

Edited transcript of a recording of **John Rothera**, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 31st of January 2013. MP3 file
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Transcribed by Jim Madell November 2013

[Part 1 00:00:00]

This is John Rothera, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 31st of January 2013.

John Rothera, Part 1.

Rothera: -My name is John Michael Rothera, I was born in Huddersfield in the West Riding of Yorkshire on the 17th of January 1934.

Lee: How long had you been living in Huddersfield for ?

Rothera: I left to go to university when I was 18 and never went back.

Lee: Ah, O.K. Where does the name Rothera come from ?

Rothera: Ah yes,now. It is.. the origin is Scandinavian; let's go back a few thousand years.

Lee: Please.

Rothera: And I know from looking at the books written on people's names and by almost the man who was my headmaster but left before I started at school, wrote a book on people's names and he had the name Rothera in it and it's from there that I learned it was originally of Scandinavian origin. That's all I know.

[Part 1 00:01:15]

Lee: Are you the only Rothera in the phone book?

Rothera: No. I am in this area but I do know there are some in the Nottingham area and, curiously enough, on holiday once sat on a balcony late at night in Italy, we got talking to the people on the next balcony and she was talking about who she'd been working for and it was the coroner of Nottingham and I said ' Oh, he's got the name Rothera', she said 'That's right ' and I said ' He's been coroner a long time hasn't he?' She said ' No, he was always appearing in the national press just as unusual cases and it wasn't him all the time' There was an original Rothera in the post then his son took over and I believe one of the family gang took over after that. I do know that in some of the villages around Nottingham there are people with the name Rothera.

[Part 1 00:02:17]

Lee: Has it got a special meaning, the word ?

Rothera: No, I don't know of it.

Lee... No,... I see. Tell me about your father. Was he a professional man?

Rothera:...He had his own small business to do with, oddly enough in the West Riding, to do with cloth and that kind of work.... yes.. He was born in the West Riding of Yorkshire. not far from Huddersfield I've never been quite sure where, I think it was a

place called Kirk Burton, but of course, when you get to this stage in life you realise all the things you never asked and never knew, interesting.

Lee: Was he well educated?

Rothera: Was I?

Lee: Was he well educated?

Rothera: Not to my knowledge.

Lee: Were you?

[Part 1 00:03:09]

Rothera: Well I went to a good school in Huddersfield, King James' which had had its Royal Charter in 1608, it was well-recognised and then to Leeds University where I did my Geography degree.

Lee: Geography, yes. OK. What was the first memory you have of the Antarctic, what was the first inkling you had that it might exist on this planet of ours?

Rothera: I think when I was very young and when I began to read and read about the places in the world and so on. I always was interested in maps and the world in general so I was aware that there was an Arctic and an Antarctic, where Europe was and Australia and so on.

Lee: Have you read about the heroes?

Rothera: Not in particular, no not at that age, no. When I knew I was going to the Antarctic I started to read then.

Lee: So what happened when you left University, what was the next step?

Rothera: I went straight into the British, well the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey and I went to begin with for training to the School of Military Survey near Newbury, Hermitage, and then there was some training but not really much at the Directorate of Overseas Survey at Tolworth in Surrey.

[Part 1 00:04:39]

Lee: Why did you apply to FIDS ?

Rothera: Because of my Geography degree., very interested in different parts of the world, the opportunities, which in those days were very limited to go to the Antarctic, and I was quite amazed when I actually got the post.

Lee: Do you remember the interview at all?

Rothera: I remember yes part of the ... Millbank the Crown Agents, yes I do. I think it was a chap called John Green and I always remember that he had a list in front of him and he seemed to have to tick one column in particular after the question or discussion.

Lee: Was it just one to one then do you think. ?

Rothera: Yes it was

Lee: Gosh. Why would you want to go as a surveyor?

Rothera: I had done surveying as part of my Geography course and I didn't let that clear and we did have a whole one Easter field trip to the, somewhere near Scarborough on the East coast where most of the time was spent surveying.

[Part 1 00:05:43]

Lee: Did you enjoy

Rothera: I did have, after all I would say a smattering of the knowledge of surveying before I actually joined Fids

Lee: OK. Tell me about going south.

Rothera: Ah well the ship was new, the *John Biscoe*, again it was interesting, the first few days we spent in our bunks I think, it was so rough in the Bay of Biscay it was horrible but by the time we got down South of the entrance to the Mediterranean things were warming up literally and I always remember passing Madeira looking at the magnificent cliffs on that island and we actually did work on the ship. We did a bit of painting and scrubbing the deck at times, not all the time but there was that kind of work going on.

[Part 1 00:06:]

Lee: Who was on the ship with you that you still remember ?

Rothera: Well, Peter Gibbs I remember, a chap called, no I nearly said Brian Holmes, I don't think he was on the ship, good question, I hadn't thought about that part of it.

Lee: OK

Rothera: I know we picked up a chap in Montevideo called George Larmour who had flown down there with somebody else I can't remember because he'd been appointed more or less at the last minute for that season's work in the Antarctic.

[From personal knowledge, George Larmour was already at Hope Bay at this time]

Lee: And we're talking about nineteen fifty ?

Rothera: We're in 1956, yes, we left here at the beginning of December 56 or late November, any way I know we were in Montevideo a week before Christmas and we were actually in Port Stanley at Christmas.

[Part 1 00:07:38]

Lee: What did you make of the Falklands and Stanley?

Rothera: Oh quite quite pleasant I thought, very much like Scotland, that's my immediate impression sailing into Stanley harbour they are so much like Scotland and it was even when you got off and were walking around the small town of Stanley.

Lee: Were you there for a while?

Rothera: We were there for 2 or 3 days and then we went south where we waited at Base W for the arrival of Britannia.

Lee: Britannia?

[Part 1 00:08:13]

Rothera: Britannia. The Duke of Edinburgh was on his world tour on Britannia and having a good time from what we understood. We waited, I remember, on the morning of the 1st January 1957, New Year's day, and there was a mist, which was quite unusual in the Antarctic, and suddenly out of the mist came Britannia then he got off with the Governor of the Falkland Islands and John Green I remember and they came on board for two days and we took them round some of the bases. And then when we went off again we went all the way back to Stanley for the New Year because they were having big celebrations because the Duke was going to be there and they had horse racing which of course the Duke won one when he rode in one of the races and then, after another few days we came south properly.

Lee: So the first time you came south was merely to be a taxi for the Duke of Edinburgh really.

Rothera: Yes it was.

Lee: How did he strike you, was he clean shaven or a bit scruffy?

[Part 1 00:09:23]

Rothera: I wouldn't say he was scruffy but he was informal, very much so, so maybe I think Oh you could say yes he'd been in the Navy, he wasn't really just a member of the Royal family.

Lee: Was he mixing with everybody?

Rothera: Yes, I think so.

Lee: You had lunch with him I think didn't you.?

Rothera: What?

Lee: Did you have lunch with him?

[Part 1 00:09:45]

Rothera: We had lunch, yes. I wasn't on his table, there were only two tables actually in our little mess but we were on a table with the Governor and I think the ADC to the Duke but we had drinks with him before lunch in the bar.

Lee: There's a story about that I think isn't there?

Rothera: Yes, I did write down, that he wanted a, I was on bar duty. Somebody was on bar duty every day, a different person. I happened to be on bar duty, he wanted a pink

gin, I didn't really know what a pink gin was but I knew that you did put the bitters in it only apparently I put far too much bitters in and he passed the drink back to me and said it was far too strong. The second one was OK so that was alright.

