we can carry on. So we were there about four days, waiting for one to be flown out from the UK. I think they flew at about, what 12000 feet. We went off to Lagos and then up to Portugal and then to the UK. That was the only way they could cover that distance. We had the meeting in Air Ministry and it was decided that I would actually be seconded to the Governor, to run. to organise the Falkland Islands Dependencies Met Service.

[1:43:28] Lee: You ran it? You ran FIDSMS? You were in charge then of FIDSMS?

Howkins: Well I was in charge of FIDMS under the direct supervision of the Governor. Of course primarily what I had to do to make sure that the Met Office in Stanley ran, the forecasts were issued as required. I actually set up four or five small volunteer reporting stations in the Falklands and that was rather fun because I had to visit them and the only way to visit them in those times was to ride. Never having ridden on a horse before, I found myself doing the first 50 miles from Stanley to Darwin on horseback, and I remember being greeted by Tommy Gildworth, who was the manager there and he said 'Do you want your supper off the mantelpiece or would you rather sit down with us?' [Laughter] And then I rode from there to Port San Carlos where one of the landings took place, you remember, in the last war. And then by boat from there to Port Howard on the West Falklands, and then I rode from there to the extreme tip of Pebble Island and stayed with the shepherd there. The meal he produced was: we started with a goose, and then he finishes 'Well what will we have next?' And he produced some roast mutton, after a goose!

Olga: A high protein diet.

[1:45:16] Howkins: I met him in the morning and he got on his RT. A small boat came over from Pebble Island, picked me up and took me to Pebble where we had this met station. I can't remember how I got from there back to Fox Bay East, which was about 50 miles south, still on the West Falklands, but I remember staying there for a short while, where we had another volunteer station. It was the wireless operator from Stanley who was based there, who was running it for us. Then I ended up at Port Stevens which is in the south-west of the West Falklands where the manager at one time had been the vet in Stanley and I knew him quite well; he was a fellow called Tom Beatty. He was doing a most remarkable thing. This lambing in the Falklands was very very poor; it was something like 0.4 of a lamb per ewe and here of course it is often 2 and he had discovered that there was a shortage of cobalt, the trace element, in the pasture. So every time he brought his sheep in, he injected cobalt when they were shearing and when they were dipping and even when they were lambing.

[1:46:47] Howkins: All this went back on the ground and his lambing improved by nearly 100%. It was quite remarkable. Anyway his wife was doing the obs for us. I remember we did some fishing there with a net. Tom and I went down to a little creek and he said 'Oh, when the tide turns, they'll all come in.' So we put this net out and before we could close it, they swam round it and went out again. He said 'Oh, just

leave it.' So we left it there for about an hour and they all came back up around the net. We close the net and waited for the tide to go out, and we had nearly a ton of fish: mullet, which is a wonderful fish. It's far better than cod, in my view. He put some in his meat store and we bagged everything else up and took it all in the *Fitzroy* which was coming the next day and brought it all to the hospital, and gave it away.

[1:47:47] Lee: So how many of you were there in FIDS-MS?

Howkins: Well in Stanley there was Don McNaughton the radiosonde officer and myself. We were the two forecasting officers and then we had about five assistants, two of whom were Falkland Islanders. One was a chap who had worked in South Georgia with the whaling companies for a while. He used to have a very amusing story. When they recruited somebody for flensing, for taking the whale meat¹² off, they had special boots with great big long spikes in them, to go down into the whale, to do the flensing with these knives. But they had a special pair of boots which they gave to the rookie when he first arrived, with none of these on there.

[1:48:48] Lee: So you were working for FIDS-MS. You were there for three years?

Howkins: I was there yes for three, almost four years. We came home on leave and we did three tours of duty.

[1:49:03] Lee: So three times three?

Howkins: Yes.

[1:49:05] Lee: Ten years? Nine years?

Howkins: Until 1956. Jean was born in April of '47, almost as soon as we arrived. Sheila was 50 on New Year's Eve and Stuart Slessor meanwhile had been to the UK and had a holiday and come back as senior medical officer in Port Stanley. So he delivered Sheila as well.

