

DICK FOSTER

Edited transcript of a recording of Dick Foster interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 7th June 2012. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/170. Transcribed by John Zerfahs on 14th February, 2015.

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Dick Foster interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 7th of June 2012. Dick Foster, part 1.

Foster: My name, full name, Richard Arthur Foster. Date of birth 28.9.1929, born in Worcester. I'm now 82 coming up to 83.

[Part 1 0:00:27] Lee: Now was your father an educated man?

Foster: My father was a self-educated man. No, he was not educated perhaps in the sort of classical sense because he left school when he was 14, but he was, as I said before, self-educated in the sense that, well my mother always used to say that he inclined very much towards the higher levels of society rather than the ones to which he belonged – she felt.

[Part 1 0:01:08] Lee: That's no bad thing, is it?

Foster: It's not a bad thing as far as I'm concerned, but I tended to incline the other way.

[Part 1 0:01:16] Lee: What did he do?

Foster: What did *he* do?

[Part 1 0:01:19] Lee: Hmm.

Foster: He actually started life, well started his working life, as an apprentice toolmaker, which is a very skilled trade but unfortunately he had a very severe accident and he was unable to continue, so he became what in those days was called a builder's timekeeper, because at that time on big contracts all the clerical work was done on site making up wages that kind of thing of course which you were paid by packet during the, at the end of the week, until latterly he became the manager of the same company's plant department, plant being heavy machinery that kind of thing. So that was what he was doing when he finally retired.

[Part 1 0:02:17] Lee: And what kind of education did you have, Dick?

Foster: I had a scholarship to a local Headmaster's Conference school, Nottingham High School, but I had decided I was going to go into the construction industry so although I had pretty good what were then, (what were they then?), school certificate results, including what was then called 'matric exemption', I had decided I wanted to be a quantity surveyor, so I left after a year in the 6th and became a pupil quantity surveyor with a company of, a construction company. And thereafter I took the first part of my final exams for what was

then called the Institute of Quantity Surveyors, later becoming part of, joined to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, I took the first part then I went to do my National Service. I was commissioned in the Royal Engineers, troop commander in the Field Regiment, and I suppose that I served my time during the Korean War out in Hong Kong. Like many others rather stupid people, I volunteered to go to Korea but all the regular officers wanted to get there so that they had it on their CV so no National Servicemen went out to Korea, officers, I'm not talking about men. So when I came back I suppose I was a little bit unsettled.

[Part 1 0:04:12] Lee: You were in Hong Kong as well?

Foster: I was in Hong Kong.

[Part 1 0:04:15] Lee: What did you make of Hong Kong in the 50's?

Foster: Oh, it was great, absolutely great. I've been back there a couple of times since and it's unrecognisable. Really, it's very good because being in the Engineers we did things, it wasn't like being an infantryman or a gunner or something like that. We actually built bridges and one bridge on the main road was washed out during a flash flood we put a new part Bailey part traditional bridge across there, we put in water tanks and we had thoroughly good times.

[Part 1 0:04:52] Lee: So you were doing all this for a local communities [talkover]?

Foster: We were doing all this for local communities, yes, doing road repairs as well I was out on detachment with my troop repairing roads going up the mountains, tracks really rather than roads, although they were tarmac. So, yes, a good time was had by all apart from, I suppose I'm talking generally about National Service some people enjoyed greatly other people would never have enjoyed it, but I was one of the lucky ones. So when I came back, I suppose a little bit unsettled, I'd done the first part of my final exams, and I applied for two positions, I can't remember the name now but it was the first I applied to, for a quantity surveyor's post on the first, it was the first large steel mill I think but certainly one of the first large steel mills in India that was built after the war. So I applied for a job there, and I saw an advertisement which called for people who were, and I think I've got the wording right, 'Capable or competent to supervise the erection of timber framed structures in the Antarctic'. I'm pretty certain that was the phrasing. I thought 'Well that's great', because I've done a lot of climbing, read a lot about the Antarctic, well, about polar matters, and never thought that I would be in a position to go, and in fact of course today I would never be in a position to go things have changed so radically, but at that time I applied. It didn't say you had to build them, build the structure yourself, it just said supervise. So I applied for that, and I was asked to go down for an interview, can't for the life of me remember who it was that interviewed me. Anyway I was offered the post of someone capable of supervising the erection of framed structures.

[Part 1 0:07:19] Lee: Might it have been Frank Elliot?

Foster: No, it wasn't Frank Elliot because he was down, unless, well it could have been because I saw Frank Elliot down later on in the Falklands, so, it might have been John Green I don't know, I honestly can't remember.

[Part 1 0:07:38] Lee: Don't worry. What was it that made you want to apply to go to the Antarctic, had you read about it as a boy or...?

Foster: Well yes, yes. I mean I'd been out in the Far East, this was with the Army, and I cobbled some leave together and went to Japan, and we went native in Japan and stayed, a couple of us, staying at Japanese inns that kind of thing, and I s'pose it woke a wanderlust if you like, and as I said before I'd done quite a bit of climbing, lot of scrambling, very much a North Country person, although I lived in Nottingham, and with all of that reading, as I say, about polar matters. The book which I remember most of all I think was Cherry Apsley Gerard's book *The Worst Journey in the World* which I read as a teenager.

[Part 1 0:08:52] Lee: So was it the environment that attracted you or the potential challenges of living down there?

Foster: I suspect it was just the adventure of the thing.

[Part 1 0:09:02] Lee: Was it an adventure?

Foster: Oh my goodness yes.

[Part 1 0:09:07] Lee: So what happened between the interview and you're appointed, was there a gap between that and then sailing south?

Foster: Well there must have been but I don't recall, I don't recall what it was but, no. I do recall people at the place where I was working saying 'Haven't you gone yet', [laughter], other fairly young apprentice ??? [incomprehensible], you know.

[Part 1 0:09:32] Lee: Did they think you were mad?

Foster: Mmm?

[Part 1 0:09:34] Lee: Did they think you were mad?

Foster: No, I don't think so although I remember one chap saying that he'd applied, I'm sorry this is in a different context, that he'd applied and had been accepted and he went home, presumably he hadn't told his mother before, he went home and said 'Mum I'm going to the Antarctic for two years'. 'That's nice dear,' she said and went on with making the dinner.

[Part 1 0:10:04] Lee: What was your parental response?

Foster: I think they were rather happy. They were unhappy about the idea of my going away for two years having just been away for two years and coming back for a fairly short period, but they were kind enough to say, to support what it was that I thought I ought to do.

[Part 1 0:10:28] Lee: Were you given any kind of training whilst you were waiting for the ship?

Foster: You're joking of course.

[Part 1 0:10:34] Lee: Why, can you tell me?

Foster: Yes. No. Period.

[Part 1 0:10:38] Lee: That's the answer I expected.

Foster: Yes. [Pause] I'd say there was a gap, but it couldn't have been a very long gap but, I and three others, I can't remember the names of any of them, other, I can't remember the names of two of them but I do remember the name of Ron Miller, who was one of the four. We must have been late entrants or something like that anyway because we didn't go down on the either the *Biscoe* or the *Shackleton* we went down on the *RMS Andes*, which was very pleasant, particularly as the last ship that I'd been on had been a troop ship. So we went down on the normal voyage, stopping off at various places, including Rio, I remember, and took our photographs from the top of the Sugar Loaf hill, and then obviously we were set down in Montevideo. And from Montevideo, again we didn't, there was no FID's boat available so we went out on the *Fitzroy*, which was the local packet boat, which to the best of my knowledge went round the islands collecting fleeces and then delivered them to the factories or whoever in Montevideo, which clearly left a slightly less than fragrant boat, and we were all, the dining salon had a big horseshoe shaped table, it was about as big as this, a big horseshoe shaped table like that and I was sitting at the top, and I don't know whether this is typical but coming out down the River Plate, the Rio Plata, you hit, I don't know whether it's a sort of standing wave or something because you got the current coming down the big river against the sea, but anyway we hit this thing, went over the top and I thought 'Oh golly that's it' so I had to slide underneath the table, because I was right on the bench at the top, and I spent the next six days ill.

[Part 1 0:13:33] Lee: Seasick?

Foster: Seasick, yeah, with nothing in my stomach. The only thing I ate, I was able to eat, were oranges because I reckoned they tasted almost as nice coming up as they did going down. But I got to the point where I was actually sitting by the bath in the bathroom, with you know sort of my hands folded on the edge of the bath and just suffering.

[Part 1 0:14:07] Lee: But you did get to Stanley, you and your stomach did get to Stanley?

