

MIKE PAYNE

Edited transcript of the interview of Mike Payne recorded at the BAS Club reunion at Alnwick on the 22nd of June 2013. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/227. Transcribed by Allan Wearden on 19th March, 2015.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Mike Payne interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 22nd of June 2013

Payne: Mike Payne born 22nd of August 1948 at Alton in Hampshire.

[0:00:16] Lee: So how old are you now?

Payne: 64 coming up for 65.

[0:00:22] Lee: Would you say your father was an educated man?

Payne: Yes.

[0:00:24] Lee: Tell me about him?

Payne: He was at Cambridge when the war broke out, and broke off his University career and in fact never went back! I suppose he would be called an intellectual he did engineering and he did chemistry, a year's chemistry in Germany before the war then came back to Cambridge and was very with (?) the Germans. And after the war as I say, he didn't go back to what he was doing he met my mother in the course of the war and they married soon after, they bought a farm and went into farming and that's how they spent the rest of their lives.

[0:01:22] Lee: So he was an intellectual farmer then?

Payne: Yeah, I think he was more an intellectual than a farmer at the end of the day, yes I don't think his heart was in really in the farming when it came to it!

[0:01:32] Lee: So why did he go into it, do you know?

Payne: I think it seemed attractive at the time, probably my, I don't know I speculate on the dynamics between the two of them. [Lee: Right] It's something my wife and I sometimes discuss!

[0:01:51] Lee: So you were also therefore pretty much destined for some kind of intellectual lifestyle were you, academic pursuit?

Payne: Well, like my father I went to, as your research will tell you, went to a leading school and scraped by the skin of my teeth into university having some terrible 'A' levels! And then managed to redeem myself slightly and from that headed into research and yeah, I think I probably do have intellectual leanings. I've spent most of my time actually working on policy interacting with government in the EU.

[0:02:41] Lee: Right OK what led you though in the first instance into the natural world to do biology, botany and zoology?

Payne: It goes back I suppose to my childhood, and I think the sort of formative influences on me there, my mother who you know had a leaning towards wildlife, not fantastically expert at it, but had a leaning towards it. And also the headmistress at my primary school similarly and that started me off as it were, laid the foundations I did biology as an 'A' level and while I was doing that I was introduced to ornithology and bird ringing and I became enthusiastic to the point of obsession! As birdwatchers sometime do and really that's, you know I was already doing a biology course but the two kind of interacted, although I was always fairly determined I didn't want to become a professional ornithologist. Because I was happy with that as hobby rather than as a career!

[0:04:05] Lee: What were your first steps in your career?

Payne: Applying for a job at BAS I suppose!

[0:04:13] Lee: That was first was it?

Payne: That was straight out of university, or when I was doing my final year, I applied for a number of jobs and I was fortunately enough to be offered the BAS one and it was right up my street!

[0:04:28] Lee: Can you think back, to when you first became aware of a place called the Antarctic, which might have animals in it?

Payne: Yeah, Al asked me that! I'm not quite sure obviously I became very aware of it once I saw the advert for the BAS job, because I'm the sort of person that goes out and finds out about it before you pursue it very far. But I think that with being interested in ornithology, I would have been aware of albatrosses and what had been found out about them and where they lived and stuff like that. But I probably did not know a huge amount the Antarctic or have any particular affinity for it until the BAS job came up, and it just fitted!

[0:05:31] Lee: So you send out a range of applications, [Payne: Yep!] for jobs anywhere really, and BAS was just one of them initially?

Payne: Yes that's right!

[0:05:39] Lee: So when they started to take you seriously, did you then take them seriously?

Payne: No once I saw the BAS job and saw what it could be.

[0:05:47] Lee: That was a light bulb moment?

Payne: That really fitted me better, than any of the applications I had put in.

[0:05:53] Lee: What do you mean, by fitted you?

Payne: I think I was a bit unusual in a biologist in terms of being numerate, reasonably numerate I'd done maths 'A' level, didn't pass it but I'd done it! But I still considered myself numerate and you know I'm a numbers man in lots of ways you know I've got a feel for that kind of thing. The project was about the change in numbers of fur seals population dynamics and you know there was a lot less done in that in those days, than there was now and that was a fantastic opportunity, it was a fantastic natural, not natural it was an experiment as it were with the seals more or less having been almost wiped out! To see what was happening in their recovery phase.

[0:06:59] Lee: These are fur seals, [Payne: Fur seals, yeah.] So the actual, the advert defined the project, unlike in previous years when it said zoologist wanted or botanist wanted?

Payne: I can't remember if the advert did, but I very soon knew! You know when I made contact with them, that opportunity was there and that was, what I went for implicitly!

[0:07:20] Lee: Do you remember the interview?

Payne: Bits of it yeah, yeah!

[0:07:26] Lee: What bits do you recall?

Payne: I can remember the bits of the medical and I can remember speaking to Bill Sloman, which was very casual, but you know Bill Sloman was very skilled in my opinion in sorting the 'wheat from the chaff'! Well it's not the right word maybe 'sorting the sheep from the goats' would be better!?

[0:07:55] Lee: Maybe the survivors, from the non-survivors perhaps?

Payne: Maybe, maybe yes! Sort of weeding out the extremes, yeah extremes you know however brilliant in their particular field aren't appropriate, whether they made a mistake with me or not I don't know! And actually I find it quite difficult to disassociate the initial interview with subsequent conversations I would have had with Dick Laws.

[0:08:25] Lee: Alright tell me about that then, because obviously he was 'Doyen' of biology or biological research wasn't he for BAS?