Lee: And was he getting off the ship at each base?

Rothera: He got off at Base W and I can't remember where, we went to another base but it was only one other. It might have been the ,do you know I can't remember which one, it was to the north.

Lee: So he was just getting off occasionally.

Rothera: Yes, that's all.

Lee: Not all the time.

Rothera: He certainly didn't go down further south because I think the ice was still difficult

[Part 1 00:11:06}

Lee: Did you warm to him?

Rothera: Well he wasn't really in our presence too much but I think he was going ashore places and although he slept on board he was upstairs in I think the captain's cabin and not FIDS accommodation.

Lee: I gather his tie was severed at one point.

[Part 1 00:11:34]

Rothera: I can't remember that.

Lee: OK.

Rothera: No.

Lee: Half of his tie is pinned on a base wall somewhere in the Antarctic.

Rothera: Oh is it.

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: Mmmm

Lee: I believe.

Rothera: He had been on bases previously to coming down to join us, I think he'd been to Deception, the Argentine Islands and I think he might have been at the Argentine Island for New Year's eve, apparently it was quite a good thing to be on board the Britannia on New Year's eve.

Lee: Work started in earnest for you once the New Year had gone and you headed south.

[Part 1 00:12:12]

Rothera: Yes, once we went south the second time we, well we were busy unloading at various bases with all the supplies and so on. Hope Bay I remember in particular. We didn't go back to W but we went, I think, directly down to Horseshoe, we could get in. The ice hadn't been brilliant the year before, people on the base the year before had really not had any opportunity to sledge at all, so we went in and we knew we were going to go to a refuge hut which was going to be built on Blaiklock Island in Bigourdan Fjord and we weren't at our base very long, Horseshoe, before we set off to erect the base hut at Blaiklock Island.

Lee: Who was in that party with you?

[Part 1 00:13:14}

Rothera: Well, me, Peter Gibbs, a chap called Nigel Procter, who was the geologist who was going to be with us the whole of that year, well various people who were going to be erecting the base hut and so on.

Lee: So the first job was to build the hut and then to occupy it.

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: The refuge hut.

Rothera: Yes. It only took about three days if I remember and then they left and we were left on our own, me, Peter Gibbs and Nigel Procter.

Lee: Was it in kit form then, the hut?

Rothera: Sorry?

Lee: Was it in kit form?

Rothera: It was prefabricated, yes. It was really nothing more than a garden hut, it really wasn't. I don't know how we survived.

Lee: So what was your, what was your mission then, what were you instructed to do in your first season.?

[Part 1 00:14:06]

Rothera: Well, to survey what we could and the point of going to Blaiklock Island was we could get onto the mainland by going over Blaiklock Island and across the Jones ice shelf onto the glacier, the Heim glacier? Yes.

Lee: That's right

Rothera: And we were going to manhaul, no dogs, no means of transport only pulling the bloody sledge, which we did and we did quite a bit but we couldn't do too much. It was only when the sea ice formed, which I think was in March, no no, yes late March it began to form that we did really get anywhere else.

[Part 1 00:14:58]

Lee: Were you picking up on the work, on work that had been previously started?

Rothera: Not really, no.

Lee: It was a clean sheet was it?

Rothera: Well work had been done but I'm sorry, no work had been done by FIDS as far as I'm aware, the original things from the 1900 charts and all those people but nothing which FIDS had done before.

[Part 1 00:15:28]

Lee: So you had some kind of map to work from?

Rothera: Yes we did, we had basic maps, yes.

Lee: And your job was to clarify those maps and...

Rothera: Yes it was, it was really to identify areas where we could erect trig points and then survey between them triangulation so we could pin point to the work going on back in England exactly where these islands and peaks and bays were in the world. They've never been actually located properly through that kind of surveying. There was something going on with the Navy too at that time. They had a chap doing some surveying, there was a chap called Angus Erskine, Lieutenant Commander ??? [inaudible] in fact we saw him several times in our brief time down there.

I remember him arriving at the Blaiklock hut one day, surprisingly, but he was doing some surveying and I know that the surveying party was going on from HMS Protector and they were flying people in helicopters to the tops of peaks and doing the work by Tellurometer while we were slogging it out on the ground and hauling things to the top of these peaks.

[A note here from personal knowledge: Angus Erskine was the base leader at Base W in 1957 and sledged with Jim Madell to Blaiklock Island and spent midwinter 1957 at Horseshoe Island. There was a Navy survey party under Lt. John Wynn Edwards which I saw near the Argentine Islands doing Hydrographic work.]

[Part 1 00:16:58]

Lee: Did you not have the Tellurometers?

Rothera: No we didn't, not then.

Lee: Were you using plane tabling?

Rothera: We just used theodolites, which is an old fashioned way really of doing the work, involving turning little knobs and so on in bitterly cold weather and your hands got very cold very rapidly.

Lee: You had to take your gloves off I guess.

Rothera: Well you did at times, yes.

Lee: Tell me about a typical day's surveying

Part 1 [00:17:31]

Rothera: Well it depended on the weather of course. Too often a typical day was lying in the tent listening to the wind whistling by the canvas and hearing the snow hitting the canvas most of it being blown snow, it never really snowed that much and it could be quite boring. It happened twice with a week on each occasion and by the end of that period you got very weak and when we got out to dig out the tent and so on and the dogs and what have you, when we did have dogs, it was quite an effort to do it to begin with.

Lee: Why were you becoming weak?

Rothera: Because you're lying in a tent for the week, you're not moving around enough but you soon got back into the way of things once you started actually doing something, digging the snow away or even just moving around.

[Part 1 00:18:28]

Lee: How did you pass the time during your lay up?

Rothera: Reading, basically reading or sleeping. If we were actually working during good weather and if we had dogs or when we were manhauling, well it could be quite pleasant, with sledging you identified the points where you wanted the trig points and you would then sledge there. You wouldn't normally go up the day you got there you would wait 'til the next day and then at the peak and back again after building a cairn, often it would be a snow cairn which wasn't going to last too long.

Lee: What was the function of the cairn?

Rothera: Well, if you were at one point where you had a cairn you could then locate on the theodolite where the other cairns were and that is the way you got the triangulation.

Lee: Right

[Part 1 00:19:35]

Rothera: It was going to pinpoint those particular points on the ground.

Lee: You were leaving little landmarks, is that correct?

Rothera: Yes, though some were quite big. We also, we would do star observations at night, sometimes. Most of them we did before we left the Blaiklock refuge, we could pinpoint Blaiklock then according to the stars, that was quite difficult at times but it did the job.

Lee: Because of cloud?

Rothera: It was cold. You could only do it of course when it was a cloudless sky and then there was the problem of did we really pinpoint that particular star or not but I think in the end because of the work we did we were pretty good at doing that.

[Part 1 00:20:31]

Lee: It sounds pretty exhausting kind of work to me.

Rothera: I wouldn't say so. We didn't do it every day and not every week, we'd do what we had to do and then we may not do anything for a week or two. That other things had to be done at the base, when we got back to Horseshoe, which we did for midwinter, of course the dogs to look after, the dog meat to get, killing of seals, keeping the base hut in good order and so on, there was always something to do and right at the end of the two years I think when people knew they were going to be coming home and that the ice was not going to last for ever I suppose in a way we started to do, shall we say, holiday things. We decided, me and another chap, to go to look at Stonington to the south of Horseshoe, a very historic base, which had been occupied in the nineteen thirties or forties rather.