[1:49:30] Lee: What was the decision to come back to the UK? How did that come about?

Howkins: Well Jean was nine by that time and there were no facilities in the Falklands for anything approaching secondary school standard. So we decided we had to come back.

[1:49:49] Lee: And did you stay in meteorology?

Howkins: Well I was seconded from the Air Ministry you see, so when my seconding finished, I took up a post in the Air Ministry still as a Senior Scientific Officer, and I had two or three months at Stanmore Training School getting myself brought up to date. Then I was posted to Heathrow at a time when they just had wooden hutments on the north side, where we had to work. I was there as an upper air forecaster for two or three years, then I went back as Senior Forecaster for a while. I remember the first

¹² Actually it was for taking the blubber off.

week we were there, I don't know whether you remember it but Air Vice Marshal Embry took over the controls of a Vulcan bomber that was landing there, in place of the pilots, and made a hash of it and crashed it. He got it all wrong at about 200 or 300 feet and they bailed out and they all landed safely. And the aircraft, somehow or other, crashed off the runway and didn't do any damage at all. It was incredible.

Olga: It just blew up though, didn't it?

Howkins: Oh yes, but it didn't damage anything. I mean it could have run into other aircraft; it could have gone into a building; it could have gone into a crowd of people. Anything could have happened.

[1:51:19] Lee: What year was that, Gordon, did you say?

Olga: It would be '57, would it?

Howkins: I think it would be about '57, yes.

[1:51:28] Lee: And you stayed in that kind of field for the rest of your working life?

Howkins: Well the other thing that happened then: we went to the Palace and collected an MBE.

[1:51:37] Lee: Did you? Well done.

Howkins: We took Jean as well, didn't we?

Olga: Yes. That was the end of '56. And then you were posted to Bracknell, weren't you?

Howkins: Yes, after about three years I was sent to Bracknell and I was put with another chap on trying to produce numerical methods of forecasting upper air winds for the North Atlantic flights. We organised that. That turned out to be quite well. It was adopted by the Met Office and all the forecasts for upper winds were issued by computer. And after that I had another year back as senior forecaster back at Heathrow, then another year in the headquarters in Bracknell as a senior forecaster. And then by that time the Met Office had decided they wanted a new, very much more powerful computer. They were running what was called a KDF9 which was an English Electric machine that – powerful at that time but nothing like enough to run a model properly. I was made secretary of the purchasing committee, not knowing anything about computers. I remember the assistant director in charge of that section sent for me and said 'Do you know anything about computers?' I said 'No.' He said 'Well you will soon learn.'

[1:53:14] Lee: So you were in on the ground floor of computerised weather forecasting?

Howkins: Well the earlier of the big ones, yes. We spent nearly two and a half years. It was a dreadful job because firstly I was learning about it as I was going along and we would have a meeting on, say, Monday, with IBM say. All the questions were

asked and I had to record the questions and answers that night because the following day we would be seeing another company and asking the same things, and if I hadn't got my records up to date, there was a great risk that I was confused what IBM said and what CDC said. So it was really hard work, wasn't it?

Olga: Oh it was, yes.

Howkins: I was running about twelve hours a day for most of the time. Patmead (the deputy director in charge) borrowed a Senior Scientific Officer from the computing section of the National Physical Laboratory as it was then, to run the machine when we got it.

[1:54:27] Howkins: A new building was built and I can remember the ... I had drawn up all this flow diagram with the building and what we required and the space we would have and how we would use the space and so on and so forth. And when we had got the machine, what the size was; whether it would fit; whether we would have enough spares and whether we had consumables and so on.

[1:54:53] Howkins: And how were we going to allocate the time to the various people who wanted to use it, bearing in mind that the absolute priority had to be on the routine forecasts because they had to go out at a certain time. Everything seemed to be going fairly well until the architect in charge of the building came along and said 'We will be three months late.' So we had to organise IBM – by that time we had decided to buy from them – to hold everything for three months, and they weren't very pleased.