Payne: Yes, but he had only very recently appeared on the BAS scene....And he was also my supervisor I registered for a Ph.D. and he was you know and he was the directly the supervisor of my work, and my Ph.D. And so you know I did have a lot to do with him, you know more than most people perhaps would have done. And so had quite a few of conversations with him and it was with considerable shock and disappointment to me in a way, when he became director of the Survey and was that much removed from me! And I didn't have very much access, well much less access to him and you know someone else was in the post, who I had to report to and wasn't particular successful and fulfilling, you know he was the person with whom I really clicked with intellectually. Although in no way did I match what he had achieved, but you know we thought...we had the same thoughts and understood each other well I think?

[0:09:44] Lee: So the Ph.D. was going to be the work you did in the Antarctic? [Payne: Yes!] And how much did you shape what that work was going to be, or was it completely 'Here's a job off you go'?

Payne: I think... although it wouldn't have been put like this, the way it was 'Here's an opportunity come up with your proposal for it'. It was probably put pretty close to that actually and if there was any steering of it I was unaware?

[0:10:19] Lee: You felt free?

Payne: I felt free, I devised the programme, you know I certainly asked Dick a lot of questions of how to this and how to do that? And there would have been a lot of steering in that basically he'd got a lot of experience with the elephants in Africa, and the elephant seals in the Antarctic. You know he knew the how, I think I knew what I wanted to do but I'm sure he would have been checking you know steering me a bit, but I don't think there certainly weren't any issues of I wanted to do this, and he wanted me do that, that never happened!

[0:10:57] Lee: But in the end, you had to come back knowing how many fur seal there were on South Georgia I presume?

Payne: Being able to estimate how many, their rate of change and the way of understanding of how that was working? What was shifting, were the females breeding earlier? Was there a gradual shift in the onset of maturity? and that kind of stuff, rate of growth of individuals, you know just to try to understand what the constraints were on the population. And for me to be able to through speculate how those restraints might change in future, and what might then happen to the population?

[0:11:49] Lee: Did you come to any conclusions about why the fur seals were making such a good comeback, 'cause as you said had been almost wiped out by mankind?

Payne: Yeah, they mainly fed on krill and the whales had disappeared so theoretically there's an abundance of krill? In fact the speculation was that the whale numbers had been higher than they would otherwise have been because of the removal of the fur seals! And that helped to generate such a big population of whales, which led to the establishment of all the whaling stations on South Georgia!

[0:12:31] Lee: So had man been a bit canny there, had man wiped out the fur seals specifically in order to increase the whale population? No, it was a side effect!

Payne: Yeah, if indeed that was true?

[0:12:44] Lee: What did you think it was true, did you come to the conclusion it probably was?

Payne: I only heard that idea fairly recently, that you know....I'd always had this implicit assumption that you know, the whales where there as well and you don't think of whales being influenced very much except by people who come along and [Lee: Harpoon them!]

Yeah, that's right or I didn't anyway, but of course they may be subjected by more subtle influences!?

[0:13:13] Lee: Never the less I get the impression from other interviews I've done, that the sudden explosion in fur seals was exceptionally high?

Payne: Yeah, it was a remarkably high growth rate for any large mammal population, you know I haven't been in the research, but I'm not aware of any large mammal that increased at such a rate!

[0:13:36] Lee: Tell me about the process of going south, did you have to go to a training camp to learn how to dig yourself out of a crevasse?

Payne: Not much, no I'm not bad I was actually quite fortunate because the standard process, I'm sure you know is you know finish university and you can just shoe horn in 3 or 4 months before the boat sails! I went on the *Bransfield* which was having its maiden voyage the year I was due to go south. It was delayed and that meant that we wouldn't have got a season's work on the fur seals, and so the decision was taken to postpone the fur seal project and I was given the choice of either sticking with the fur seals and going a year later or switching to a krill project. And you know, it was a no brainer for me as you can understand I wanted to do the fur seals at that really was brilliant, because it meant I had an extended period of preparation, I went off and did something else for a few months. Had my appendix out which was a bit of a blinking disaster!

[0:14:58] Lee: Hang on was that because they told you to or was it 'cause?

Payne: Yes!

[0:15:03] Lee: Why was it a disaster?

Payne: Well they took it out and then the whole wound became infected when there'd been nothing wrong with it to start with! But I mean a minor disaster..!

[0:15:14] Lee: Was that still a requirement then, was it?

Payne: It was then yeah, and I should think more so in my case because I was going to be on an offshore island for extended periods with no access, I wasn't even on a main base so I think that was a requirement at the time?

[0:15:34] Lee: Thank you.

Payne: Certainly presented to me in that way [Lee: Yeah] that's what I needed to do! Anyway I think soon as I'd done that I joined BAS and had about an 8 month preparation period and that was very, very valuable!

[0:15:53] Lee: In what way?

Payne: Because it enabled me to prepare my projects, to meet people around the country, who academics who could advise on how to tackle the issues I wanted to tackle, I got some

practical experience with the Sea Mammals Research Unit out in Scotland and on the Wash. And meeting people, I was taught to shoot with a rifle by the RAF Regiment at an air base just down the road from Monks Wood, which was handy not so much with the seals, but our winter project which was the reindeer. And that 8 months was barely enough, but I when we went south we achieved almost all of our objectives and I think that caused considerable surprise! And some embarrassment actually, which we can into if you want?

[0:16:57] Lee: Yeah, who was embarrassed I'd love to know, you weren't embarrassed?

Payne: No I wasn't embarrassed no!

[0:17:03] Lee: Who was?