Part 1 [00:21:45]

Lee: Post war certainly.

Rothera: Yes, and by the Americans.

Lee: And Brits.

Rothera: Yes, yes.

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: And also on the way back we stopped at an Argentinean base, well on the way down we did briefly but on the way back we stayed two or three nights, that was quite interesting.

Lee: How were you travelling?

Rothera: By dog sledge.

[Part 1 00:22:07]

Lee: So Horseshoe had it's own dog sledge at that time>

Rothera: We had our own team, yes.

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: Once we were at Blaiklock and the sea ice formed and when it got towards midwinter, the 21st June, we knew we could go back to Horseshoe and we manhailed, the three of us, the sledges back to Horseshoe where from then on we had dog sledges. I had a team, Peter had a team, Nigel did in the second year but not in the first year.

Lee: Tell me about your team.

Rothera: Well they were called the Trogs, apparently they were based on a cartoon in the Daily Mail, the leader was called Bodger and he was very good at leading and the other dog which sticks in my mind was one called Flook who was always in the team behind the leader, he could have been a leader too if the other one had somehow disappeared but they were a very good team.

[The Troggs were at Base W in 1957 being driven by Angus Erskine, John probably had this team during his second year]

Part 1 [00:23:20]

Lee: When you first arrived how did you come to terms or do your deal with the dogs?

Rothera: Quite easily, you had some training. Behind the Horseshoe was a bay called, small bay, called Back Bay, we called it Back Bay, I don't think they do now, and we would have training there and the commands we had to give to the dogs to go left and right or to stop or to start and so on. You only needed three to four commands and they were very good at it, they understood it because they'd been trained already by the people on base.

Lee: There was always a slight hiatus when the handler, the human being in that team is changed over so when you arrived you were a stranger.

Rothera: Ah yes. I've no idea who had that team before because, remember, the previous year there'd been very poor ice and they hadn't been able to sledge at all really. I would imagine those dogs, except perhaps in Back Bay, had been on the base the whole year.

Lee: They were itching to go were they?

Rothera: Oh I think so, yes, yes.

Part 1 [00:24:23]

Lee: Blaiklock point is a very isolated spot in a very isolated world, I'm wondering how the three of you coped with being so far removed.

Rothera: Well I think we coped very well, yes. I mean it was isolated, we had radio contact of course with base. I remember Peter Gibbs had, and Nigel Proctor, they'd both been in Africa and they had been used to going of into the, shall we say, the wild areas so they were quite used to this kind of thing but not in a cold, snowy, icy place of course.

[Part 1 00:25:17]

Lee: How about you, how did you adjust?

Rothera: I was OK, I had been on field trips in this country through my Geography degrees and I had no problem at all with it.

Lee: Did you have any contact with the rest of the planet. You could radio back to Horseshoe but were you able to pick up the BBC or talk to people elsewhere?

Rothera: Well, we had a, in those days the radios you had to peddle to get contact or was it like that, I think it was that, anyway whatever it was it was quite a business and all you really needed to do was contact your base or they contacted us at specific times already identified beforehand and you got quite fed up with all this winding things so as soon as anything had been said that needed to be said you would like to stop using it.

Lee: I've heard it said that it is impossible to peddle and morse at the same time.

[Part 1 00:26.27]

Rothera: Yes. Well one would peddle and the other would morse, yes.

Lee: Just tell me a bit more about Blaiklock Point and Blaiklock refuge, you say it was a small hut but how well equipped was it?

Rothera: Well, it wasn't. It was basically a garden hut and we just had the basic primus stove and very basic equipment, all our cooking was done on primus stoves, there was nothing special about it, in fact you could say we were using the equipment in the hut which we were going to use on our field trips dragging the sledge or later with the dogs, there was nothing much else. I'm trying to think about the insulation, I can't remember much, there was some insulation but it could get quite cold. There was, I remember, we had an upper storey in it which was only about that far from the roof but with a ladder up and we kept food and things but it was warmer up there than it was down here until we thought 'Hold on a minute, the fumes from the primus stove and so on were collecting up there' in that area so we stopped sleeping up there.

[Part 1 00:27:58]

Lee: That was for fear of carbon monoxide?

Rothera: Well, I don't know at that time we knew much about carbon monoxide, I think it's just it was a bit unpleasant, the fumes.

Lee: Did you sense at the time you were doing something really unusual with your life?

Rothera: Oh yes. In those days yes. The fact you know, am I really here in the Antarctic, have I actually got here, yes, to me anyway.

Lee: And what was so important about mapping the land?

Rothera: Important?

Lee: Yes. Why bother to map the land?

Rothera: Well..

Lee: So let me ask you the impertinent question ??? [inaudible] I am just wondering if there was more than one reason for doing it.

Rothera: Well, I suppose really you see, this country, in it's colonial days, had been used to mapping everything which was colonial, East Africa, West Africa, the West Indies you name it.

[Part 1 00:29:00]

Lee: If it was pink.

Rothera: It was being mapped by the Directorate of Colonial Survey in those days and

of course Grahamland was claimed by this country so I suppose it had to be mapped because it was one of our, not an actual colony but a claimed area and as the Argentineans and Chileans were also claiming it also had bases down there, they were also doing surveying we clearly had to do that I think.

Lee: So surveying the land was another way of backing up your claim was it?

Rothera: Well I never actually heard it said but that was the impression we had, yes.

Lee; Did you recognise at the time that there was a political aspect to your presence>

[Part 1 00:29:47]

Rothera: Oh yes, we did because... well we knew why the other bases were there, the Argentineans and the Chileans. For example although we stayed with the Argentineans at General San Martin base it was quite obvious that one of the numbers on the base was a political agent from Buenos Aries and he was there to make sure that everything went according to the plan as it was understood in Buenos Aries. Yes it was very much and had the most unfortunate occurrence there one night we were there. They played this game of how old do you think he is and then they said to me 'How old do you think he is ' and this is the political man and I said ' mmm thirty two', he was twenty one and he didn't like it at all

Lee: ??? [inaudible] did his welcome differ from that of the rest of the Argentineans?

Rothera: He was a bit aloof, yes, that's how I'd describe it. He would participate in the meals and so on, he'd be there but you always got the impression that he was stood back from the others.

[Part 1 00:31:05]

Lee: Did you have to hand over a protest note?

Rothera: No. No we didn't. In fact the base leader was very welcoming indeed. He came quite clearly from, I would say, a very wealthy family in Argentina and they did I know have, somewhere out on the pampas, apart from some accommodation in Buenos Aries. A very pleasant chap.

Lee: And you got on well with the Argies did you?

Rothera: Yes, we did.

Lee; Were there any tricky moments in that first year, any scary incidents?

[Part 1 00:31:50]

Rothera: Well it was always said that when you went to the Antarctic for work, whether it's surveying, geology or whatever, you had to go for two years because the first year was spent learning how you do it and how you get through the Antarctic weather and so on. You had to acclimatise to it, you had to learn how to live through it but that's first year I don't remember anything scary really.

Lee: Were you doing any significant trips|?

Rothera: We started to do proper ..., yes we did, we were still working, although we went back to Horseshoe we did go back to Blaiklock and work from there as well so we were then sledging all around the fjords, Bourgois, Bigourdan, Laubeuf Fjord and eventually over to Adelaide Island.