Foster: Heavens, heavens yes, we got to Stanley, and then, I remember thinking when we got there, 'This is a very small island in a very big sea. I've got to get away from here some time', and that had been a particularly traumatic six days. I can't remember what happened to the other three, and it may j[ust], the first voyages south had been made, so waiting for the ships to come back, I don't know what happened to the other three, I just can't remember, but they didn't form part of my life for about six weeks, I was in Stanley waiting for the *Shackleton* to come back. So I can only assume that they probably went down on the *Biscoe*.

[Part 1 0:15:13] Lee: So what did you get up to in Stanley for six weeks?

Foster: Well I was, I helped the local, there was an engineer there a nice chap, but obviously I've forgotten his name, who was the Public Works Officer there, and they were talking at that stage, and again I can't remember the full details, but I did a, spent most of the time doing a running survey, level survey from the top end of The Creek down into Stanley. It was in connection with the possibility of, perhaps the probability, of a water supply. The name of the top end of The Creek is at the back of my mind and darned if I can remember.

[Part 1 0:16:14] Lee: Don't worry, it's ok.

Foster: So then eventually, oh of course while I was down there I had a, we were, I suppose me and others I suppose, were interviewed by Frank Elliot and he told me that I was going to be Base Leader of the new base, Base 'O', and the intention was to place that base on Brabant Island. There already was a base on Anvers Island and Brabant Island was to the north of Anvers Island, and that I was to be the Base Leader, and ...

[Part 1 0:16:59] Lee: Was that a surprise, to be promoted before you even started?

Foster: Well in a way I suppose. Perhaps I was arrogant enough to think 'Well I'd been a troop commander of 63 people I should be capable of looking after this'. In fact it was a mistake as far as I'm concerned, I was quite happy to do it and I think I did it with reasonable competence, but there was Brian Bayly who was the geologist on base he'd already been to Spitzbergen and already had considerable experience of, I think he'd been to Spitzbergen twice with the Cambridge Exploring Society (sic), so I would have thought that it might have been a better idea to have made him Base Leader. But I was quite happy to do it and perhaps the intention was, oh sorry of course I was appointed, I'd forgotten to say this, as a General Assistant Handyman.

[Part 1 0:17:59] Lee: Not a surveyor?

Foster: Not a surveyor, no, General Assistant Handyman, because I was going to be handy enough to wander around and make sure that the hut went up properly. Oh, let's see, so I was going to be at Base 'O', it was going to be a new base, we're going to build a base and, (sorry this is re-capping a bit isn't it?), and I was the Base Leader and I've just said what I thought about that.

[Part 1 0:18:29] Lee: Did erm, Brian Bayly was he upset by not...?

Foster: No, not in the slightest. Perhaps being non-specialist in a sense did make sense in that I was able to ask people because, there was no such thing as Base Commander in those days, there may be in some men but as far as I'm concerned you were, there was only six of us we were six equals I happened to have to write the reports at the end of the day or whatever, but I was able to ask Brian to take the lead in all sledging matters, and the, then we had two surveyors, Fred Wooden and, Kershaw?

[Part 1 0:19:23] Lee: Dennis Kershaw?

Foster: No, not Dennis, that's a different chap, erm, Fred, Fred?, no, no, Fred Wooden...

[Part 1 0:19:34] Lee: I'll look it up for you. Fred. I interviewed Fred Wooden quite recently.

Foster: Oh, right, yes.

[Part 1 0:19:41] Lee: He's alive and well and living in Hampshire.

Foster: Well I know he's a member of the club. Oh I am sorry about that.

[Part 1 0:19:53] Lee: This is 195..?

Foster: This is 1955.

[Part 1 0:19:57] Lee: '55 at er?

Foster: Danco, mm, Danco.

[Part 1 0:20:00] Lee: Well '56 really.

Foster: No, '55. Well, it would be '55 initially, yes, but it would be '56 I suppose.

[Part 1 0:20:06] Lee: Ketley.

Foster: Ketley, of course, John Ketley.

[Part 1 0:20:12] Lee: Yeah, so..

Foster: 'Pidge' Palmer, and er...[long pause], [chuckles]...

[Part 1 0:20:24] Lee: Here we are I'll get the book out again. Foster, Bayly, Harris?

Foster: Harris, yes, Les Harris, he was a, Les was carpenter/mountaineer.

[Part 1 0:20:39] Lee: So your style then was not kind of to command but to chair?

Foster: Indeed, yes.

[Part 1 0:20:47] Lee: The base?

Foster: Yes.

[Part 1 0:20:48] Lee: Did you ever have to put your foot down?

Foster: I don't remember putting my foot down at all. No, no. We didn't, wasn't necessary. I don't remember, because the, I don't remember any circumstances where the exercise of authority could possibly have been any use whatsoever under those circumstances. I mean there were six blokes, they were all there for the same reason, because they wanted to be there. One was a little bit concerned about the amount of money he was getting, but he was the only one all the rest were there purely because they wanted to be there. No when you've got a set of people like that, and there're only six of them, you don't ??? [incomprehensible], even if you wanted to it would be counter-productive to start throwing your weight about. So

but I was able to ask Brian to do or to take control of all matters sledging. Les Harris obviously had his own competence, and Brian of course was a geologist as well, two surveyors John Ketley, and Fred, Fred Wooden, 'Pidge' Palmer who was a, rather strangely the way events turned out, was a radio man, wireless operator, and me, and 'Pidge' had been a wireless operator in the Navy, the Merchant Navy I think.

[Part 1 0:22:45] Lee: What was strange about that, you would say it turned out strangely?

Foster: Well it turned out strangely because we didn't have any electric power for most of the time.

[Laughter]

Foster: We had a, I think it was what they called '19' sets, army '19' sets. In passing I would say that most of our kit, at that time, including the sledges, were ex- Korean War army kit – the sledges were painted white for example, that was the first year.

[Part 1 0:23:31] Lee: Was there much call for sledges in Korea?

Foster: There would have been, yeah, there would. I don't know whether you've read anything about it but I mean the winters there are *ferocious*.

[Part 1 0:23:40] Lee: Ok.

Foster: So we had army mukluks, and army over parkas, however of course we had battledress trousers as well, they were the khaki battledress trousers, khaki shirts that kind of thing. Where have we got? Oh you asked about, we were talking about why 'Pidge' really had rather a hard time of it. We had three, I think it's three, almost certainly, three wind generators, little things, about as big as that approximately, and there were a pole, and the pole was supported by four guys. Now we were all very competent, practical people, we knew how to put these damned things up, but one by one we put them up, and one by one they were blown down and smashed. So the batteries that we, storing the power, no I think there was no means of, until later on, of recharging the batteries. So 'Pidge' was a little bit, having a little bit of a problem because obviously a '19' set is battery powered, and in fact I seem to recall and I told this story a lot of times that almost the last thing we heard was the news of the Suez invasion, in 1956, which made us wonder what on Earth was going on and it was right at the end, and we'd heard also about riots in cinemas, it was the, what was it?

[Part 1 0:25:55] Lee: It was Bill Haley.

Foster: Bill Haley and the Comets, yes.

[Part 1 0:25:58] Lee: Comets, yes, *Rock Around the Clock*.

Foster: *Rock Around the Clock*, and we heard about these riots in the cinemas, and then power faded in and out, and the, you know due to circum the, I suppose the atmospheric conditions. So we were left in quite a little ...

[Part 1 0:26:18] Lee: So had FIDS not bothered to give you any diesel generators at all?

Foster: Well I don't think it was a question of bothering it was a question of what was thought to be, had to be appropriate. We did get diesel generators down the next year, but, I mean we lived with Tilley lamps, you know pressure lanterns, and of course it was a coke fired Aga type stove that we had, coal fired sorry, Aga style stove, so I don't think, I never thought 'Oh, God, we should have had a diesel generator', although in retrospect you wonder why you didn't, and I don't think we were particularly incompetent in putting up these wind generators and having them blow down. That was just one of those things, it just added to the ...

[Part 1 0:27:26] Lee: It raises two questions one is how on Earth do you communicate with the rest of the world? Answer: you didn't.

Foster: The answer is you don't.

[Part 1 0:27:33] Lee: And secondly what did Palmer do for the rest of the ...?

Foster: Well he helped out with everything else, you know. I mean when you go into the field you need at least two people, and there was quite a lot of boating work to do, and in fact if I recall correctly I think 'Pidge' looked after the outboard engines, as a specific job.

[Part 1 0:28:00] Lee: But it meant that you had not only did you have no communication with anywhere else or Stanley, that also meant presumably that if some of your chaps went off boating you had no communication with them? Or am I wrong?

Foster: No we, but that wouldn't have, the set that I'm talking about wouldn't have helped anyway. No we, but in addition to those we did have battery powered '68' sets, which at that time was pretty much infantry back pack set, with astonishingly heavy wax protected batteries, so we had those.

[Part 1 0:28:45] Lee: But how could you recharge them?