Payne: Well I mentioned that I was doing a reindeer project in the winter you know I was taken on to do fur seals for the summer. And then for the 2 winters in between I was to go out and investigate the reindeer population, and again the opportunity was there to prepare my own project and I was interested to find what was limiting the population, there being no predators or anything like that. And I suspect that people thought what I was planning to do was wildly optimistic! And what I discovered later was that, another reindeer project in preparation, you know a more fulltime project. And when we achieved everything we set out to do on the reindeer that caused difficulties with you know, the person who had been taken on, which I didn't know about, I wasn't told which you know I'm not pleased about! They could have been upfront with me, that they were planning another project and so when I came back and I'd got all this reindeer material, there was a difficulty about me writing it up! When there was somebody else following on behind, who'd done a much more thorough project and so they was some compromises called for there! Which I didn't particularly mind, what I minded about was not being told, I'd heard a whisper that somebody had told me that a reindeer project was being planned, yes alright that's mine I'm doing it, and the name mentioned wasn't yours!?

[0:18:49] Lee: Oh, right.

Payne: I just heard that one whisper before I went south and Dick Laws hadn't been up front with me about that!

[0:18:58] Lee: Do you think that was typical of BAS of the particular point in its history?

Payne: No, I've never met anything else like it, it's very odd!

[0:19:05] Lee: It's just one of those things!

Payne: Well I think you know they were getting me to have a look see on the reindeer, was their idea. So but me being me, once I got an opportunity [Lee: You took it!] I took it! I prepared for it, excellent support from my mate Pete Prince and you know between us we delivered what we planned to achieve, and you know we got some pretty good stuff!

[0:19:33] Lee: And that was largely down you think was down to the fact you had time to prepare?

Payne: I think so yeah.

[0:19:39] Lee: About 8 months.

Payne: I think so yeah or we wouldn't have achieved half of it, I think you wouldn't have hit the ground running you'd have spent your first season messing about probably on both the seals and the reindeer! [Lee: Yeah] Learning what to do and how to do it, and I think that was probably quite typical, it's probably typical of most graduate research actually! You know it's the second year, that's usually for most critical to people?

[0:20:13] Lee: Tell me about arriving at South Georgia, how was that for you because that was a completely new environment for you wasn't it?

Payne: Absolutely yes, yeah it was a new environment but I'd done, in no way comparable but I'd done little expeditions before, I'd been to the Shetlands with the university expedition and I'd been to an island off Spain before doing a bird ringing expedition! So you know the mentality was the same, yeah getting your gear making your plans, getting stuck in and getting going it was only the scale and the circumstances which were different, and some of the previous stuff the island off Spain I'd done with Pete Price, so we'd worked together. What now, the way how it actually worked in practice was Bird Island was the first stop from Stanley as I recall, I'm not absolutely certain but I don't think we went, I'm pretty sure we didn't go into King Edward Point I think we made first stop Bird Island. The ship stayed for 2 days and the builders did some repairs to the hut, which was fantastic! That little wooden hut smaller than this room, was another contributor to what we were able to achieve because it gave us the spare and the facilities and with a Rayburn stove, you know the warmth and you know the ability to cook easily and stuff like that. To just be able to operate easily and well, you know working from a tent or a small hut, just doesn't help it just doesn't facilitate the same way, it's much less efficient!

[0:22:16] Lee: It was in a bit of a state when you arrived, wasn't it a fur seal had got inside it?

Payne: And died yeah, and all that kind of stuff yes, they think it got in through snow drifts! So the windows were broken and the felt was gone, and I think the stove pipe was rusted, but nothing that the builders couldn't fix!

[0:22:32] Lee: In 2 days?

Payne: Yep, yep there was probably 4 or 6 of them and they were great and they had the opportunity to land on Bird Island and see it, and quite a lot of the people on the ship took the opportunity in those 2 days and these days it's very, very difficult to get to Bird Island! So I think that was probably you know a great experience, for us I suppose was getting use to the seals was one of the big things, you know the males where all on the beaches if you've been south, you must know what fur seals are like and you've got to get used to those! Bird Island for birds lived up to expectations it was fantastic! So seeing that, the seamanship aspect of it was entirely new to us but we never had do much of that, and then we had Bob who had been south before.

[0:23:34] Lee: Bob Burton?

Payne: Yeah, who knew how FIDS did things [Lee: right!] and you know he kind of launched us on to (what would you call it?) a Fid daily routine and all that so that formed the basic framework within which we were able to work.

[0:23:57] Lee: How many of you where there in this hut?

Payne: There where 3 of us each summer, Pete and I went all the way through and each summer we had a different person there to do the albatross work, it was Bob in the first year and a chap called Jim Conroy in the second year and Derek Turner in the third year.

[0:24:22] Lee: Was that always successful?

Payne: No, no! Derek didn't fit in he was what a sort of middle aged chap with apparently 2 Ph.D.s to his name in cookery & chemistry or something or was it maths & chemistry and Derek knew all the answers!! And he was a difficult character, he and Pete particularly didn't hit it off and Pete ended up sleeping in his tent the other end of the island most nights! You know this was for his own research project, but it fitted in very conveniently with the difficulty, I mean they were just complete character opposites you know Derek was a very precise person and Pete was more rough and ready, and you know somebody very precise aggravated him! I can be a bit precise and I aggravated him at times, how he didn't lay one on me in 3 years I don't know, but he didn't! So we didn't hit it off terribly well with Derek, I was there most nights with him, half a bottle of port a night made it bearable for me! But none of us have heard anything of him since.

[0:25:43] Lee: I have heard Pete being described as brilliant? You knew him before you went south didn't you, in fact were you responsible for engaging him in that project?

Payne: I was yes I suggested to him that he might apply.

[0:25:59] Lee: So tell me about Pete Price then, sadly the late Pete Price?