[Part 1 00:32:55]

Lee: Did all those expeditions go smoothly?

Rothera: Well one of mine didn't going over the glacier, the Heim yes, when some of the dogs went down, yes.

Lee: Oh yes, tell me the story please John.

Rothera: Well, we were going to Base W, this is the second year. I and two others were sledging to W and going up the Heim glacier the second day, suddenly, my dog team, the middle part fell into the crevasse. Fortunately the leading dog and Flook and so on were still on that side and stayed there but three or four fell down but only two we managed to get out the next morning because it was getting dark and the next day there was a blizzard, we couldn't do anything. It was only the following day that one of our number went down and got the two remaining dogs out that were still alive.

[Part 1 00:34:07]

Lee; So some had died in the process.?

Rothera: We don't...there was no sign of them.

Lee; You never saw them again.

Rothera: Because of the blizzard a lot of snow had gone into the crevasse.

[Part 1 00:34:20]

Lee: So the decision to delay the rescue, was that, I suppose you had to do that, you couldn't rescue them?

Rothera: Yes, there was no way we could do anything. I think my memory is correct here but as I was talking to you I began to wonder was there a whole day or not, I'm not sure. I could check my diary.

Lee: There was certainly a delay was there before you could go down.

Rothera: There was a delay, yes, because overnight it was getting dark when this happened and there was nothing much we could do.

Lee: You describe it in your notes as an explosion of snow.

Rothera: Yes

Lee: So the snow bridge collapsing I guess was it?

Rothera: It was a bridge, a snow bridge across a crevasse which was quite wide, we didn't realise it was there even from looking at the aerial photographs, we had aerial

photographs done by Huntings and we used to look to see if there were crevasses, we never saw this one: and the thing is once there's a bridge over with snow there's a difference in temperature between above and below. The sledge went, caused something to happen and that's why it blew up.

[Part 1 00:35:32]

Lee: So were you able to reassemble the Trogs after the loss of a couple of dogs.

Rothera: Yes, yes. We were down to seven dogs from nine dogs.

Lee: Huntings of course were doing lots of aerial photography at that point weren't they?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: So in a way , they were already overtaking you in terms of the survey work that could be done/

Rothera: Yes, probably.

Lee: Were you aware of that at the time do you think?

Rothera: What, the aerial photos?

Lee: Were you aware of the change, the imminent change in the way that surveying was going to be done?

Rothera: Well we knew the Navy were better equipped than we were and I think we were all using Hunting aerial photographs which had been taken, I think the previous year before we went down.

[Part 1 00:36:28]

Lee: So it was part of your job to actually plot those on the ground?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: Tie them in.

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: So you were in the field with the aerial photographs?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: Weren't they largely white?

[Part 1 00:36:41]

Rothera: No. This is the thing about the Antarctic, so many people when you got back thought 'Oh it's just snow and ice'. No, not in Grahamland, a tremendous of rock was exposed and there's a lot more exposed today, I understand, much more. But there were quite a lot of rock points, for example at Rothera Point we built a trig. point because

there was a lot of rock exposed and also it rose up to quite a nice height and the big cairn we built on the top could be identified from other points around from miles away.

Rothera: Is this the cairn that you left the note in?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: This is a note from Alan Wright who followed you on.
'At Rothera Point there is an unusual circular hollow cairn apparently built by John Rothera and Peter Gibbs when they surveyed the point' A year or more later Alan Wright was part of a survey team based out of Adelaide Island, they returned to the Rothera Point as part of the survey they were doing, to investigate linking Marguerite Bay bases, found the cairn, and inside it a cocoa tin with a note from John and Peter.

[Part 1 00:37:58]

Rothera: Mmmm, yes.

Lee: Now what was the cause behind that?

Rothera: Well I don't know. I understand that note was on display in the first base hut at Rothera Point, at that time anyway. That Jim Callis told me that when he came once and we talked about the Antarctic.

Lee: But why did you, what did you say and why did you say it?

Rothera: Well I think we said some rather silly things about, probably some creatures we invented called, I think they were Krodat's or something.

Lee: Krodat's?

Rothera: Mmm, K-R-O-D-A-T-S, I think that was the name but we... it might have originated when we were at Blaiklock Island and we were going around and 'Oh well, the Krodat's live up there' We invented these peculiar people, no idea what they looked like. And I think there was something like that, I can't remember the rest of it.

Lee: So you were leaving a note for them were you?

[Part 1 00:39:01]

Rothera: Yes. Well no, no, it was for anybody who came and obviously they did come, somebody did come and get it.

Lee: Alan Wright, the following year.

Rothera: Where was he coming from before he...

Lee: I'll have to look it up John, he didn't say, but he was the following year's survey team anyway..

Rothera: Mmm

Lee: So it wasn't a practical note with instructions or advice?

Rothera: Oh no. No,no,no. I don't think so

Lee: The cairn was unusual and circular, is that standard design?

Rothera: Well, I think we'd regard it as just a...I think the point there was there was so much loose rock that we could build a really decent cairn, in many places there wasn't much material and this is why, to begin, in some places anyway, you had to revert to building snow cairns which we knew were not going to last but you always put your black flag on top and we were able, because we could be sure to do it, relatively short period of time in those particular areas, to use those snow cairns before they disintegrated with the wind or a bit of melt in the summer and so on. But with a rock cairn you knew it was there for good unless somebody came along and dismantled it.

Lee: Everyone's referring this point as being Rothera Point but what were you calling it at that time?

[Part 1 00:40:25]

Rothera: I don't think we did, no. The other point thing about Rothera Point was it was when we had that unfortunate business of loosing three men from Horseshoe, Rothera Point was where we all sledged to at one point before we went further south into the bay or down to Avian Island where the Argentinean rescue chap was. Because we knew it was a very good rocky area where there was plenty of space to erect the tents and so on and it was true that we all used to work from there and then we came back there when we had done our effort at trying to find them.

Lee: So it didn't have a name at that point?

Rothera: Not to my knowledge, no.

Lee: Can we talk a bit about the loss of Black, Statham and Stride from Horseshoe, I guess you knew them?

Rothera: I knew David Statham because he was on the Biscoe when I went down. I got to know him quite well. He was, I believe, the cousin of Brian Statham, the Lancashire fast bowler.

[Part 1 00:41:45]

Lee: I didn't know that.

Rothera: Well I'm not absolutely certain but I'm pretty sure I was told that, he didn't tell me that.

Lee: Lancashire and England.

Rothera: And England yes, very much so. I didn't really know Geoff Stride. I'd spoken to him but didn't know him. I knew Stan Black a bit but not for long, it was only on the ship really because when we went down they got off at different bases and then I went further south but of course, when the Biscoe came in at the end middle year, in between the two years, they were coming on to Horseshoe so I met them again then.

Lee: What was the first news you had that there was a problem.

Rothera: We were ??? [inaudible] sledging up the northern end of Laubeuf Fjord and we had a radio sched. at a certain time and when we got onto Base Y, Horseshoe, they were talking to somebody else about the fact that these three men had left Horseshoe two days before and there'd been no sign of them and they had note.. they had identified the fact the sea ice had gone out from the southern end of , well Laubeuf Fjord I suppose. We broke into the sched. and asked for more information and then we said we would search what we could of the southern end of Laubeuf Fjord.

[Part 1 00:43:22]

Lee4: And who went out and did the search?