Foster: Oh you couldn't.

[Part 1 0:28:49] Lee: So they were sparingly, sparingly used were they?

Foster: Yes, yes I mean we didn't, they, again if memory serves me correct, you're really going back to the army, they were almost supposed to be line of sight, but they didn't work like that because when we were up on the top of the plateau later on, from up there I suppose in a way we almost were line of sight because we were at 6,000 feet, we could talk to other bases, we were talking on a '68' set they would be talking on what's, the next set it was that they had, so we weren't no we weren't totally out of touch but we didn't have our main.

[Part 1 0:29:31] Lee: Right. So nobody organise a rescue mission because they couldn't hear you at all?

Foster: Oh, good heavens no. No.

[Part 1 0:29:37] Lee: We've leapt forward a bit let's just go back now to departing from Stanley and trying to find somewhere to put a hut.

Foster: Yes. Well we left Stanley on the *Shackleton*, and had to call, ??? [incomprehensible] whether we only called at Deception? I think we only called at Deception. It would be logical had we only done that.

[Part 1 0:30:06] Lee: You left Stanley though, you left Stanley..

Foster: So we left Stanley with all the kit on board for building the hut.

[Part 1 0:30:13] Lee: Pre-fabricated hut?

Foster: Pre-fabricated, the Boulton & Paul.

[Part 1 0:30:15] Lee: Had you erected it in Stanley first?

Foster: Oh! No no no no because it wasn't pre-fabricated in that sense it was pre-cut, that's to say all the timbers were cut to length, and then they had to be fixed together so you got the studs and the cill and the top cill, they were all cut to the right length but you still have to put them together, nail them together.

[Part 1 0:30:47] Lee: Had to drill or nail them, it wasn't an Ikea flat pack?

Foster: No no no, no, far from it.

[Part 1 0:30:54] Lee: But you had to find somewhere to put this blessed hut, didn't you?

Foster: Well that was the nub of the, of the problem. We went to Brabant Island, which is a pretty big island. In a word, we couldn't find anywhere to get ashore. [Long pause]. So, to cut a relatively long story short the ship was shunting about, I and the second officer on the - oh HMS *Protector* was asked if she would come down and assist, as she had two helicopters - and the second officer and, I went over to the, was called over to the *Protector*, and the second officer and I took off in this Sea King helicopter, probably a Sea King I don't remember, and to look for somewhere to put a hut. Now, eventually, I mean we flew around, I could tell you exactly how long we flew around because by the good offices of the gentleman who runs the South Yorkshire Air Museum, he sent me copies of the log sheets, of that helicopter that I flew in, he thought that he might have that helicopter itself in the museum, but he found that it was the twin, not the one that I flew on. Anyway probably a couple of hours, something like that, we flew about, and so we concluded following the flight around we discovered a very small island, about a mile long, hidden in a channel behind a very large, not a very large, but a large island offshore, in the channel between the mainland and that island, a very small island with a nice pebbly beach. So, after a certain amount of traffic some of which I've in my diaries 'cos I've still got the diaries that I wrote at that time, the captain was directed by SECFIDS that we should establish the base on this little island.

[Part 1 0:33:50] Lee: Did it have a name at that point?

Foster: No. No. The big island did it was called Rongé Island, the little island didn't. In fact I'm not at all sure it has a name now [it does, Danco Island, recognised by the UK Antarctic Placenames Committee], but we called the base Danco but the whole coast was called the Danco Coast. It's really too small to have a name [laughter], but it had a beach, and it was somewhere where you could establish the base. So the decision was made that a base should be established there, and we piled to, and it was difficult because you had this nice sort of sloping beach, but it meant we couldn't get the scows very close in so we spent time, considerable time in retrospect, trying to make a kind of jetty out, we didn't, I say we I'm talking about the whole ship's company at that time, including the FIDS, but we made it work and so all the stuff was offloaded, the stores were offloaded, scattered about a bit, all the material, including cement and all that stuff to make concrete, [phone rings], concrete bases. So everything was offloaded and, work, in a word, we started to build the hut, which basically consisted of first of all of concreting piers, about a couple of feet square, set them out, concrete the piers, to - we had a concrete mixer - to sit the hut on. Remember it was a timber framed hut. So whilst we were doing that we slept in our tents, of course.

[Part 1 0:36:02] Lee: The ship had gone, presumably?

Foster: Yes, I can't remember whether the ship went immediately, I think it went fairly quickly.

[Part 1 0:36:09] Lee: Had you ever built a hut before, Dick?

Foster: I'd never built a hut before, no.

[Part 1 0:36:13] Lee: And were you purely supervising or were you ..?

Foster: No, was I? [Laughter]

Foster: No, I mean Les, Les Harris, he was a carpenter, construction carpenter, and, I mean he could nail things in while the rest of us were sort of hitting a nail and knocking it sideways. But we learnt, of course, quite quickly because, well, in a word if we didn't get the damned thing up, we weren't going to have anywhere to live, come the winter. So, in fact the building went very well. My notes, where I sort of had a look at them the other day, I think there was one time where I made a decision that the others thought was not a very good decision, so I rescinded my decision. At one stage I decided we were going to do some work before breakfast, but the others decided they weren't going to do any work before breakfast, at least two of them did, the most important two, including Les, and so I soon - what do they call it now?

[Part 1 0:37:33] Lee: Rescinded?

Foster: No, no, no, did a U-turn.

[Part 1 0:37:37] Lee: Oh I see, sorry, yes, yes, lots of those going on right now. So was there a bit of a rush on then to get it finished?

Foster: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:37:43] Lee: There was a deadline?

Foster: I mean the winter was coming, and this was the second voyage down, so it was kind of, I mean I can put dates to it, but I don't think we'll, don't think we need to.

[Part 1 0:37:57] Lee: So the others didn't share your urgency then?

Foster: Oh yes they did, of course they did, but they didn't think it was a good idea to work before breakfast.

[Part 1 0:38:05] Lee: Was there any concern about how far up the beach the hut should be built, were you thinking about tidal variations and so on?

Foster: No, no I mean we went a reasonable way up the beach, yes, I mean would did take that into consideration, but I don't think with, quite big icebergs came by that would have been the source of a miniature tsunami, but no, we were perfectly ok.

[Part 1 0:38:39] Lee: And the building of the hut went smoothly there were no bits left over at the end?

Foster: It went very smoothly indeed, very smoothly. In fact later on the *Shackleton* had gone south, and the *Shackleton* called in on us going north again, and again in my diary it's saying they were absolutely astonished to see where we got to, we'd almost got the hut, almost got the hut up in six weeks. Well we had got the fabric up, we were watertight, and we were camping inside it by then. So they were able to help us to put the, there's not room in any of the huts in those days for all the stores, couple of year's stores of course, so you have to build a tarpaulin covered thing outside, so the blokes off the *Biscoe* helped us to do that. No, no problem at all, it really was a superb exercise.

[Part 1 0:39:41] Lee: What was it like to live in, was it cosy?

Foster: Oh, smashin' yes, very, very nice. With my Scandinavian connections, I said my wife is Norwegian, and very much always had been very much wood oriented, and to live in a timber house is ideal, ideal. No, no, the huts were very nice. I'm sure in a way they're as cosier than the accommodation that they have on the brand new stations. I mean in a way it's strange to think that in 1955 we were closer to Scott, than we are to today, and certainly our accommodation and much of our kit, well all of it in many ways, was much closer to there than today. It's very strange, really.

[Part 1 0:40:41] Lee: Did you feel any connection to those heroic chaps? When you were there in the Antarctic did you contemplate them?

Foster: No, I don't think so, I certainly didn't. I don't think to any degree we felt heroic. We were all young, 25 down, yeah, I could well have been the oldest, I was 25, but the others were about the same age you know. We just had a damned good time, and we did what work we were able to do. The geologists did a lot more I suppose than the surveyors due to the problems that we had in moving about because of course we were on this very small island,

and the object of the exercise, in a way, was to make a route up on to the plateau at 5,000/6,000 feet up.

[Part 1 0:41:58] Lee: Off Brabant Island or off the mainland?

Foster: No this off the island, the little island that we are now on.

[Part 1 0:42:05] Lee: Right.

Foster: But it was all really rather complicated the fact that we were on the little island in the middle of an expanse of open water so wherever we went we had to load everything onto a 12 foot dinghy, take it across to the mainland, mile or so?, something like that, offload there, of course somebody had to take the boat back, and somebody had to be in the base there because if there weren't two of you you couldn't get the boat out of the water, because the water was not just water, the beach was always covered with bits of bergy bits that were washed up on the beach and then the tide would move away and so you had to have a block and tackle to pull the boats up out of the water so ??? [incomprehensible], which made life quite difficult, it wasn't like just going outside the hut and loading up the sledges and saying 'Uit dogs!' and away, and of course we had no dogs.