Payne: Yeah, Pete was the son of a British father and a German mother who ran a pub on the outskirts of Lincoln. He was I think interested in bird watching from quite an early age, but he wasn't academic or I imagine was a pretty naughty boy! I don't think he even got 'O' levels and he'd been a forestry worker and I think at that time he was selling ladies lingerie door to door a knickers salesman as he put it!! Which was a waste of Pete, but he was a birdwatcher and a bird ringer and I met him through a mutual friend and that mutual friend and he and I were planning to have an expedition to Turkey bird watching & bird ringing. And in the end we didn't get permission from the Turkish Foreign Office, and at such short notice we switched to the Spanish island in the Mediterranean which I mentioned, and went there and you know everything worked well, we were there for a couple of months. And so when I got the job at BAS they were going to advertise for an assistant to work with me for the 3 years, I suggested Pete and I think BAS thought they were taking a chance. But they took the chance, and so Pete came south with Bob Burton and me, he and Bob Burton got on absolutely great guns I think! Probably better, you know he really hit it off probably better

than Pete got on with me you know we got on alright, but I think Pete learnt a lot about science from me, you know he was my assistant throughout and we worked together, you know he was out with me most days. And took quite an interest in my writing up and what I did, and we also did a joint project on 2 very similar species of birds on Bird Island diving petrels which we worked together on. And Pete also developed his own project on these 'Blue Petrels' which were he was going off camping and catching these birds, when they came in at night. So after we came back Pete was taken by BAS for 3 months or something to write up his 'Blue Petrel' work and one thing led to another, I can't remember exactly it worked, you'll have interviewed Fran so you'll probably know more than I can remember?

[0:29:34] Lee: I haven't actually yet, I'm hoping too, but Bob Burton I certainly have.

Payne: OK but Pete prepared a project I think, to which he proposed to BAS which I think involved carrying on with the albatross monitoring because the albatross is, you know there is this ringed population that Lance Tickle had ringed in the 1960's which were of an age that were coming back to breed, and there was an opportunity to study these now aged birds. And also to do a comparison of two very similar species of 'Black Browed' & 'Grey Headed' to differentiate, I think I'm not entirely sure what happen was that he drew up this proposal put it to BAS. BAS must have been impressed with his 'Blue Petrel' work, where he'd done something quite novel not only had he caught the birds coming in at night. But when he caught them he'd noticed they often regurgitated food and he started collecting this food and looking to see what was in it? And he realised that by doing this, for different species you could work out what the differences the species were, what food source they were exploiting in the ocean and that turned out to be a key thing, for differentiating these you know these two albatross species, where he made this proposal and one was going for one source of food that was far more energy rich and that species could complete a breeding cycle a year just! And the other species was going for a food source which was less energy rich and so the chicks grew more slowly and they couldn't complete their breeding cycle in a year! And these 2 species are very, very similar physically a bit different colouration, but this different food preference seemed to underlie the really important differences in their breeding biology and so Pete's work on the 'Blue Petrels' starting to collect these food samples, working out what they were and he made use of everybody when we, you know he collected these but what to do with them!? When we got back to the main base in the winter, there were marine biologist there and so, he went along to the marine biologist there and so 'What's this and what's this', you know?

And so he learnt from them how to identify things and that led on to how do they, differ and you know what's in them and all this kind of thing. And he spoke to the glaciologists and learned from the glaciologists and he went up to stay with the glaciologists on their glacier and you know coming from a pub, he was great at sitting round a bar chatting to people and finding out about people and getting you know, having great relationships with them. And also extending it into their work areas and so he learnt & learnt and he was good field naturalist to start with, and so from just a basic, a basis of intelligence and inculcation he put together an academic career! You know he gained an academic qualification a Member of

the Institute of Biology, which effectively parallels a university degree you know on the basis of the work he had done.

[0:33:31] Lee: I wonder what it was that made BAS take him on in the first place, because he was unqualified and you were recommending him and you where an unknown quality, was there something in him that swung it?

Payne: I wouldn't know, you'd need to ask others really. I mean I had my own ideas about Pete and there's a big danger at this distance, I would transpose my ideas on to BAS! I think they took him on, because he and I had worked together before.

[0:34:05] Lee: Right, so it was a known team?

Payne: Yes I think so, I think Dick Laws saw potential in me and when I left BAS you know he said you know he regretted it and I was well suited for research and I fitted quite well, with his interest you know the population dynamics and all that kind of stuff. So I suspect you know, you may think this is arrogance I don't know? But I suspect that he thought he'd got somebody that would deliver some kind of reasonable results in me and he wanted to invest and support that? And so getting somebody that there was a pretty good chance I could work with was logical thing to do, so I think in taking Pete in a way was a safe option!

[0:35:05] Lee: Yes.

Payne: In getting, helping me deliver results, from what they where investing in me, because they where investing quite a lot in Bird Island more than any other biologist because they had to set up another base, a small base! And they had to divert the ship goodness knows what a day's ship costs and all this kind of thing? So I think, I don't think it was a risk, I think it was a safe option!

[0:35:25] Lee: They also to build a lab, there was a wet lab that had to be created?

Payne: Not at Bird Island!

[0:35:28] Lee: Oh, that was at King Edward Point was it, oh I beg your pardon yeah!?

Payne: Yes!

[0:35:32] Well we'll come to that later shall I?

Payne: Well, Al referred to *Ice and Men*, so I went and looked it up I didn't know what was in there and they have referred to me using the wet lab and I didn't use a wet lab that's wrong!

[0:35:43] Lee: Oh right.

Payne: That's wrong!

[0:35:45] Lee: OK.

Payne: That was Gary Maxwell and Andy Clark, not me!

[0:35:50] Lee: Oh, that where I got it from too!

Payne: They added my name and I don't know why?

[0:35:54] Lee: Let's talk about the 'furries' then the fur seals, because when you got there it became evident fairly soon that they'd bred a lot faster than you thought they had?

Payne: Yeah, yep!