Rothera: Well we searched and then of course we regrouped at Horseshoe. Peter Gibbs and people came up and Henry Wyatt came up from Base E, Stonington, and they followed us but we got to the Avian Island before they did, two separate parties.

Lee: Who's we John, you and.. ?

Rothera: Well me, Nigel Proctor and I think it was a chap called Hillson, Hillson I think and we got to Avian Island before and we out to the Dion Islands the next day. No sign of course of them anywhere, there was plenty of sea ice around then because time had gone on from the initial information that they'd gone missing. Then the next day I think Peter Gibbs and Henry Wyatt arrived or John Paisley, yes, and they went out there into the bay and they went to the Dions again and to the Faure Islands and I think somewhere else too, some rock or other but there was no sign of anybody.

[Part 1 00:44:46]

Lee: Were you aware at that time that FIDS HQ had actually forbidden there to be any rescue attempt?

Rothera: Forbidden?

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: Sorry, forbidden?

Lee: When Peter Gibbs was in touch with FIDS HQ in London about rescue attempts or searching parties he was advised not to conduct any.

Rothera: No, I didn't know, no I didn't.

Lee: Because he'd just ignored them basically and...

Rothera: Yes, well he would, yes he would.

Lee: What was morale like at that time because I guess you realised you were fighting a loosing battle

Rothera: Well, I think we did because we could see that when we first learnt of what the problem was and when we sledged south down Laubeuf, we could see that the sea ice had gone out too and we thought 'Oh God if it's camped on the sea ice they would have had it' there's no way, then of course, this business of the dogs turning up one by one.

[Part 1 00:45:51]

Lee How do you mean?

Rothera: Well the dogs they'd had, most of them turned up at Base Y individually over the next few weeks and the Argentinians down at their base informed our base that there were two or three of our dogs running round their particular location. So we thought, well those dogs didn't just bite themselves off the traces, somebody cut them loose at the last moment, they must have done.

Lee: So although we don't know what happened, the inference is that the three men realised that they weren't going to make it back and they cut the dogs free.

[Part 1 00:46:37]

Rothera: I think that's what we all thought, yes.

Lee: On the grounds that a dog might get back but a human being wouldn't

Rothera: The dogs, I would think, because they are low, four legs, they could survive on a large ice floe, that's just my...all what I always thought. Whereas the men on two legs it was very difficult and very unsteady I would think but we don't know really, we just don't know.

Lee: So was the ice ever blown back in again or were the dogs coming back because the wind had changed.?

Rothera: It must have blown in again, the ice floes must have done. They didn't all come back but most of them did.

Lee: So had they swum, was it evident whether they'd swum?

Rothera: I don't....

Lee: Don't know.

Rothera: I doubt it, I was never aware of anybody suggesting that the dogs had been in the water, they may have done, and of course the dogs that survived, lower temperatures and worse conditions than the human beings would.

Lee: So did it change anything for what you thought or the practises you followed?

[Part 1 00:47:50]

Rothera: Well, I think then it was always understood that we don't camp on sea ice again until of course you suddenly realise one day that you were camping on sea ice. But after that sea ice went out and it reformed it really formed in a very incredible way, it was really thick ice that year and the year after, very thick ice and I think we all, as you do in the Antarctic, you get a bit blasé. You start doing things which afterwards you think mmm why did did we really do that, should we have done that. Like coming down from a cairn one day in Hanusse Bay with two others we were coming down and we knew at the end of the ice floe was an ice cliff but we came back down a very slippery area I knew then we curved round to go down to what we could get onto the

sea ice and I thought afterwards we were a bit stupid, if we had slipped we would have gone straight over the ice cliff and I suppose on the sea ice, several times, I found myself on ice, especially near the land, the coves where it was a bit thin for some reason, there may have been a current or something and you have to keep your eyes open but you assume, I think, all the time Oh everything's going to be fine.

[Part 1 00:49:23]

Lee: Did you never fear for your life in your time?

Rothera: No ,I didn't, no, no.

Lee: Tell me about Peter Gibbs, what sort of man ...

Rothera: About?

Lee: Peter Gibbs what sort of man is he?

Rothera: Oh now this is where I must be careful isn't it? Well, I mean he was .. he was quite an interesting person really. He was very, I think,....he knew a lot about Africa and he talked about it a lot but he would sing Afrikaans songs, I think his father was the Dean of Capetown at one time, I think, but he'd been out and learnt how to survive in the backlands or whatever, the outback, that sounds a bit Australian, but he'd learnt by going out with people who told him how to survive in these conditions.

[Part 1 00:50:28]

Lee: And was he transferring that experience to Antarctica?

Rothera: I think so, yes. He could, well both Nigel and I thought we had to rein him back at times, like Peter would think, say, Oh I think we'll build a cairn there, and we would look and it was really impossible. So we would have to put our feet down once or twice, we really did.

Lee: OK.. He struck me as a very authoratitive, military man?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: Beautifully spoken.

Rothera: Yes, I don't think he had any military experience though, did he?

Lee: No.

Rothera: Not to my knowledge he didn't, no. Oh he was very much in command, yes.

Lee: Was he fair?

Rothera: Oh I think so. I got on quite well with him.

[Part 1 00:51:22]

Lee: Did the whole base get on well together?

Rothera: What, at which base?

Lee: Horseshoe initially and then second year you were elsewhere weren't you at Detaille?

Rothera: Yes I was at Base W, he went down to Base E. the last year, until all this business with finding, trying to locate the missing men came up and then we were all back really centred on Horseshoe. Sorry, I've forgotten the question.

Lee: So have I.

Rothera: Something about what was the ??? [inaudible] on the base.

Lee: Was Horseshoe generally a harmonious base?

Rothera: I think so, yes.

Lee: And is the same true of Detaille the following year?

Rothera: I don't know.

Lee: Were you not at Detaille?

Rothera: Oh Detaille, yes it was OK, yes. I can't remember much about Detaille actually.

Lee: That was your second year wasn't it?

Rothera: It was but I didn't get there until late.

Lee: Why not?

Rothera: Because we were still surveying down from the refuge hut at Blaiklock and it was only later in the year that we went back to W but we did quite a lot of sledging once we got to W, in fact probably more sledging in Hanusse Bay for quite a while than we did originally in the first year in the Horseshoe area.

[Part 1 00:52:44]

Lee: And was this to do with surveying or just more jollies?

Rothera: Ah it was surveying really, yes.

Lee: So, effectively, you were moving down to Detaille because you'd finished the work in the Horseshoe area?

Rothera: Basically yes. Well we knew work needed to be done around Detaille. A chap called Bryan Foote, who was the base leader, he was a surveyor, I think he was a surveyor. I can't remember him at the Directorate of Overseas Surveys but I think he was, he certainly did some surveying in Hanusse Bay.

Lee: Was life quite different at Detaille compared to your first year?

Rothera: Yes, very much, I think really, most people in the British Antarctic Survey

wanted to be in the Marguerite Bay area, there's no doubt about that. People who were further north in the first year like Denis ??? [inaudible] and so on were very keen to get down to Marguerite Bay because it was, well, it was more what I think what they expected to find when they went to the Antarctic, but if you were at Deception and so on you weren't going to be sledging for hundreds of miles or whatever because there was no prospect of that. Base W, I can't really remember too much about it, I wasn't really there that long.

[Part 1 00:54:16]

Lee: Did you not spend some time at Danco Island as well?