[Part 1 0:43:17] Lee: No. So was not part of your role to try and get some sort of ground fixes for aerial photography?

Foster: No.

[Part 1 0:43:26] Lee: No?

Foster: No.

[Part 1 0:43:27] Lee: That was the following year wasn't it?

Foster: That was the following year.

[Part 1 0:43:29] Lee: Right.

Foster: Yeah.

[Part 1 0:43:30] Lee: So, you were not doing any surveying work at all really?

Foster: Oh yes, yeah, we were doing surveying work, but it was basically confined to the coast. Fred Wooden and I did some up on the, perhaps I ought to explain that we did push a route right up to the, to within what felt like spitting distance of the plateau of the spine of Grahamland, only to find that the ground just fell away. We camped one night, there were four of us, we camped one night which didn't feel quite right somehow. We were in mist, couldn't see where we were, and we camped and did a recce forward the next day, and found that in front of us the ground rose and then dipped down, like that, to a knife edged ridge. So what from looking up had appeared to be a feasible route up to the plateau turned out to be one that, I think I wrote down that it could have been climbed, but it couldn't possibly be sledged. So Fred and I stayed up on one of the occasions and we did a, and he did some

survey work up there. The problem always was that, what we called clag, you're probably familiar with the word by now other people I'm sure have used it, you were always either below it so that you couldn't see the peaks, or you couldn't see where you'd set out survey points, or you're above it where you couldn't see down, or in the middle of it, where you couldn't see anything [chuckles]. So survey work was very, very difficult.

[Part 1 0:46:02] Lee: Did you get frustrated?

Foster: Yes, yes. But there was no point in getting frustrated really because there wasn't much you could do about it. I mean when Wally Herbert came down from Hope Bay to join us in the second year, I mean he was able to do a survey, because he was *above* all the bad weather on the plateau. We were in that kind of no-man's-land I suppose you could almost call it, with cloud above, cloud below and it really was as you say, it was really very frustrating. The geologists had a better time because all, where we were virtually all the bare rock, country rock, was down at sea level.

[Part 1 0:46:58] Lee: You had a scary episode with Fred Wooden?

Foster: Yes, yes. I was leading and we were going downhill.

[Part 1 0:47:07] Lee: Manhauling?

Foster: Manhauling, yeah, and I saw, and we were in light mist conditions, and I saw something black on the snow over there, and my mind said 'OK crevasse over there'. The only problem was it was down there, so we went straight in.

[Part 1 0:47:36] Lee: It was nearer than you thought?

Foster: Yeah, it was in front of me, I walked into the hole basically, but in whiteout conditions there's no comparison and I just thought it was further away – wasn't helped by the fact that we were going downhill. In fact, the fact we were going downhill did help because the sledges came in after us, and because we were on a slight traverse they didn't hit us as they might have done had we been going straight down, and the lid of the crevasse choked, I suppose we were about 30 feet down, something like that, but it jammed, and neither of us hurt ourselves even though we'd got skis on, I mean all sorts of things could have happened, and as I say luckily the sledges came down. After, I suppose I think it took me, it took a total of 8 hours before we were both up on top. I climbed out, a crevasse is pretty straight sided, except at the top where you get a cornice coming over, where the lid was. So, I don't know how it was because we threw the damned things away later, but it was because we were still fairly inexperienced, but we had a bag of wooden tent pegs with us, and of course because the sledges coming down we got our ice axe and everything so I was able to construct a sort of ladder, vertical ladder, with wooden tent pegs, by making a hole, driving the tent peg in with the side of the, and when I got to the top to, with the long handle of the old-fashioned ice axe, to burrow my way out through the cornice, and then to try and get Fred out. I nearly gave up, I couldn't have given up of course, but, if, it had failed me...

[Part 1 0:50:11] Lee: What was the problem?

Foster: I suppose you could say lack of physical agility as far as Fred was concerned. He's quite a hefty chap, and I was scared stiff because he fell off this ladder I'd got a bit of rope on him, but he fell off the ladder a couple of times, and I had visions of the whole damned stuff that had jammed in the crevasse, moving. But eventually we got out, wet through getting out of the thing because it was really quite warm down in the crevasse, completely sheltered, but as soon as you got to the top there was an icy wind and, my was wet through, but of course eventually it froze, so I was crackling as I moved. So we got some, oh before Fred came up of course we got as much stuff up as we could and then we camped, not by the side of the crevasse exactly but very close by.

[Part 1 0:51:17] Lee: Did you have enough tent pegs left over to..?

Foster: Well we never used tent pegs, that's why I was so surprised that we had them so *lucky* that we had them, because we used skis you see, deep down into the snow as tent pegs.

[Part 1 0:51:33] Lee: So, was that a, was it a scary moment, did you fear for your lives?

Foster: Oh I can remember exactly what we said as we went down, I said 'Fred, this is it!', and he said 'Help!' Honestly I can remember saying it because I thought we were goners. We were two people by ourselves, the others were back in base, we did have the wireless set of course, but if the lid hadn't jammed [pause] that would have been it. But it did jam, and you don't recriminate (that doesn't sound right somehow), I've said the word, you don't think too much about what might have happened when you can cope with what did happen. So, I've never even dreamt about it.

[Part 1 0:52:34] Lee: Did you blame yourself, only two chaps in the field together, you were Base Leader so you must have sanctioned the trip? Or was it..?

Foster: No, no, I didn't, perhaps I should have done.

[Part 1 0:52:49] Lee: I'm not saying you should have done.

Foster: No, no, no, no, I'm thinking myself perhaps I should have done, because the others had been out and the others had gone back, been in the same place and they'd finished whatever it was they were doing, and they returned. I mean, with hindsight it does seem rather a strange sort of thing to do but then we were on relatively known territory, we had a radio, I suppose we might have thought of going down a crevasse but I don't think that ever crossed my mind, and in the event of course when we got out we did radio to base and said 'Look, come and help us. We've been in a crevasse and come over', they had to come over with the boat anyway to help us, so erm, right, yeah, ok.

[Part 1 0:55:53] Lee: Did it change any procedures later, did you adjust your planning as a result of that close call? I.e. 3 or 4 men only on expeditions rather than two?

Foster: I don't know whether it would have made much of a difference, if there'd been three you'd have all have been in the same group anyway.

[Part 1 0:54:13] Lee: Same boat.

Foster: Yeah. If there had been two sets of two all the time, they really couldn't have managed that because again much of the work, following our inability to get up onto the plateau, was concentrated round and about in the straits, round about particularly for the geographers (sic) and for the surveyors, so most of it really became boat work, and we had two 12 foot dinghies, we had (how many engines did we have?), 4 ½ horsepower Seagulls, I think we had three, and really we used to take them all in one boat because, ok they were simple enough engines, but had the engines failed we wanted to have a really good backup, 'cos had the engine failed there was almost literally nowhere to land other than the places where, the place where we actually had the hut. So, I'm sorry it really does seem in some ways, when you think back, that perhaps organisational ideas in terms of safety, were not all that they might have been.

[Part 1 0:56:07] Lee: There was another awkward moment when you lost the tent on one of your trips out..

Foster: Oh yes, that's true. That was the same trip.

[Part 1 0:56:15] Lee: Oh was it?

Foster: Yes, because we stayed up and the others went back afterwards, yes. Yes we were, you have to remember this is very steep terrain and in places we had to carry the loads, rather than pulling them on sledges. If you get thick, and perhaps wet snow pulling a sledge is almost impossible. So yes on this occasion we were relaying, and we relayed, took the tents up and other gear first and I suspect that we brewed up, had some tea, and then we went back to fetch the remainder of the stuff. The tents were beige coloured. The wind rose, the clag came down so our sledge tracks disappeared, and we couldn't see the tents.

[Part 1 0:57:40] Lee: You couldn't find them?

Foster: Couldn't you the tents, and, as I say, we were in mist, you never knew where on earth you're going.

[Part 1 0:57:51] Lee: So both tents you couldn't find either tent [talkover] ...

Foster: So we couldn't find either tent. So we dug a snow hole, and we stayed the night in the snow hole. The next day the wind had abated it was quite strong, it gets very, incidentally it gets very warm and most unpleasant in the snow hole because all the snow that dribbles in melts on your back. Mostly the wind had abated, so we got a, well we'd have two 100ft climbing ropes, probably had more, no probably two 100ft climbing ropes so we set the sledges within sight of one another, which was probably about 25, 30 metres something like that, remembering that we were going up the slope so we knew basically which way to go up, and then one of the outriggers at the end of a 100ft line, and the other end of a 100ft line, and we went forward like that. We didn't find them like that, or we would have done, but the mist lightened and there in the front we saw two little triangles - [pause] - which was nice!