[1:55:24] Lee: Did you stay with the Air Ministry all that time then, throughout our career?

Howkins: Yes, I was an Air Ministry employee because the Met Office at that time was part of the Air Ministry.

[1:55:33] Lee: I have talked to several Antarctic veterans now and they all say the same thing: that the Antarctic was the most important or memorable period of their lives. Was that true for you?

Howkins: I don't think it was for me because we were very very busy in the Met Office. I mean the next thing that happened was Patmead decided, for some reason which I never really established, that he didn't like the chap he'd borrowed to run the computer so when we had finished the buying, he said 'You'll do it.' So again I said 'I don't know how to run a computer system.' He said 'Well you'll learn.' And we got by. One of the amusing things that happened was my deputy, Ron Brady, who eventually became computer manager, and I, we had a Red Alert because the Irish business was still active and they were leaving bombs and bits and pieces around. There were strict instructions that anybody using the computer room mustn't leave anything around. People were coming in with dispatch cases and carrier bags and picking up work. So everybody was a little bit on edge when this Red Alert was out.

[1:56:55] Howkins: We suddenly realised that there was a dispatch case left right under the counter, half hidden, so we set the alarm off and got the place emptied. Ron

and I looked at this and I said 'Well it's on the hollow floor. Supposing we got the lifters and lifted the four slabs out on either side of it, and you and I got down inside, couldn't we lift it up on this thing and carry it out?' He said 'Yes, we'll have a go.' So we lifted it up and we went very carefully to the lift and Ron pressed the button. Before he pressed it, somebody else upstairs pressed it and we went up. [Laughter]. Eventually we got down, took it outside and of course it was harmless anyway. But I thought afterwards it was a very silly thing to do, but we didn't want to see the Richardson Wing destroyed when we had just occupied it.

[1:58:02] Lee: I am going to stop because we have been talking for a long long time, and we have kind of moved into a non-Antarctic area, but thank you very much Gordon. That was fantastic.

Howkins: Well I hope it is of some use to you.

[1:58:13] Lee: He's a star, isn't he? Eh? Well you should know. You know him.

Howkins: What I did do after that was I was eventually promoted to Assistant Director (Data Processing) and did that for four or five years and as a celebration we were going out to Greece for a holiday on the date when Princess Anne was going to be wedded.

[1:58:34] Lee: Princess Anne?

Howkins: Yes. And all the trains were put out of gear and we couldn't get to Stanmore. So I ordered a taxi.

Olga: Stanmore? Heathrow.

Howkins: Sorry, was it Heathrow? Yes. I got a taxi and I was just going over to it and my boss, Sir Basil Mason, had also get stuck and he saw the taxi and he went straight over to it. And I said 'Excuse me Sir, but that's my taxi and I am just going on holiday. Do you mind?' He looked a little bit upset but he let us go. So that's why I never got promoted further. [Laughs]

[1:59:20] [End]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- Balloon following in training. [0:07:02]
- The battle to sink the Bismarck. [0:09:58]
- First Tabarin ship unaffected by mines but is condemned. [0:22:47]
- Mercury barometers shipped upside down. [0:24:32]
- Good accommodation at Deception Island. [0:35:10]
- Life at Base B - lack of travel options. [0:39:46]
- Fire, in spite of precautions. [0:43:39]
- Sealskin boots no good on ice. [0:45:03]
- First women on Deception Island. [0:57:11]
- Lots of salted fish left by Norwegian whalers. [0:58:52]
- A makeshift alarm clock. [1:02:14]
- Illness later diagnosed as appendicitis. [1:03:39]
- Unforecast storm postpones wedding. [1:12:52]
- A formal Naval dinner. [1:20:08]
- Setting up a radiosonde station in Stanley. [1:31:17]
- Landing and installing a heavy radar. [1:33:03]
- Forgot to replace the bolts. [1:36:45]
- FIDS and FIDMS relations. [1:39:43]