Rothera: No.

Lee: No?

Rothera: No.

Lee: Can I ask you a bit more about the search for the three men?

Rothera: Yes, Yes.

Lee: Where did you start off from and what kind of territory were you covering?

Rothera: Well, we were out in Laubeuf Fjord when we heard about this so we then went south down Laubeuf Fjord towards the open sea when we knew what happened in Marguerite Bay and we searched what we could around that area but found nothing but then we went back to Blaiklock and then down to Horseshoe where things were being organised, then we all came back again and the sea ice had frozen so we knew we could then get further south into the bay and that's when we went to what is now Rothera Point and then to Avian Island, the Argentinean refuge, and sledged out to the Dions and so on.

Lee: Let's take a break John and we'll pick up this....

Rothera: Yes, would you like some more tea?

Lee: Please.

[Part 1 00:55:22]

This is John Rothera, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 31st of January 2013.
BAS Archives Reference AD6/24/1/210/1

John Rothera, Part 2

Lee: Most of your surveying you were using theodolites but did the Tellurometer come in towards the end of your time and if so, was it a great advance.

Rothera: It was never used as far as I know by any FIDS surveyor in my day in that time, 1958 or 56 to 59, no I don't remember but I do remember that the Royal Navy were using them.

Lee: And why were they so much better than what you have?

Rothera: Well, I think, in those days, that the FIDS was really run on a shoestring, it really was, whereas the Royal Navy of course would be well equipped and I think that's it really.

[Part 2 00:01:00]

Lee: So they were available but the FIDS couldn't afford them?

Rothera: Oh they must have been available, yes.

Lee: Were they a struggle, theodolites?

Rothera: I think you've got to know how to use them, but you know, when you put them up on the tripod and so on you've got to level everything beautifully and then it's pretty cold working the actual knobs and so on especially if you are doing star observations at night and it's bitterly cold then, you did have silk gloves but even they were too much really, they got in the way of the very fine manipulation you had to do on the wheels and so on.

Lee: So you'd take these theodolites out on your sledging trips presumably?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: I've been asked to ask you if there was a particular memorable sledging trip, one that went further, higher, farther.

Rothera: Well,

Lee: One you are proud of particularly?

[Part 2 00:02:00]

Rothera: I think that one thing which was interesting was getting to the northern end of Laubeuf Fjord, a place called The Gullet I think it was called and as far as I know only, before our time, only one lot of people had managed to sledge through there. It was connecting Hanusse Bay to the north, the Base W area, to Marguerite bay to the south through this very narrow gap on the east side of Adelaide Island and when we went, when I was out there, we were able to sledge right into the gullet, it got a bit slushy but we could, if we'd had the time and inclination, have gone right through to Base W that way which was quite remarkable. The problem was, I think, caused with the pressures of the sea to the north and the sea to the south in this very narrow gap which made it, even in good ice years, very difficult to get through.

[Part 2 00:03:13]

Lee: It was all crumpled up was it?

Rothera: Yes, and very slushy indeed, you find your feet going through the ice.

Lee: When you lost those dogs down the crevasse were you then reduced to a seven dog team for the rest of the season?

Rothera: No...I can't remember.

Lee: O.K.

Rothera: There may have been dogs we were on the way to W and I've got a feeling we had two replacement dogs at W but I can't quite recall that.

Lee: You don't remember that the sledging or surveying programmes were affected by the loss of the dogs?

Rothera: They weren't at all, no.

Lee: O.K. Tell me about this close shave with the helicopter.

[Part 2 00:03:54]

Rothera: Oh yes.

Lee: Thank you.

Rothera: That was... The helicopter came from San Martin, well actually it came from an Argentinean icebreaker and landed at our place.

Lee: At Horseshoe?

Rothera: At Horseshoe ,on Back Bay on the ice and they were going back to the icebreaker and then it began to fly from the icebreaker to the General San Martin base and they said one person could go with them and we drew lots, Peter Gibbs drew the lot. He got back to the ship successfully and got off on the ship, on the way, when the helicopter was flying from the ship to the base, the engine stopped, well something went wrong and it went straight into the water and quite a number of them were drowned. But some survived, two or three I believe.

[Part 2 00:04:59]

Lee: It's a chilling reminder isn't it?

Rothera: Oh yes, it is. The Argen..., I must be careful here, the Argentinean equipment and stuff, they were that superstitious people we knew that. If they were going up onto the plateau from their base, which was not far north of Stonington Island, they were very superstitious about their chances of getting back. They set off in a frame of mind which wasn't really conducive to having a successful sledging trip. They expected something awful to happen every time.

Lee: You mean they were pessimistic?

Rothera: Sorry, they were pessimistic, yes, very pessimistic people when it came to sledging.

Lee: How odd.

[Part 2 00:05:52]

Rothera: In fact, when I and my sledging partner, I can't remember who, were at San Martin on the way back to Horseshoe for Christmas, when we left they didn't want us to leave, wanted to stay another night but we said 'Look it's Christmas Eve tomorrow, we've got to get back' and they came with us with a kind of a tank with caterpillars all on the sea ice, halfway to Horseshoe, or a third of the way to Horseshoe before we all shook hands and they went off. Well, I gather, not long after that, that machine went through the ice and was lost forever.

Lee: Once one of the FIDS said to me the big difference between the FIDS and the Argentineans was that the FIDS wanted to be in the Antarctic and the Argentineans didn't.

[Part 2 00:06:48]

Rothera: Yes, that could be true, yes.

Lee: You sensed that did you?

Rothera: Well there was certainly a difference of the attitude, yes, yes

Lee: But they were very hospitable as well I'm told.

Rothera: Very hospitable indeed. One of the good things you knew about going to their base was that they had steak, lots of steak, which was kept, if I recall it correctly, in an ice cave because their base was actually connected to the mainland, as Stonington was, by ice and snow and of the cave there where they kept the steak and we knew that if we went there we'd get steak. Not exactly fresh but it was frozen well, it was a darned sight better than what we got on our bases. Anything we had was dried or either tinned.

[Part 2 00:07:44]

Lee: And red wine?

Rothera: I can't remember that.

Lee: You don't. Some bases had it, some others didn't I gather.

Rothera: I can't remember red wine, no. I know on our base, oddly enough, there was always plenty of drink or not too much, at Christmas and Midwinter there was plenty of drink and there was drink throughout the year but not many of the people at Horseshoe drank very much, but I didn't really. I don't remember anybody ever drinking too much. Several of us smoked, I did in those days, because there was an enormous amount of cigarettes, there really was, Peter Gibbs smoked I remember and ... but because there were so many cigarettes sometime you'd find yourself smoking two at once, I don't mean in your mouth but you'd lit one and put it on an ashtray and without thinking you got another one out of the tin, they were these round tins, Players, I don't know whether you can remember them Chris, all in round tins with a lid on. But some of us smoked a bit too much because a lot of people didn't smoke at all.

[Part 2 00:09:07]

Lee: How would you relax, what would you do for recreation?

Rothera: We would when we were at Blaiklock, before the sea ice formed, we'd take our skis up the slope behind the refuge hut and we'd try and ski down but of course it was a long way back up so you didn't do it more than, say, about twice. If we'd had a ski lift it would have been much better. Also most people read a lot, that's the main thing I think. On base, well sometimes you had to do the cooking of course but fortunately I didn't because I wasn't really on base that much. So we existed basically on the dog... not dog food, the iron rations in the boxes, pemmican, it was horrible stuff. The second year we got this meat loaf stuff which was much better, much better. Otherwise there was always something happening, the dogs always needed looking after, as I say, you had to feed the dogs and sometimes it was necessary to go and get seal to get the seal meat and so on, always something happening.