[Part 1 0:59:17] Lee: It's a bit like trying to find your car in Sainsbury's car park, isn't it?

Foster: In the thick fog [laughter].

[Part 1 0:59:23] Lee: Let's just pause for a moment or two, and just come back and do some more.

Foster: Right. Shall I make a cup of tea?

[Part 1 0:59:28] Lee: That would be a welcome...[fades].

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Dick Foster interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 7th of June 2012. Dick Foster, Part 2.

[Part 2 0:00:10] Lee: You built not just one hut, Dick, on Danco Island, or whatever it was called, you built two huts.

Foster: I'm sorry that's not correct. I didn't build the second one [laughter]. The second one was built on the, outgoing, I'm not sure which ship it would have been but, by 'Pidge' Palmer and Brian Bayly who were on the way out, sorry and Les Harris would have been there as well, 'cos the three of them only did a one year stint, in the days when people did only one year, and the hut, which was manufactured in Port Stanley, was built by them. Earlier in the year a reconnaissance party had established that there was a way up to the plateau from Cape Reclus, not an easy one, a very steep one, but nevertheless a way, and, I'm not sure to the political background to this to be absolutely honest, (I don't like that phrase but), but somewhere along the line this, there'd been the decision made that a party, a sledging party, should come down from Hope Bay, and this would be the first party to cross the Grahamland Peninsula, it always seemed to me to be a bit of a contrived thing but a great journey nevertheless, and that whilst we hoped that we were going to do surveying because Dennis Kershaw - the base personnel had changed - and Dennis Kershaw was now there from Anvers Island, and a new Fid, Ray McGowan, whom you've met I think, had joined us. So I split the base into two, and so three of us, a route having been established, a hut having been built, three of us went with the object of doing, of surveying up there, we'd been up in the summer time with the boat doing some surveying and some geological search in the Harbour.
[Presumably Paradise Harbour]

[Part 2 0:03:27] Lee: Is there a map of Grahamland?

Foster: Yes [talkover][Continues away from mic – that's Anvers Island...oh, that's Brabant Island...that's the one we were supposed to go ...but we were, we did eventually end up...]

[Long pauses, intermittent discussion of features on map].

[Part 2 0:04:10] Lee: So it's just the east of Rongé Island.

Foster: Yes, yes, and Cape Reclus is there, and that's the route [pause] up.

[Part 2 0:04:29] Lee: Cape Reclus is another peninsula, further to the east of the Rongé Island.

Foster: Yes, east and north from the original base.

[Part 2 0:04:41] Lee: Portal Point.

Foster: Well it's now called Portal Point, and it certainly was never called, I've had a little bit of a conversation by e-mail but we never knew that it was called Portal Point it was always ...

[Part 2 0:04:58] Lee: Cape Reclus.

Foster: Cape Reclus.

[Part 2 0:04:59] Lee: At Charlotte Bay.

Foster: Yeah.

[Part 2 0:05:03] Lee: So the Hope Bay party were going to come over the top of the...

Foster: The Hope Bay party came down the Detroit Plateau, the Herbert Plateau, across The Waist to the Foster Plateau, it's all very nice you see when you know the bloke who gives the names, to the... [Laughter]

[Part 2 0:05:23] Lee: Oh that's your personal plateau?

Foster: That's mine, yes.

[Part 2 0:05:25] Lee: Ok, now we're going to turn north.

Foster: And that was where we met them, or rather where we left the indication for them as to where they should go, and then, this was the way down to Cape Reclus.

[Part 2 0:05:45] Lee: By turning north down the glacier.

Foster: Yeah.

[Part 2 0:05:50] Lee: The Bayly Glacier? [Talkover]

Foster: Sorry?

[Part 2 0:05:52] Lee: The Bayly Glacier was that?

Foster: Yes, yes, that would be Brian Bayly's as I say, I'm trying to think now Kershaw, not Ker[shaw] the Ketley Rock somewhere over there, and...

[Part 2 0:06:06] Lee: So the plan was for them to come and you were going to meet them weren't you?

Foster: Yeah. We were not actually to meet them we were to meet them in a sense, but I don't think anyone would find that route down...

[Part 2 0:06:20] Lee: Without guidance.

Foster: Without knowing it was there.

[Part 2 0:06:23] Lee: Yeah. So did it all go according to plan?

Foster: Oh not exactly. It took them a considerable degree longer than they thought it was going to do. We were up on the top waiting for them. We spent a long time in the field trying to do survey work and we were thwarted by the, by what I, atmospheric conditions as I described before, but that particular exercise went well although we had to go down onto half rations. We waited for them, and we were in contact not with them but with other bases with the 68 set and they, so we knew more or less how long it was going to take for them to arrive because they would be talking back to Hope Bay, and Hope Bay would be talking to bases that we could contact on this little 68 set. But they were gradually delayed by bad weather, I mean we had appalling weather but, for the most part they were up above it, and so we went on to half rations and, but we knew that they were getting closer and closer and that they were going to make it ok. So we retreated down to one of our higher depots so that we could get enough grub to keep going on there, went back up again, and I'd left the message up on the top in one of the snow cone I suppose you could call it, and then all of a sudden we heard noises, (we were in the tents), we heard noises and we heard dogs, and they were with us, which was nice.

[Part 2 0:08:43] Lee: This is Wally Herbert?

Foster: Yes.

[Part 2 0:08:46] Lee: Dennis Kershaw?

Foster: No, Dennis Kershaw is...

[Part 2 0:08:48] Lee: He was with you.

Foster: Yes. Dennis and Ray, we were the team, three man team.

[Talkover]

[Part 2 0:08:56] Lee: And they brought four men [talkover].

Foster: They had four men.

[Part 2 0:09:01] Lee: What did that prove then, that exercise, what was the...?

Foster: Do you know, I don't really know. Wally did a sledge traverse all the way along, and that map there, you will see it attributes at least some of the work to him. I don't think that was the object of the exercise. By that stage I suppose most of long journeys had been done, and the germ of an idea must have been born in somebody's mind and I don't know for the

life of me who it was but it obviously SECFIDS would have to approve it, that somehow coming from down here at Hope Bay over there would be crossing the first traverse of the Antarctic Peninsula.

[Part 2 0:10:07] Lee: So, it was to help the political claim?

Foster: It would certainly be part of it.

[Part 2 0:10:12] Lee: Support the political claim, yeah.

Foster: Yes. And doing some very valuable survey work on the way.

[Part 2 0:10:21] Lee: But your own trip up from the Reclus hut onto the plateau must have been pretty strenuous?

Foster: It was. I mean it's at 5,000 feet above sea level and we started at sea level, and you're carting everything with you, and some relatively short days it's amazing looking at it to think that I spent a hundred days actually out in the field during that nine months or so. But, ach it was just a desperate slog all the time taking, we lost one depot, totally. It doesn't snow much in the Antarctic I understand but it does blow about a lot, and we lost one though we'd put a pole on the top and guy wires down but we lost it totally. So that didn't help, so. But I mean much of the time we got 40 lb sledge ration boxes on our backs, going up hill on ski, wooden ski, and they had skins, so called skins, on the skis, I'm going to draw a sketch now.

[Part 2 0:11:47] Lee: No, use words, please.

Foster: Yes, of course. Well what happened was that after a very short time with these skins under the, the skins were...

[Part 2 0:12:01] Lee: Reindeer?

Foster: ... a material, no, no, no, they weren't actual skins, they were a material which had a nap on them which meant that they acted as friction against the snow. But all they had were, they fitted over the toe of the ski, and then straps across the ski, two or three places, and then an end strap, so after continuous use which of course is what we were doing, you would end up with a ski, which is straight, you would end up with the skins, having captured between themselves and the ski, great lumps of snow so the underside of the skin was bulging little bulges all the way along the ski. So you didn't have a flat surface, it was like a series of great lumps under the skis which were held there by the skins. So you were carrying an enormous weight of really what amounted to ice, because it was so compressed, of ice under the ski every time you lifted your foot up, and we had a lot of soft snow, and when we didn't have soft snow, if we had soft snow there was no way in which you could pull the sledges, because they would, they were like bulldozers. So then we would off load the sledge and just plod on backpacking, I think a ration box weighed 40 lbs, but it was all good competitive stuff. Dennis was much the same sort of person as myself, and we would break into a run when we were coming to the crest, see who got there first, and then we would carry up the sledge. So you've got this twelve foot sledge across your back, and the tents as well. If it has blown, as

it very often did, then the surface could be so hard that you could hardly put the pick end of an ice axe into it. So, going up steep slopes like that, well we were skidding, well we could use the sledge but you couldn't get traction. So, yes, in a word, it was a slog, it was a good job we were fit. [Laughter]

[Part 2 0:15:07] Lee: You started off with two tents I think on this particular expedition but then reduced to one.