[0:36:05] Lee: There were twice as many, than you might have imagined?

Payne: I don't quite remember that, but I remember that we were quite surprised by the numbers that were established!

[0:36:17] Lee: Did you have to change your methodology to accommodate the vast numbers? You went with a clicker a click counter?

Payne: Yeah, that was a waste of time! [Loud laughter!!]

[0:36:30] Lee: What's wrong with it, not fast enough?

Payne: Well the numbers were too great, you know you couldn't, it was very, very difficult to count them individually! I mean it was doable in a lot of places, but not everywhere and it wasn't 100% accurate because the number were great and they don't stay still. But I don't think the error in our estimates was huge, it was certainly more than adequate for the work we were doing and the weight we were placing on them. You know they're quite good in that they've got a very compressed breeding season they all pup in about 3 weeks, so you don't have some of them clearing off, you know all the pups are there at one time, they get increasingly difficult to count they are easier to count when they are small and on the beach with mothers, because once they get a bit bigger they disappear into the tussock! We had realised that some of the beaches would be big and dense, so we had the idea that we would build little timber towers which we could climb up and look down. I don't think we quite anticipated how difficult it would be to get to our timber towers! And they got blown down once or twice and we had to hang big weights on them, and then we created a few walkways on top of oil drums which just about keeps you out of reach of a bull fur seal! You know if you are walking along a walkway about that high above the ground, but it was fairly hairy! But I don't think, well I don't recall we had to change very much fundamentally, we had to find the right container to stick a pup in when you wanted to weigh it, and a Post Office mail sack did the job quite nicely! But most of the equipment, most of the plans as I recall and I haven't reread my report or anything like that, you might have done I don't know? With the reindeer it was a bit more suck it and see, because they were a bit flighty one of the herds was flighty and we had to learn a bit about stalking the reindeer and watching them, you know fit in with the weather and this kind of stuff.

[0:39:08] Lee: We'll come to this shortly if I may?

Payne: Yeah, OK!

[0:39:10] Lee: It seems to me that the nature of the beach was also influential to how you counted the fur seals, because if you had a beach that backed against a cliff?

Payne: It was easy, yeah that's right!

[0:39:23] Lee: Yeah, but if it was a grass tussock area?

Payne: Big flat open area beaches were difficult and that's why we needed these towers, you know most beaches had high ground, higher ground in the vicinity but if the beach was too big and so the angle from the high ground was too shallow. You know, too many pups would be hidden behind the bodies of the adults and so that's where you needed these timber towers, to get up above so you are looking down to a degree and so in one case, we had to carry the wood over the island to get to a big beach down on the south, Pearson Inlet!

[0:40:02] Lee: These are railway type sleepers we are talking about, are we not?

Payne: 2 by 4's I think they were, but?

[0:40:08] Lee: Pretty heavy stuff then to shift around?

Payne: It was a hell struggle carrying those over through tussock!! But you know we did it.

[0:40:20] Lee: And were you at that point still trying to count individual animals, or were you doing a grid method where you'd do a sample and multiple?

Payne: No we were always trying to count animals, but sometimes you know rather than counting individuals it was 10,20,30,40, 50 and 60 it was that kind of thing! But Pete and I had both got experience of doing bird counts that way and you know we calibrated our method and I don't say, I'm not aware it was seriously inaccurate. I suppose one thing we did, we did hadn't planned to do was in the second year, I spent a month on the mainland opposite South Georgia [note I think he meant B.I.] because the seals had spread there. More there than we had anticipated and so, we had a general assistant who came and stayed with me there and Pete ran the work on Bird Island. Then later that summer we had 3 additional people to help us with the big tagging programme, we wasn't particularly successful in the sense in that an awfully lot of the tags ended up tearing out! But we did have one recovered, one of those tags from Tierra del Fuego which was interesting, because nobody had ever recorded an Antarctic fur seal from Tierra del Fuego or from South America! So that was quite interesting as it's against the prevailing winds and all the rest and it provided a hint of where they might be going in the winter, which we didn't know about?

[0:41:56] Lee: Did you ever have to resort to the abacus?

Payne: Yes, somebody made an abacus you got that from Bob did you? Bob made me an abacus that's right it comes back to me [Lee: As a Christmas present!] That's right that first year, year, yeah that's right yeah! But I don't think we used it?

[0:42:13] Lee: As a joke?

Payne: Oh yeah, because we spent all our time counting, counting! That Christmas in the first year we'd been there what, 6 weeks? and we hadn't done a lot else other than count and count, but that was the first thing, yeah, yeah!

[0:42:26] Lee: Did it feel a great responsibility in this project, because BAS were investing lots of time and money and men in this project weren't they, rebuilding the hut giving you 3 scientists I think it was?

Payne: I don't think it weighed on me, I don't think I felt it you know I was too self-centred! [Lee: Too young?] Yeah, too young and too focused, I was just doing what I was doing to the best of my ability! I think I probably pushed the guys helping me quite hard and I'm not sure how much they resented that, I suspect they did a bit, but nobody ever said anything?

[0:43:12] Lee: Another way of counting creatures, is to photograph them from above 'Aerial Photography' did you try that?

Payne: We did try that yes, yes.

[0:43:20] Lee: A success?

Payne: What it...yeah I don't think it did any better than we did and probably did worse I think, on the main island where we could get to, what it did it gave us coverage of most of South Georgia which we couldn't, couldn't possibly have done otherwise. And it was very helpful for the reindeer!

[0:43:53] Lee: Right, the photographs were OK were they?

Payne: Yeah, they weren't bad! We...that was another thing the RAF helped with 'stereoscopic examination' of vertical photographs, they couldn't do that for the reindeer, but for the seals. And so that was quite good, so my recollection, you know everything is my recollection - I may have remembered wrong! - was that it was a check, and it didn't turn out being any more reliable or accurate, because we did have certain check beaches which we counted very accurately, yeah and we calibrated stuff from that as I recall?