[Part 2 00:10:33]

Lee: Were you also dealing with your survey results when you got back to base, were you, having got the fieldwork done, in your notebooks or whatever it was. Tell me first of all how did you record your measurements in the field.

Rothera: Well we recorded them in the survey books but the work actually of compiling the results from those figures we did not do until we got back to England to the Director of.. Directorate of, I think it was then Overseas Surveys, I can't quite remember when the name changed, but we all went to Tolworth and worked there for a year, nearly a year anyway.

[part 2 00:11:12]

Lee: So you were working on your own results, you weren't passing....

Rothera: Yes, nobody else's, no.

Lee: You weren't handing them over. I can just imagine, probably my imagination running riot, there you are back in jolly old England going through your notebooks and (finger snap) Missed one.

Rothera: Oh yes, it's possible, yes. But we did have a lady there who was brilliant at ... we had these German machines where you pushed levers down and so on, I can't remember what they called them, [Brunsviga calculators] but it was quite a performance using those but she always took the results from us that we'd worked on to begin with and she worked on them again some where down in the Directorate.

[Part 2 00:11:55]

Lee: Comptometer ?

Rothera: It might be.

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: It was a black, very black and lots of little levers.

Lee: Like an adding machine.

Rothera: Yes that's right, it was.

Lee: So you weren't drawing maps yourself?

Rothera: No, we weren't. They were going to be drawn by the cartographers at the Directorate.

Lee: Were you looking at drafts of those maps to comment on them?

Rothera: No, I don't think so.

Lee: So the first you knew was when the published map was released.

Rothera: Well, the first, the first time, no they would send me a map now and again.

Lee: So this was a thank you.

Rothera: Well I suppose, they just arrived. Over the years several maps arrived and then a map would arrive. When they put the name Rothera on the point they sent me a map of that with the name on it. I keep meaning to go to Samford's, is it Samford's, yes, in Longacre the map people to see what the latest circulation is of the mapping because they must be quite brilliant now, the maps.

[Part 2 00:13:03]

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: Compared to our day.

Lee: Satellites help enormously ??? [inaudible]

Rothera: Oh yes, yes.

Rothera: You didn't sense, I hope we didn't come in touch with this before, you didn't sense that your methods would soon become redundant with the advent of satellite?

Rothera: Not in those days.

Lee: Not as early as that.

Rothera: I don't think we'd really got to the stage of satellites in any big way then, no. I think today, well I don't know but I'm glad I went there when I did rather than nowadays.

Lee: Why is that?

Rothera: Well it was more of an expedition shall we say, whereas now, I think I made the point, you can fly in and out of Rothera at will. In our day, when the ship went, on the last supplies, nine months and no outside contact at all. And of course in those days too, I think it was a lot more Antarctic than it is now because Jim Fellowes told me, when he came here, that the Jones Ice Shelf, we used to get from Blaiklock to the mainland, had disappeared. In fact, when he went on this ship they actually sailed round Blaiklock Island which I thought 'Mmmm, not very happy about that.'

[Part 2 00:14:20}

Lee: Yes, it does seem a reversal at present doesn't it, that trend.?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: So tell me then about the process by which this piece of land got called by your name, what was your story?

[Part 2 00:14:39]

Rothera: I,... well, in fact I did work. After we got back to England, myself and Peter Gibbs, we went for two or three weeks to the research department of the Foreign Office in Stamford Street on the South Bank. In those days it wasn't like it is now, South Bank, vastly different but I always remember being there. We'd been there a few days and every morning and every afternoon the lady would come with the tea trolley down this long corridor. A very basic building and some people would come out of their rooms and men in woolly cardigans and so on and I always remember one day, I'd never thought before of looking at the doors of where they came from I saw this one was Sir somebody so and so and I thought, My goodness, they really don't look like they should do, quite interesting. Now the point was we were working looking at place names. There was a chap called Brian Roberts, I remember him very clearly, Brian Roberts. He was in charge of the British part of the place names programme and I remember every name that was then put onto a map had to be agreed internationally. I didn't realise, nobody ever told me my name was going to be on that point until the map came through the post with a little note saying this is the Rothera Point. Nobody had ever approached me at all. But it was the policy, I knew, for all surveyors and geologists to have their name, or they tried to have their names, the authorities, to put their names somewhere on the map.

[Part 2 00:16:38]

Lee: As a kind of memento really.

Rothera: Yes, mmm. In the area where you were working not a thousand miles away or a hundred miles away but in the area where you were actually doing the work.

Lee; So there was some inevitability that your name would appear somewhere in the Antarctic.

Rothera: Yes, I suppose so although by the time it came here I'd forgotten all about that kind of thing.

Lee: So it was years later was it?

Rothera: Mmmm

Lee: I see. So then it was sheer coincidence that that site was chosen for the new base.

[Part 2 00:17:10]

Rothera: Oh yes, very much. I believe the base was supposed to be down at Alexander Land but because of the ice conditions they didn't get in so they settled on what was

then Rothera Point, although it was a very good location, as we had found in the ... at the time we were there, there was so much rocky area and the extent of it that you could have built a large base quite easily but it never entered our heads there'd be a runway there, my goodness !

Lee: I've been asked to ask you what it's like to have an Antarctic base named after you.

Rothera: Well, it's like sometimes the 'phone rings and said "Put the television on, your, your base is on the television]" and that's when I say "But it isn't actually my base, it's only by chance they put the base at Rothera Point" Whether, I don't know, I mean they needn't have called it Rothera base need they?

[Part 2 00:18:11]

Lee: No.

Rothera: They could have, it could have been Sir Vivian Fuchs base or whatever. I don't understand how that happened or who made the decision in the end.

Lee Yes, an interesting thought isn't it? I suppose calling it after the piece of land that had already been named was the coward's way out, wasn't it?

Rothera: Well, it was an easy way yes.

Lee: Yes, there's no argument.

Rothera: No.

Lee: (unintelligible) of the points made by BAS today, it's a jolly good job you weren't called Pratt or Smellie.

Rothera: Yes, yes. I think then, probably, it would have been Sir Vivian Fuchs or something like that.

Lee: So when did you begin to discover that they were going to actually build a base there, on Rothera Point?

Rothera: I didn't know until they'd done it.

Lee: Oh really?

[Part 2 00:18:56]

Rothera: I'd no idea, no. The thing is of course, once you leave the organisation, gradually it recedes into the background and I got very much involved in town and country planning and most people in planning they get immersed in it in the end and they love doing it.

Lee: Just before we move on to your later career, your final connection was concerning the Antarctic place names committee which you were connected with when you were at the research Department of the Foreign Office, is that correct?

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: So what places, what names do you remember being awarded in your period there?

Rothera: Oh I don't think we were awarding names, I think we were just considering with Brian Roberts, and he had an assistant, lady assistant from there, she came from the Channel Islands, she never stopped smoking, I always remember that, chain smoker. But we were only looking at maps and we were not in any way deciding that this name should go here and that should go there.

[Part 2 00:20:07]

Lee: Let's look at what happened next with you because having done those two and a half to three years in the Antarctic everyday life beckoned again didn't it, how ... when you were leaving the Antarctic were you glad to get out or sorry to leave.