Foster: That's right, yes. We had a pyramid tent, which was a standard travelling tent, and a mountain tent. I can't quite think why we were so cruel, because it was usually Ray that was in the mountain tent, oh well I mean we would all be together in the main tent for eating our pemmican or our porridge in the mornings, but then he would retire to the mountain tent which we had the two tunnels face to face he would retire to it, and certainly on one morning the poor chap just couldn't move at all, the guys had pulled out they're in the, it's in the small tent one man tent, the guys had pulled out so he was like that..

[Part 2 0:16:15] Lee: He was pinioned was he?

Foster: Mmm?

[Part 2 0:16:16] Lee: Pinioned under the snow?

Foster: He was pinioned under the snow, totally. So we said 'That's not fair, that's not right', so we dug a hole and abandoned the mountain tent and we slept three in the two man tent.

[Part 2 0:16:31] Lee: The mountain tent was rectangular?

Foster: No, no. Standard tent shape, it was a ridge pole tent. If you picture a tent..

[Part 2 0:16:46] Lee: Yeah.

Foster: That is what it was like.

[Part 2 0:16:48] Lee: Vertical ends?

Foster: No, no, ah vertical ends, yes, and a triangular shape.

[Part 2 0:16:53] Lee: And this proved once and for all that Scott's plan of pyramid tents was the right decision?

Foster: He certainly had the right tents, yes, because ours were, I suppose they're still much the same, I don't know mind, I must confess, but pictures I have seen are more or less the same.

[Part 2 0:17:14] Lee: So Ray was having to shout for help was he from time to time?

Foster: [Chuckles] I think he shouted for help that morning, I think he sort of got up and sort of 'Way hey!' from this tent.

[Part 2 0:17:28] Lee: And there was a problem with carbon monoxide on one particular occasion as well I believe?

Foster: Oh heavens, yes. Yes there was. That could have been nasty. What happened the tents the, you probably know all this before because you've erm, the tents have a little ventilator, the tents in those days anyway, had a little ventilator, which was a little bit of rubber tubing really of about an inch diameter in the top of the tent. And of course all the cooking was done on Primus stoves, on a Primus stove, which of course gives off noxious fumes, which is great, perfectly ok because the tent acts as a kind of funnel, the hot air goes up, it can be very hot in the top of the tent, and out, outside but on this occasion what had happened was the wind had changed direction and the ventilator had become clogged with snow. I don't know who realised it first, but we suddenly realised that something nasty was happening and we had headaches, and opened the flap, opened the tunnel to the tent. Luckily we didn't suffer from any ill effects. But, was it Ray who said that, I wonder?

[Part 2 0:19:07] Lee: It's in your notes.

Foster: I'd almost forgotten it.

[Part 2 0:19:11] Lee: It's in the notes you wrote.

Foster: Is that right?

[Part 2 0:19:13] Lee: So when, when you heard the Hope Bay party, was that a film moment of joyous reunion, a Hollywood moment?

Foster: [Laughter] Well it wasn't a film moment for me, I don't think it was a film moment for any[body] there are some photographs, but no, I mean not everybody was out there with, I mean I didn't have a camera I don't think, but yeah it was a great moment, more particularly for them of course than for us in a way because we'd been sort of sitting there, you know, they'd been the ones who had been doing the hard physical work, I suppose in a way we'd been doing hard mental work in hoping that they were going to get there.

[Part 2 0:20:00] Lee: So when you, the seven of you then went down to Reclus...

Foster: That's right.

[Part 2 0:20:06] Lee: Hut?

Foster: Yes.

[Part 2 0:20:07] Lee: Which of course is only big enough for three people?

Foster: Yes, yes.

[Part 2 0:20:10] Lee: Was that?

Foster: Yeah three, yes

[Part 2 0:20:13] Lee: So how did you solve that problem?

Foster: Oh that was simple because they camped outside and we had all the meals inside. The, it was a good thing really because, somewhere in my notes originally, I say that when we were in the hut, the hut was about as basic as anything could be, and all our cooking was done on Primus stoves. Somehow or other another sort of stove got into the hut. When they finally took it down they took it over to Port Stanley but we only had Primus stoves, and it was my bright idea to make an oven out of a 5 lb flour tin, it was either a flour tin or a dehydrated vegetable tin.

[Part 2 0:21:11] Lee: Was it one tin or two?

Foster: I can't remember if it was one or two.

[Part 2 0:21:16] Lee: Did you not fasten two tins together?

Foster: Yeah I think we must have put two it would have been too with small just one, and then we wrapped it in asbestos cloth, I suppose more to protect our fingers more than anything else, and sat it on three Primus stoves, and the solder on the inner one melted, and we only had three Primus stoves, it was the solder it wasn't a replaceable part that melted it was the stem into the body of the thing that melted so we now only had two, and they had to do us for all the cooking on the base, and all the camping all the time we were in the field, so we didn't make any more bread [laughter], until the boys came down and we got down to the bottom, then we got sgads of Primus stoves they got their's and we'd got ours so we reinstated the oven and I baked a cake for Lee Rice's birthday, there's a picture of it, there's a picture in the archive there somewhere which I sent, he was a sailor so it had a little boat on it, and we were able to, were able to bake a cake by cutting the burnt bottom off and then turning it over and cutting the other burnt bottom off, which had been the top, and making a very respectable, edible cake.

[Part 2 0:22:55] Lee: Before the Hope Bay chaps arrived you had actually really only expected to be at Reclus Hut for a short period of time?

Foster: No, we were always going to be there for the whole winter.

[Part 2 0:23:06] Lee: You were?

Foster: Oh yes.

[Part 2 0:23:07] Lee: I see.

Foster: Yes, because bear in mind that it was, this was the access to the Grahamland plateau, the only one as far as we knew. We'd failed down at the bottom there, where we couldn't get up onto the plateau, and of course the intention always was to carry out survey work. I mean we carted the theodolite and the staffs and everything with us all the time, and we would at the slightest excuse *try* to do something, but then the weather would come down and, no that, I mean there are some very despairing comments in my sledging notebooks, really.

[Part 2 0:24:06] Lee: Were you getting depressed?

Foster: Nope.

[Part 2 0:24:08] Lee: At Reclus?

Foster: No, no not in the slightest. We never had any arguments at all. I don't, I really don't know why, but we didn't, any more than we had done amongst the six of us, 'cos if there'd been arguments amongst three, that would have been death!

[Part 2 0:24:33] Lee: Mmmm.

Foster: Death! I mean Ray told us all about what it was like in Northern Ireland, he's surprised you could understand him [laughter], but having said that we could understand him then, I think Ray's accent has tended to get a little bit thicker as he's got older. So he told us all about Northern Ireland and, I was only recently of course come back from the Far East, and, Dennis was funny, he was a funny Lancashire man, funny Lancastrian, and, he'd played a lot of cricket, and, I remember one time when he was bowling against some thick set Lancastrian there who was in league cricket, and the Lancastrian said to him something like 'If thou does that again I'll thump thee into t'bloody ground like a tent peg', I think he'd bowled him a bouncer or something, you know. That was my approximation of Dennis, bless his soul.

[Part 2 0:25:56] Lee: What sort of chap was he?

Foster: Oh, he was great. He was great. We got on like a house on fire, although we didn't carry on much afterwards, ways diverged. I don't know, I mean he was damned hard working, he was very fit, he would do more than his share given the opportunity, as indeed would Ray, as indeed, I hope, would I, you know, funny, no, a good egg.

[Part 2 0:26:39] Lee: And Wally Herbert, who of course you also got to know quite well.

Foster: Yes.

[Part 2 0:26:43] Lee: Tell me about Wally.

Foster: Yeah well Wally was, of course it was his first experience of polar work, but it had always been something, he was a driven man, and it was great. He, Dennis and I at that time seemed somehow to strike up a particular friendship, which persisted between, Dennis and Wally all the time really. Whereas I went abroad ??? [incomprehensible], I'm unfortunately not a good correspondent, so I drifted out and it wasn't until I knew that Dennis had died, because I rejoined the club.

[Part 2 0:28:04] Lee: BAS club?

Foster: The BAS club, yes, and I heard that Dennis had died, I got in touch with his widow Mary whom I knew of course, and again got in touch with Wally. As I say I mean he was a driven man I only, I wish, my wife was very angry with me because I didn't keep in touch with them. She very much, she was, we went to see him once in Lichfield when he was preparing the Trans-Arctic expedition, and we had a very good chat there and it was before

we were married actually, and we came away and Jorun said 'Have you ever seen a man who was so meticulous, I've never seen a study like that', and it was true, you know, I mean it was necessary, but he was a very, a very good friend, but, no it's not but, and a very driven man because he knew, it wasn't like the rest of us, he wasn't down there really for the one off exercise he was down there as the start of a career as a polar explorer, which he went on to achieve with very great success of course.