[0:44:43] Lee: And when you started feeding these results back to Cambridge, Dick was back in Cambridge by then I presume? [Payne: Yeah!] Did his eyebrows raised because of the numbers?

Payne: Well it would have been at Monks Wood at that stage.

[0:44:53] Lee: Monks Wood I beg your pardon!

Payne: Moved to Cambridge after I came back. I don't know! Didn't get much feedback, again as I recall I was left to continue with what I was doing I think the feedback we got was mild enthusiasm! It all seems to be going well, keep up the good work that kind of stuff, no there was certainly nothing like 'This is going fantastic we'd never have dreamt this'! There was absolutely nothing like that as I recall and I don't recall criticism either, maybe my mind weeds that out?

[0:45:41] Lee: So the reindeer then was that some sort of afterthought at sometime or was it part of the grand scheme, counting reindeer?

Payne: I was given it as a project to do, you know as part of what I was doing I wasn't aware if it was an afterthought.

[0:46:01] Lee: No, I'm not suggesting it was, I just asking whether, what the status of the project was?

Payne: I think the fur seal was the major project, but this was a significant project I spent quite a bit of time referring, preparing for it. I went up to visit the people running the reindeer herd in the Cairngorms, I studied deer research and how to do it, certainly wasn't an afterthought as far as I was concerned it was serious project! But it was secondary to the fur seals and we got stuck into that and so what subsequent happened, that's why what subsequently happened I found slightly upsetting! [Lee: Yeah, yes!] Not that it seriously bothered or upset me but I wasn't happy with what had happened, I don't particularly want to dwell on it you know it never caused me serious concerns!

[0:47:05] Lee: And again was the primary function of the project was to count or was it also to establish patterns of breeding?

Payne: Well the first thing is you had to out how many there were. And understand the density and the pressure on the range, and how they were altering the range you know what that density was in order to have an effect, so numbers were fundamental to knowing that. And again I wanted to understand the controlling factors so seeing them under winter conditions when the pressures were greatest was important for that, and so that was great and again there were the 2 different herds to understand and compare! They came from different stock they behaved differently, very differently! One herd was much, much tamer than the other so that was quite interesting and you know we had a month, 3 or 4 weeks at a time, 2 or 3 times in the winter so it wasn't as intense by any means, and then some of the time I would have somebody else rather than Pete to come with me, which gave Pete a break from me! Which I suspect he needed, I don't think I particularly needed a break from Pete, but he you know, was more easy going character to get on with!

[0:48:30] Lee: How long have the reindeer been in there?

Payne: Since about 1907-1910-1920 there were 3 introductions, one of them failed and the other two succeeded, and so about that time.

[0:48:47] Lee: Was that down to the different species that were being introduced, different?

Payne: I don't think so one lot was wiped out by an avalanche!

[0:48:55] Lee: Oh right I see!

Payne: They were very small numbers and they just got clobbered and that was that I think! So they all thrived there, you know there was initially quite a lot to eat and no predators and no parasites didn't give them a hard time, things like warble flies because they don't survive

you know the first generation would survive, but they wouldn't go on to another generation I think under those conditions because the summers aren't warm enough!

[0:49:28] Lee: Why the gun, what was the need to shoot?

Payne: For to take samples, for aging them understanding the age structure, we'd be collecting teeth to age them from the teeth and again understanding the breeding biology, from the ovaries you can understand you can work out how many calves a particular female had, and matching that with its age how often they're breeding those kinds of things?

[0:50:05] Lee: And were they fairly stable the population or were they also exploding?

Payne: One population had reached the limit of what the, that particular section of the island could carry, so they appeared to be stable or declining [Lee: right.] you know they'd just eaten, probably the limiting factor was the availability of food in winter when its snow covered! And my belief, I certainly didn't prove this, my belief was that they were being forced on to steeper and steeper slopes to get at remaining tussock grass because they wiped out tussock grass progressively as well as some other species! And as they got forced on to steeper and steeper slopes in the winter, they had more and more casualties through falling off cliffs and stuff like that? And you used to find a few carcasses in that situation, so I got the impression that's what was controlling that population and the small population didn't seem to have damaged the vegetation so much, but that population probably could have been increasing but a lot of the material I gathered I never wrote up on that, I left that for the person who came afterwards you know!

[0:51:27] Lee: Where they departmentalised, were there fences, no?

Payne: Glaciers!!

[0:51:33] Lee: Oh glaciers, just as good!

Payne: Well yeah, the problem is now the glaciers are retreating it potentially allows the reindeer to move to other parts of the island and that's why they are being killed off now, quite correctly!

[0:51:47] Lee: They're being culled?

Payne: Yeah, I think one herd has been wiped out and there's a few left you know a number left on the second herd.

[0:51:58] Lee: And the birds that you looked at I mean did you get, you showed me, you said earlier you were a keen amateur ornithologist, were you deeply involved in the bird work, or was that just another sideline?

Payne: Not much involved in the albatross work, which was the main work going on, but you know Pete and I did this Diving Petrel work. So we did that and we found a bit of time in the course of our other work, and then later in the season to devote more intensively to studying those measurements, you know finding nests, measuring chick growth rates, trying to get

some idea of what they were feeding on, for the comparison between two species which was quite interesting!

[0:52:45] Lee: You were erecting mist nets to catch petrels at night, with Pete Prince?

Payne: Yeah, yeah.

[0:52:52] Lee: How did that work?