Rothera: Well curiously enough, at the end of the two years, in fact there were two and a quarter years, the ships were finding it difficult, or our ships were finding it difficult to get to relieve our base because we were at Stonington again, at Horseshoe, and there was a possibility that we weren't going to have a relief that year.

Lee: Oh right.

Rothera: But then we heard Ah, they'd got an American icebreaker, then we heard they'd got three American icebreakers and then it was three and sure enough three turned up and we were taken out by helicopter to the ice edge, American helicopter and the Americans rescued us. Well we were on the Biscoe but we wouldn't have been out without the Americans and there was a feeling of 'If they don't come, they don't come'

[Part 2 00:21:22]

Lee: You were fairly sanguine about that?

Rothera: Mmm. Most people were.

Lee: An extra winter.

Rothera: Nobody was desperate to get out.

Lee: So were you sorry to leave.

Rothera: In a way I was but I thought two years is long enough really but it was sad to think possibly you'd never see that area again. In those days you weren't getting too many ships going down or very little.

[Part 2 00:21:51]

Lee: Have you been back since?

Rothera: No, I haven't, no.

Lee: What happened when you got back then, back to Blighty?

Rothera: Well we were a year, I was a year at the Directorate of Overseas Survey or I think it may have still been Colonial Survey and then I went into Town and Country planning. Started in Dorset at the Dorset County Council in Dorchester but after a few years moved here.

Lee: To Basingstoke ?

Rothera: Yes, to the, what was then called the Basingstoke Development Group, it was a special group put together of planners, architects, surveyors and other people and we were asked, our mission in life was to facilitate the expansion of Basingstoke to take London overspill both in housing and in factories and in office blocks and so on and that was a very interesting period because there was loads of money for doing it, it mostly came from the Government and the then London County Council. So overnight roads would suddenly appear offices and such would go up and it was very interesting.

[Part 2 00:23:03]

Lee: How did it compare to humping your theodolite up a snowy hill?

Rothera: Totally different, very different.

Lee: So on a .. you were sitting in your office on a winter's day and the snow would start outside were you transported back to...

Rothera: You were always , yes the snow does make you think of that, well it does me anyway, yes. I love snow, I always have done. Even when I was a schoolboy I would trudge miles to get to school, through thick snow to get to school basically to be out in the snow.

Lee: Oh right.

Rothera: Yes.

Lee: Did you find yourself using anything you'd gained or experienced or learnt in your Antarctic years in your later personal life, were there skills or abilities that you'd picked up that came in handy later on?

[Part 2 00:23:55]

Rothera: Mmm. I may have picked up a bit of diplomacy you are living in a, on a base with, there were only nine of us that first year. I remember once there should have been ten but somebody was, who should have been there was taken back to Britain, I think there was some problem, it could have been a mental problem, I can't remember.

Lee: They did sometimes turn people round at Stanley.

Rothera: Yes.

Lee Yes.

Rothera: Yes. Mmm. We didn't really have any pro... most people were quite easy going, very easy going., microphone, but I think we did have one person who could, not be awkward, but had definite views. He had the definite view of course that we should

not kill seals to provide dog food, it was totally wrong and made his view very well known and
I think he went out with the rifle, our rifle and when he came back the rifle was broken so nobody could out and shoot a seal from then onwards.

[Part 2 00:25:12]

Lee: Right, that's interesting.

Rothera: Mmm, it is interesting.

Lee: Would that person, let's not name him, would he be kind of sent to Coventry by the rest of the base?

Rothera: No, no not at all. No.

Lee: So they embraced...

Rothera: There was talk about 'Oh you know, what does he think he's playing at' and so on but no, he wasn't sent to Coventry. Well not certainly, not as far as I know.

Lee: So his idiosyncrasy, his idiosyncrasy, is that the right word, yes, was embraced rather than rejected.

Rothera: Yes, mmm yes.

Lee: Yes. How interesting.

Rothera: Yes. Otherwise I don't remember anybody being difficult at all. I suppose it's because of the selection procedure, I'm pretty certain about that.

Lee: You think people were sussed out or psyched out?

Rothera: Yes, definitely, before they got there, before they left England.

Lee: Yes.

Rothera: Basically, yes.

Lee: So was it a fairly smooth career then?

[Part 2 00:26:17]

Rothera: It was really, I ended up as head of forward planning and design here at the Basingstoke Council. They were still expanding the town enormously and still are actually, I'm still involved, not there but I can't stop being the chairman of the Kempshott Resident's Association, I tried desperately to unload it but nobody else will do it but, because of my planning background, I get caught up in all the planning things and I've spent hours in the last few months on certain proposals at the northern end of Kempshott and all to the west here, a big problem with land purchased by the Hampshire and Basingstoke jointly to develop, and then they said 'Oh, we're not going to build on that' and the landowner, who's already made a mint through selling the freehold, took them a high court last year and he won and they are now having to build thousands of house west of Basingstoke. The council were accused of acting

unlawfully and irrationally, which they were of course. This caused a lot of problems, in the council particularly.

Lee: Life was so much simpler, wasn't it, on Blaiklock Island?

Rothera: Oh it was, yes, it was yes.

Lee: Final question Jonathan, how do you rate those Antarctic years in your life?

[Part 2 00:27:54]

Rothera: Well I would say very highly, yes, yes. You can never forget what you experienced and what you saw and so on and I think, also, I knew I was going to the Antarctic I was taken by surprise when I got there, how beautiful it was really and the colours, the blues and the, oh, the amazing purples in the ice and the icebergs and so on. You tend to think 'Oh it's just white and black ' but it isn't, there's a tremendous of colour in the Antarctic, and everything I think, always stuck in my mind. In fact, when I came to the interview at the development group here, to get the job, one of the questions was " What's your biggest impression then of the Antarctic ?" and I'd never thought of that and I thought for a second then I said " Silence "

Lee: Silence?

Rothera: Silence. At night, if you're outside at night in the Antarctic on a calm night, especially if there's a moon and so on, absolutely so quiet it's unbelievable.

Lee: Do you think that your Antarctic experience counted for anything at the interviews for jobs in this country?

Rothera: It may have helped with my first job in Dorchester but afterwards I don't think so. I think you find there are people who will think ' Gosh, you've been to the Antarctic' and so on and others couldn't care less about the Antarctic.

Lee: I think, of Neil Armstrong at times like this, when he stepped on the Moon and he came back knowing that nothing could ever match that. I wonder whether you've kind of spent the rest of your life slightly in the shadow of that achievement?

Rothera: Mmmm. It could be to a certain extent but I think because I was so immersed in what I was doing in this country that really for most of it you never thought about it. You would always go back to the Antarctic in your mind for some reason or other but I wasn't going to work every day thinking ' Oh I wish I was sledging up Bourgeois Fjord ' and so on.No,no.

Lee: It's been a real pleasure John, thank you very much.

Rothera: Well, thank you very much indeed.

[Part 2 00:30:27} [End]

Notable points:

Part 1	00: 05: 00	The name of Rothera
	00:07:38	First impressions of the Falklands
	00:08:12	Duke of Edingurgh's world tour
	00:26:27	Blaiklock refuge described.
	00:29:47	Argentinean attitudes
	00:32:55	Dogs lost on Heim Glacier
	00:41:45	The search for themissing men
Part 2	00:03:54	Argentinean helicopter crash
	00:14:39	Place names