[Part 2 0:29:33] Lee: What was his personality like, was he phlegmatic or, the opposite?

Foster: No, no he was lively. I wouldn't have said that he was phlegmatic at all, no. He was bright, I don't mean bright in the sense of intelligent, but bright in the sense of being aware, of being there. I mean obviously he was a leader, but again I suspect a leader in the way that I would like to be a leader, a motivator of people rather than a commander of people. He was very forthright obviously. The occasion when he was on the ice there and he called the people of the Royal Geographical Society, rather unplea..., no unfortunate names, which certain, I think it was Ranulph Fiennes thought was the reason why he didn't get a knighthood before he got it, in spite of Prince Charles saying something about he should be distilled, his spirit should be distilled and I've forgotten the detail but, no he was, I was proud, very proud that he was a friend.

[Part 2 0:31:02] Lee: So there we are there were seven of you now at Reclus hut, plus a fair number of dogs to feed as well I presume?

Foster: Yeah.

[Part 2 0:31:09] Lee: So there was a bit of shooting of seal was there?

Foster: Yeah, well there were two things about shooting the seal one was that we, obviously we'd come to the end of the sledging exercise so what we did was to, the Hope Bay boys were used to killing seal, because they had to kill them for dog food. We weren't so used, so they had a '38 or '45 revolver, and we lashed two sledges together with some empty oil drums and went seal hunting on this raft approaching a floe and I mean the seals were, it was like, what's the phrase, shooting pigs in a barrel, you know, they would just look at you, with g-r-e-a-t b-i-g eyes. It was rather horrible to kill them, but, dog food. So that was a very successful exercise. [talkover]

[Part 2 0:32:15] Lee: Well there was one moment which wasn't terribly successful.

Foster: Oh no, no, that's right. That was the time when we came across a leopard seal on the seashore, and, a live leopard seal on the seashore in fact, it was on a bit of ice shelf, and they're big beasts, you know, the head of a leopard seal is about as big as this, and the teeth are about as big as my thumb, and so luckily, as I say, we had this '38 or '45. So one of the Hope Bay boys I've forgotten who it was now, can't remember their names actually apart from Lee, put several bullets into the, and I mean these are b-i-g things 9 millimetres sort of thing, and we were absolutely certain it was dead - we thought - and we approached it and all of a sudden, it probably was dead, but it convulsed like that, head went up, tail went up, and we *flew* to the four winds, you've never seen seven people move as quickly as we could,

away from this dangerous beast, but I think it was dead. Anyway, it died. We put a few more shells into it, and then it made a very good supper for the dogs for several days, because we had to wait quite a long time to be picked up, because the *Shackleton* hit a berg, and, I'm not sure where, we weren't in touch of course with it, we only learnt through other means, probably went to South Georgia to be repaired there.

[Part 2 0:34:22] Lee: It did, in dry dock.

Foster: In dry dock, in South Georgia.

[Part 2 0:34:25] Lee: It fitted with a few inches to spare.

Foster: Yeah, hmm, oh right? Well there's something I never knew. And then eventually it came, and ..

[Part 2 0:34:34] Lee: It was about six weeks later, wasn't it, at least?

Foster: I actually remembered four but it was of that order, yes

[Part 2 0:34:41] Lee: Did they take you and Wally and his Hope Bay team out?

Foster: Oh they took us all out, yeah.

[Part 2 0:34:47] Lee: Because of course Danco was to be abandoned, wasn't it?

Foster: No no Danco was used for a further year.

[Part 2 0:34:53] Lee: One more year, of course.

Foster: Yeah.

[Part 2 0:34:55] Lee: And Duncan Boston was in charge.

Foster: That's right

[Part 2 0:34:58] Lee: When you heard that it had been abandoned were you disappointed or was it no surprise?

Foster: Well it was no surprise because it was the wrong base in the wrong place, or, I don't think it, that's not quite right, it was no place for a base. Even though the second year before we left we got, (oh no was that the last year?), but we got a 14 ft fibreglass boat which made life an awful lot easier, and made me quite unpopular back in base because I was rather rude about the boats that they sent us previously, and when I got a message, everything came in code you know in those days, when I got a message saying 'We're doing the best we can' I just sent back 'Sorry you're not doing good enough', which is why they probably offered me the job of Stores and Equipment Officer.

[Part 2 0:36:02] Lee: Well how did that happen because you were leaving the Antarctic, presumably for the last time you thought on the *Shackleton*?

Foster: Yes.

[Part 2 0:36:07] Lee: But you didn't leave BAS?

Foster: No, no. I was offered the, before we left I was offered the job, of the Stores and Equipment Officer.

[Part 2 0:36:20] Lee: That came in London?

Foster: Well it would be partly 6 months in London, 6 months on the, travelling around the bases.

[Part 2 0:36:27] Lee: Right.

Foster: And I accepted it. It was before we left because I had to be back by about May, and I travelled back through South America. I think we were about the first, there were Dennis and Pete Wild, and myself, and do you know I've forgot the name of the bloke who came with me? I don't know why I didn't really know him, and unfortunately he died very soon after he arrived back in England in a motor accident, so I didn't really have a chance to know him properly except during the journey, and Wally. Wally came up by himself. So there were two groups of us came back and I knew I had to be back by May so unfortunately I had to leave when we got to Colombia and catch a ship from there, to get back. During that period [pause], I never really got my head properly around the job, I didn't allow myself the time to do it, because personal matters intervened. A Norwegian manufacturer came to see me, I didn't know that he was the man, he was the boss man when he came humping this great thing full of gear up the stairs, and I was going to go to Norway that year climbing in the Jotunheimen, and he invited me to stay at his house, which was a collection of restored huts from all the different provinces in Norway, vernacular housing, beautiful.

[Part 2 0:38:33] Lee: So this was in Norway?

Foster: This was in Norway above Oslo Fjord. Anyway, so I accepted of course. He got me a cheap air ticket as well, and it was the head of the Norwegian Tourist Board as well. Anyway I went down to see him in his office and he said 'What are you going to do tonight?' and I said 'Well I'll probably go and have a look round Oslo' and he said 'Well I'm sure Miss Palse [phonetic] will show you round', and this tall slim girl walking towards the door, his secretary, sort of went 'Who, me?', and that was the girl that I eventually married.

[Part 2 0:39:12] Lee: This is Jorun?

Foster: This is Jorun, and having met her and fallen in love and decided that I was going to marry her it didn't seem appropriate that I would continue with a job which meant I was going to be in this country six months and elsewhere in six months. So, I resigned, in a word.

[Part 2 0:39:42] Lee: But you did do one summer trip..

Foster: I did one further trip down, yes.

[Part 2 0:39:46] Lee: ...which actually again, the *Shackleton* nearly ruined your plans?

Foster: Well, yes, yeah we were, I think it was Stonington you know I'm not entirely sure, and [pause], I didn't really grip this job, I mean I, the germ of what I should be doing was a sort of equipment officer was forming at that time. I mean for example, the first thing that I, that had occurred to me already was 'We shouldn't have beige tents! [Laughter] Against a white background'

[Part 2 0:40:31] Lee: Yes.

Foster: Yeah? You'd find a far better chance of finding them if they were fluorescent orange, you know, so I had started to think that on this occasion the trip down was before I'd really got my mind round these things properly, and, yes we were stuck in the ice, and first of all, I'm pretty certain she was a U.S. Coastguard icebreaker, the *Edisto* came down, and she got stuck in the ice, and the *Northwind* the U.S.N I suppose will be, *Northwind* icebreaker came half way round the world, you see we were stuck there quite a long time, half way round the world and broke both of us out so we had, going out we had the *Northwind* and these icebreakers, you know, can turn on a sixpence, *Northwind*, the *Edisto* and the poor old *Shack* in the back I don't know how many screws she'd got probably two, but she couldn't turn on a sixpence. On one occasion I was on the bridge and the *Edisto* in front of us and she had a helicopter platform on the back with stays out with netting, obviously safety netting for the crew. We couldn't stop, she stopped, I don't know whether she put her screws in reverse or what, anyway she didn't stop and we went along and all these navy men were sort of throwing themselves out of the way and we chopped all these projecting supports to the netting on the helicopter platform before we ground to a halt between the ship and the surrounding ice. Yes.

[Part 2 0:42:43] Lee: There's a note here which suggests that Eleanor Honnywill was with you on that trip, is that the case or not?

Foster: No. Eleanor Honnywill was the first girl in the office in London.

[Part 2 0:43:01] Lee: Right.

Foster: With whom I shared the office.

[Part 2 0:43:05] Lee: Right, ok.