Payne: A mist net is a conventional tool that bird ringers use for catching birds, you know you could put one up in woodland here to catch Great Tits, Blue Tits and Blackbirds, and it works pretty much as well at catching these petrels as long as you don't get anything too big, that would fly straight through! But it wouldn't hold an albatross for example, for catching them..!

[0:53:25] Lee: For ringing?

Payne: Yeah, you can ring, ringing is..depends what, ringing a lot of those small birds wouldn't be very useful down there, unless you wanted to build up a population of breeding birds, that you could then identify individually, but was particularly useful for Pete catching the birds for getting the food samples! Because they have got this habit, petrels carry a whole day's food in their crop in one go and then regurgitate it to the chick! In the case of some its several days' worth of food and they will regurgitate it when they hit the net, so you can collect it, but it was mainly Pete doing that and I helped him a bit with that but not much.

[0:54:04] Lee: But there were occasions when you shot birds, to find out more about them?

Payne: One or two birds, we shot vagrants which obviously weren't going to, you know they'd drifted from South America, weren't going to make it back and so for identification and to confirm the record we shot one or two, but we didn't generally shoot them!

[0:54:30] Lee: And I gather you also had chickens as well?

Payne: Now!

[0:54:33] Lee: No at King Edward Point!

Payne: No, nothing to do with me! [Lee: No?] Blame somebody else for that, no not me!

[0:54:41] Lee: No, you ate the eggs? Ricky Chinn kept chickens!

Payne: Oh right, I don't remember having fresh eggs! On Bird Island we had albatross eggs and Giant Petrel eggs, gull eggs, even penguin eggs occasionally! But I don't remember the chicken eggs, I do remember having a very small tomato which had been grown on the island, no don't remember that I'm afraid!

[0:55:06] Lee: OK some more points that you might have discussed with Allan, ask about the high protein diet, was that because of the reindeers?

Payne: Yes, yeah reindeer were brilliant to eat, don't know if you've ever eaten them better than ordinary venison and so we would have reindeer stew in the evening, and reindeer liver & kidney and then sort of bacon & stuff for breakfast! It doesn't do wonders for it induces constipation and small black turds! So, yeah very high protein diet then we would take some of the reindeer back to Bird Island in the summer and send some of it across to the main base, for the people to eat when we were taking animals, as much as possible the meat was utilised.

[0:56:00] Lee: That presumably is why the reindeer were there in the first place, why they were introduced initially?

Payne: Sporting yeah, yeah.

[0:56:04] Lee: Feed passing sailors?

Payne: Well I think it more for the Norwegian whalers, you know partly I suppose sport and which some them of them were tame, wasn't very sporting but you know, just good food yeah! [note: Also food in case of shipwrecks!]

[0:56:23] Lee: Did you do any man hauling, whilst you where there?

Payne: Yes, yes that first winter we had one jolly, where you know Pete, Bob had gone back, Pete would have done something else, he went up to the glacier and I went with Gerry Tallowin and a couple of other people man hauling over to place called Royal Bay, which was very, very hard work!! The sledges didn't run at all on the snow, too warm most of the time snow was mushy, but it was an experience and was about the only typical Antarctic thing we tried to do! Otherwise South Georgia is pretty different we'd make a mile or two a day, well maybe a bit more, but not much!

[0:57:22] Lee: Recreational or not?

Payne: Oh yeah, it was a jolly I mean I don't think we achieved anything scientific, but you know got to know different people and I'm still in touch with Jerry Tallowin got on well with him.

[0:57:39] Lee: And what about working on the water, there was an incident concerning a Zodiac which escaped?

Payne: Yes, yeah I think that would be the second summer, the ships would sometimes call in with odds & ends that we needed. I can't remember if they called, if we didn't have some justification but on that occasion the ship stopped off shore and a Zodiac came in with Stuart Lawrence who was 1st Mate. And they came in and they were having a coffee, dram or something and one of looked out of the window, can't remember if it was me or not and said to Stuart 'What's that Zodiac doing in the middle of the bay!?' And they hadn't hauled it far enough up the beach, so it drifted out and so we had to lash together a few oil drums to make raft! [Lee: To paddle out?] Out, to paddle out and recover it and I gather from Al that story's not particularly well known! In view of Stuart's later prominent as a BAS captain, so that was quite entertaining we had quite a laugh about that!

[0:59:08] Lee: Did you have your own boat to work with anyway?

Payne: We didn't no, we didn't there had been a Norwegian 'pram' a small dingy left at the base, but I don't even remember seeing it, but I think what happened was is when the ship came in, they whipped it off probably for our protection! So that we weren't tempted to go out and because it you know would have been useful, it might have been slightly useful within the bay. But the risk of getting carried out or going out you know, none of us were seamen really, Bob might have got a little bit of experience, Pete and I certainly weren't at all, it might have been a bit of a liability!?

[0:59:54] Lee: So you weren't using this old whalers work boat, to get from place to place?

Payne: No not at all no, and we wouldn't have been competent to do it, [Lee: No!] you know it would have been a serious risk! I know Lance Tickell used it for dumping gash in the middle of the cove! Can't remember what we did with ours think we crushed, think it got taken off to the ship actually, we had a bonfire for what would burn and the tins were crushed and carried off.

[1:00:18] Lee: What about these sound recordings you made?

Payne: Oh, I didn't make sound recordings.

[1:00:22] Lee: Somebody did?

Payne: Derek Turner did yes, Derek Turner was very keen on making sound recordings of every species on the island, which was great a good thing to do! But he was very assiduous about it, very pernickety and I suppose you're leading me towards this story that Al's told you about, which is one of the best stories, from me anyway!?

[1:00:49] Lee: Actually I don't know this story?

Payne: OK, well I'll tell you the story! You will already know from what I've said, that Pete and Derek didn't get on and Pete use to go off his tent every night. And some people might call Pete a slob! But anyway once he got in his tent, he wasn't getting out and so when nature called during the night, it was the biggest cooking pot that was used for that purpose! And so that kind of sets the scene. Now Derek decides that he wants to record Blue Petrels, because he wants to get every species on the island and Blue Petrel only breeds down on that particular point where Pete has got his tent! Well Pete was studying them, so Derek being, well Pete goes off to the island he sets off seven, half past seven at night and you know gets himself down there and you know does his food and get stuck into his work. Now Derek being Derek it has to be an all day expedition you know with a HUGE rucksack all packed up, he sets off about midday so by the time Pete got there Derek has got fully ensconced! And Derek is already a Ph.D. in cookery, has already got the meal well on the go and 'Lo & behold' offers Pete 'Would you like some food?', and first thing on the menu is the soup and can you guess which pot the soup is being cooked!!? [Loud laughter]

[1:02:31] Lee: Oh dear!

Payne: And Pete said 'No thank you Derek, I don't think I feel hungry yet!!' So Pete sees Derek with that 'piss pot', so that's the story, so that was Pete's 'piss pot' story!!

[1:02:51] Lee: Were you ever in fear of your life at all, did you ever have a scary moment?

Payne: Probably had a few, I think my mind has wiped out most of them certainly the ones that might have been my fault!

[1:03:03] Lee: Very wise!

Payne: I think, not being a seaman and so not being a very good judge of the risks, when we were taken off at the end of the first summer that was quite a frightening experience! Because there was a storm brewing up, the ship came in late afternoon and it was 'Hurry-hurry, get everything off quick', you know, 'A storm coming and we don't want to have to wait days for you before we can get you off, so we've got to take this opportunity!' And so it's one of those situations where the ship didn't anchor, she just steamed off shore and when you know they took the gear off, we couldn't take much gear off. And then when they took us off it was, again in the Zodiacs and the ship would steam broadside into the wind to create a 'lee' and it was approach the ship and keep on the move, they dropped the hooks and hook on and whip you up quick! And that was, you know and it was blowing quite a lot and then we went into a harbour farther down it blew up to hurricane strength later that night! So that was, it may have been absolutely and probably was perfectly safe and in good hands, but it was bloody frightening if you didn't know how safe it was or wasn't! And I think probably there were other hairy moments, which I think of with shame, where I led Pete across dangerous slopes above cliffs, which I shouldn't have done which wasn't an acceptable or worthwhile risk! I think there were other things like that, they would have been hairy, they could have been fatal if either of us had slipped, but you know there were although the risks were far greater and far less justifiable than what I've just told you about, you know nothing happened and so it just seemed like walking on a path. But I think frightened by fur seals there were some pretty hairy moments, when you got a quarter ton fur seal snapping at your thighs and you've met bull fur seals yeah, so you know they can move quite fast, so you can have 'brown trouser moments' with those!

[1:06:00] Lee: When the time came to come home to the UK, had you had enough or were you sorry to leave?

Payne: I was ready to come home except you know I'd done 2 ½ years, but I was in no way sorry to have done it!

[1:06:21] Lee: And you spent 3 years doing your write ups?

Payne: Quite a lot of write ups yes, and I put in quite a lot of effort devising follow up projects, and so although I published my papers I never wrote them up in Ph.D. form, so I never did get my Ph.D. but I think you know, if I'd written it in Ph.D. form I think I would have got my Ph.D. so you know I feel I could have got it kind of thing?

[1:06:53] Lee: Did it matter that you didn't get it, [Payne Not to me!] did it affect you're future career that you didn't get your Ph.D.?

Payne: I don't think so, I don't think so, I think it matters more these days because they are much common and not having one.

[1:07:15] Lee: It singles you out rather!

Payne: It singles you out more than it did then! And anyway I had a change of career, you know I didn't continue in science, but I don't think it would have mattered as I had scientific papers behind me the published work! And the Ph.D. would have contained the same science.

[1:07:30] Lee: Memorable years in your life?

Payne: Very oh yes! Yes and funnily enough more so now I think, it's something I've come to back to! I suppose I'm not a big introvert so I don't pretend to understand my own physiology particularly, but I didn't want to feel I was dwelling on past glories as it were. You know move on, a great period in my life but now other things, but at the end of the day where I am now, it was a great experience you know and I was very lucky to have the opportunity to do it! One of the reasons I did it was it, was because it thins out the opposition as it were, when you are competing for jobs not everybody wants to do that and so I did get this fantastic opportunity and you know I was incredibly lucky to get the chance to do that full time work! You know most biologists you know would give right arm, left arm whatever to have such a fabulous opportunity I was just so-so lucky, I was very lucky to have that extra preparation period, I was lucky having Pete who you know I was quite a difficult character at that stage, I probably still a difficult character now! But at that stage I wouldn't use the word selfish but self centred and you know the work was everything and the other things of life, were probably more secondary to me than they were to most people and I didn't recognize that! So I probably pushed people as far as I wanted to go, not as far as they wanted to go. But it was a fantastic experience met a lot of interesting people, it I met a more mixed bunch of people than I had met before and that was good for me! And hope it was good for some of them as well but it was certainly good for me and I learnt a lot of practical skills down there, which has stayed with me and have influenced the way I have brought up my son, and you know my life has been a lot influenced that and I'm a great fan of what goes on, and what BAS does and the fact that BAS is there and so the events of the past year have had a lot of resonance with me, so yep it was a fantastic time!

[1:10:50] Lee: Thank you for talking about it!

Payne: Not at all.

Possible extracts:

- Weighing the many fur seals pups in mail sacks. [0:36:30]
- Rescuing an escaping ship's Zodiac. [0:57:39]
- Pete Prince's 'piss pot' story. [1:00:49]