Foster: There was no-one else so she in a sense she was the London presence, continuous presence of FIDS at that time, before she married Sir Vivian Fuchs.

[Part 2 0:43:30] Lee: Oh did she?

Foster: I think so. I'm almost certain so.

[Part 2 0:43:34] Lee: I'm sure you're right I just never thought of that before.

Foster: I've said that, mmm.

[Part 2 0:43:40] Lee: Well I'll check, don't worry.

Foster: Yes, yes if you would, please do, please do it's an idea I had.

[Part 2 0:43:46] Lee: Right. Were there any funny moments that you had right down, I'm thinking particularly of the, something to do with chair, broken chair?

Foster: [Laughs] Yes, yes. The first year, and the bergs used to drift up and down the, Lemaire Channel I think it is, and some very big ones. I've not mentioned this, far as I can remember ever before but on one occasion I was out, and I think it was with 'Pidge', and there was this great tabular berg that had been in the water quite a time, and it had tunnels in a word, right through it, and I said to 'Pidge' 'Shall we go through there?'

[Part 2 0:44:45] Lee: In what, in a dinghy?

Foster: In a dinghy, yeah, with an outboard on it, and he says 'Yeah, why not?' So we went in and this great echoing vault of ice up above us, and this noise of the engine was sort of echoing from the sides, and I think I said [whispers] 'I think we better turn the engine off'. So we turned the engine off, and gently rowed, very quietly out through this tunnel in the berg. But the one that you are perhaps reminding me of was a much smaller one that grounded outside the base, right outside the base, about 20 feet tall, and we had a broken, it was Sunday as I recall, we were all being idle I suspect, and we were looking out from the kitchen through the kitchen window and someone, I don't know who it was, sugge..., probably me, suggested 'Wouldn't it be funny if we took this broken chair, which we'd tried to mend but couldn't, and perched it on the top of this berg because it was in the form of a spire, a spire, if you can imagine it, which broadened out at the base and then in front of it was a kind of basin, full of sea water, with an outlet on one side through which the water flowed, swished backwards and forwards. So wearing sea boots couple of us went out, and I can't remember who was the other idiot, and wearing sea boots and I climbed up, I'm not quite sure how I managed to climb up it because it was quite steep, anyway climbed up, put this chair on this pinnacle of ice, lost my grip, slid down, went round this basin full of water and out into the sea, in my sea boots. But I kicked the sea boots off so we lost a pair of sea boots and of course the boat was there with the other fellow in it and he pulled me on board. There was another unfortunate thing, at least it felt, felt really unfortunate at the time when on the base that same year and we were, we did have a Lee Enfield 303 on base, it was absolutely no use for anything whatsoever, because we weren't going to kill a seal just to eat seal liver or seal meat or whatever, and nobody liked the idea of killing penguins, although there were penguins in abundance. We did try once, we was out once but it was like trying to kill a rubber ball, so we gave up after a while, walked away. But, I had this 303, and we were just standing outside the hut it was a pleasant cool evening and there were the er, oh dear, snowy petrels, (would they be snowy petrels?), snowy petrels probably, let me see and I, I drew a bead on one that was hovering, like that, and fired at it, it was about, oh a good hundred yards away, and I hit it, and Lord alone knows how that could conceivably have happened, I was not a good shot with a rifle in the army, so it was pure coincidence and this little bird dropped like a stone. Well this mass of feathers, because it had been hit by a 303 bullet, dropped, and I

never felt so [pause] sad, and at the same time angry with myself, you know, there was no way that I could possibly have hit it, and yet I did.

[Part 2 0:48:55] Lee: Hmm.

Foster: Rather horrible. I still remember.

[Part 2 0:49:00] Lee: On this final summer down south when you went going round the bases as stores logistics whatever it was, was there anything of any significance that happened on that trip?

Foster: Well, other than being iced in.

[Part 2 0:49:17] Lee: Yeah, on the actual bases themselves I mean you saw bases you hadn't seen before I presume?

Foster: Well I did but, honestly no, there was nothing that I, nothing really that I can recall. As I say I was ..

[Part 2 0:49:30] Lee: At that time your mind was elsewhere was it?

Foster: Oh well not really, it wasn't, it wasn't it was, it was just that, as I said in other words I was feeling my way, and I was still dedicated although, but I hadn't decided, I don't think I'd really decided what the job description was. That would have come next year I think..

[Part 2 0:49:57] Lee: Yeah, but you, by then, you met Jorun and that was the end of that, and life changed. Do you have any regrets about departing from BAS?

Foster: Oh yes, lots. I mean it was a great time, but, I was not, not, obviously not the kind of person, and there are, there have been in the history of BAS, quite a few who winter, over-winter, winter after winter. I was obviously not that type of person. But, yeah I mean erm, I think I would have made a good Stores and Equipment Officer had things not actually ended up as they did, because I was intensely interested. It was just at the time when, it was just at the time when we started to get aircraft, and things were, things were changing. I think it was the cusp of the change then, to the, the new, the FIDS as it now exists, you know.

[Part 2 0:51:26] Lee: So what did you do instead, very briefly?

[Talkover}

Foster: Well, I was, as I say I trained as a quantity surveyor, but I decided I didn't particularly want to be a quantity surveyor, and I still wanted to go abroad, so I converted myself into an engineer, that's to say a construction engineer, it was much the same knowledge of course, and I first of all I joined a big company called Costain, and I went out to the Persian Gulf, and I was the engineer, and then we built an air terminal building for what was then the airport for Dubai. I smile because I've been to Dubai since and er, I mean the changes, indescribable, and built a NATO airfield, aerodrome, runway, came back from that, married Jorun, and we went then, pair of us, to Libya, to Tripoli, to some construction projects in Tripoli and

Benghazi. Came back from that, spent two years and a bit in the UK, I learnt, I'd taught myself Spanish while I was, got a book down on the bases, because of the journey through South America, so I was asked if I would like to go to, I could either be promoted to something which was really, was called a sort of area director, or I could go to, in this company, or I could go to Spain. I went home and said to Jorun 'What shall we do?' and she said 'We'll go to Spain'. So we went to Spain, we were a year down in Jerez de la Frontera in Andalucia, and then three years in Madrid. And then we came back, and that was in, came back in '71, and very briefly spent some time up in Northumberland with a company where the chief executive had known me and invited me to join them which was a total disaster, I joined John Laing Construction here in Yorkshire, and really that was the end of the travels because in the first year of, first ten years of our married life, married life, we'd moved house in three different countries and in ten different places, and we ended up here in 1971 and we're still here.

[Part 2 0:54:43] Lee: So how was the Antarctic, as you're a well travelled man as you are, how do those two years in the Antarctic rate in the Dick Foster life story?

Foster: Yes. Well, I mean there is this strange thing, which I suppose everyone comes to, that as you get older things that happened earlier on in your career seem somehow to become more important, and, oh let me just say very briefly, I would *not have missed it for the World*. It was very character forming, I really think it is because I did all sorts of things in construction which I shouldn't have done because there was some area manager or something who said 'You did what?!', and I would say 'Well yeah, I mean it needed to be..', you know, you were, on your own you did the things that had to be done, things that you thought had to be done, things that needed to be done, and you weren't fazed by anything. And I'm sure that would apply to anyone who's been down there it's character forming, as well as totally, completely, and absolutely enjoyable.

[Part 2 0:56:20] Lee: Marvellous. Well shall we leave it there, Dick?

Foster: Shall we?

[Part 2 0:56:22] Lee: Excellent, thank you very much indeed.

Foster: Yes. No, thank you.

Possible extracts:

- Appointment as Base Leader. [Part 1 00:16:14]
- Unsettling snatches of news of the outside world. [Part 1 00:25:09]
- Finding a site and establishing Base 'O', Danco Island. [Part 1 00:30:54]
- Location makes for difficult survey work. [Part 1 00:43:40]
- Scary episode with a crevasse. [Part 1 00:46:58]
- Cannot find tents. [Part 1 00:56:07]
- First crossing of the Grahamland Peninsula. [Part 2 00:00:10]
- Difficulty of getting to the Plateau from Reclus. [Part 2 00:10:21]
- Carbon monoxide poisoning. [Part 2 00:17:28]
- The flour tin oven. [Part 2 00:20:13]
- Memories of colleagues. [Part 2 00:24:33]
- Wally Herbert. [Part 2 00:26:39]
- Getting seal meat for the dogs. [Part 2 00:31:09]
- Meeting his future wife. [Part 2 00:38:33]
- *Shackleton* stuck in ice – rescue by U.S. icebreakers. [Part 2 00:40:31]
- Amusing incidents with icebergs. [Part 2 00:43:46]
- Life after BAS. [Part 2 00:51:26]
- 'How do you rate those two years?' [Part 2 00:54:43]