

FRANK CURRY

Edited transcript of a recording of Frank Curry interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 9th January 2013. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/237. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 18th June 2017.

Part One

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Frank Curry, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 9th of January 2013. Frank Curry, Part 1.

Curry: Frank Curry. Preston, Lancashire. 31st of May 1943.

[Part 1 0:00:19] Lee: Would you say your father was an educated man?

Curry: He went to a grammar school and he was an Army officer.

[Part 1 0:00:28] Lee: Did he rise in the ranks?

Curry: He became an Army officer because he had a grammar school education. That was the custom in those days, at the beginning of the war.

[Part 1 0:00:39] Lee: Did the Army run in the family, then?

Curry: Yes, yes. His father was a lieutenant colonel.

[Part 1 0:00:46] Lee: And what was your father's first name?

Curry: Leslie

[Part 1 0:00:49] Lee: And did he rise to anything significant?

Curry: No, he rose to Major which is not really very far, but yes, he had a good career.

[Part 1 0:01:02] Lee: So did that kind of set a precedent for you as well? Were you thinking about going into the forces or expected to go into the forces?

Curry: No, there was no pressure of that sort. I did think about it a lot but in the end, the thing I think that decided me was that I wanted to go to university, which in the early '60s if you were in a grammar school sixth form, wasn't necessarily the automatic choice it is today. It was only about 5% of people went to university in those days and most of my colleagues in the sixth form, as I did, went immediately into jobs. I went into the Ministry of Defence at the sort of Executive Officer level and then after a year and a half, decided that I would like to go to university. So that steered me away from an Army career really.

[Part 1 0:01:58] Lee: Were you the first Curry to go to university?

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 0:02:01] Lee: Breaking the ground?

Curry: Yep, that's the way things were in those days.

[Part 1 0:02:06] Lee: So where did you go and what did you read?

Curry: I went to the University of London, on my headmaster's recommendation, to the School of Oriental and African Studies, to read history, but in those days London was very much a federal university. So I did European and English history based at Queen Mary College and some lectures at UCL and LSE. That was the way it was. And then specialised in African topics for the remainder of the degree.

[Part 1 0:02:37] Lee: They did really well on *University Challenge* the other night. Did you see them?

Curry: Yes, I did, yes. So yes, SOAS was a good place to be.

[Part 1 0:02:46] Lee: What drew you, do you think, towards history as an interest?

Curry: Well because it was the subject I enjoyed in the sixth form. Simple as that, really. And still remains with me today.. I spend a lot of time reading history and it has stood me in good stead.

[Part 1 0:03:03] Lee: So did you spend any length of time in Africa?

Curry: Yes. In the second year we did two terms at the University of Ghana on a sort of exchange scheme. So we went out by boat, on a banana boat, to Ghana. So I spent two terms there, spring and summer terms, in 1965 I think it was, when Kwame Nkrumah was the President. And then, after the terms were over, we spent some time travelling. I was with a colleague doing the same course. We went by boat to Nigeria and then travelled round Nigeria, just before the civil war, and then down to Bangui in the Central African Republic, currently of interest¹. And then eventually ended up in the Congo, down the Congo River at Brazzaville and came back from there.

[Part 1 0:04:03] Lee: So as your university course came to a close, what was your plan of action; what was your life plan?

Curry: Well I still had the right to go back to the Ministry of Defence because they gave me leave of absence, which was very good. I didn't really know what to do but unexpectedly I got a First Class degree, which I regret very much funnily enough because it encouraged me and my professor encouraged me to think that research was a good way to go. So I did a sort of extended MA/ MPhil type course but I realised that I was not cut out for research at the end of that, so decided to return to the Ministry in a quite different entry point and branch of work really.

[Part 1 0:04:58] Lee: Doing? May I ask you what you were doing?

¹ There was fighting between rebels and the CAR government at the time of this interview.

Curry: Yes. When I asked to go back to the Ministry, I had an interview by an officer from the Royal Naval Supply and Transport Service, which in those days ... It dates its history back to Samuel Pepys actually. They were a completely civilian organisation but they ran all the logistics for the Navy essentially, notably the RFA fleet which was about probably 40 ships in those days, all the ammunition, fuel supplies for the Navy. It was a huge organisation and it was a practical sort of thing which appealed to me.

[Part 1 0:05:39] Lee: But you were a civilian, I presume, were you?

Curry: Yes. It is a civilian organisation but in a wartime situation, as happened in the Second World War, you were immediately put into Reserve Officer uniforms. It was something that dated back in history really.

[Part 1 0:05:5] Lee: So did that happen to you in '82 when the Falklands War broke out?

Curry: No. Funnily enough they didn't do that, although many of my colleagues went down on the ammunition ships and tankers, for example. Sure, yeah. A lot of guys went down on the *Atlantic Conveyor*, for example, which sank. Yes, absolutely, but I don't think they put them into uniform because it was never actually declared a war if you remember.

[Part 1 0:06:18] Lee: It was a Conflict, wasn't it?

Curry: It was a conflict, yes, indeed.

[Part 1 0:06:23] Lee: So did you have (and again I appreciate you may not be able to answer this fully), did you have any particular role or relationship in the Falklands War, with the war?

Curry: Yes. At the time – I think I pointed it out on my outline CV – I was in charge of all the fuel depots in Scotland. I was based on the Gare Loch, part of the Clyde submarine base, and because my previous post had been working for Commander-in-Chief Fleet, where a lot of the job was fuel planning, I was asked to come down to London to take part in all the logistic fuel planning really, which underpinned the entire operation to be quite honest. It was a long long ... It was a very big logistic exercise, sure.

[Part 1 0:07:16] Lee: To get the fuel south?

Curry: Oh absolutely, and the right sort of fuel because the carriers at the time, *Hermes* in particular, was burning black oil and so there was quite a lot of complications getting the mix right. And the aviation fuel as well. I won't go into the details of it all but it was quite a complicated exercise. And of course chartering ships to back up the RFAs. The RFAs remained down there the whole time but there was a long chain of supplies going down. There was air drop and so on and so forth.

[Part 1 0:07:55] Lee: The RFA is ...?

Curry: Royal Fleet Auxiliary. You have probably seen them on television programmes. They replenish ships at sea. I spent two years on one when I initially joined. Yes, so we all had some involvement in the Falklands War. We were working for the Navy for sure.

[Part 1 0:08:13] Lee: One of the complications is knowing how long it is going to go on for. Nobody knew really. Everybody assumed it would be over by the end of April but nobody quite new how long the Falklands problem would persist.

Curry: I can't really comment on that, to be honest. We were so busy at the time just getting on with the job and thinking about the big picture was not something I was particularly ... It was a very exciting time and the whole machine worked very well.

[Part 1 0:08:44] Lee: Were you aware of any contact between the Ministry of Defence and British Antarctic Survey at that time, because ...

Curry: Absolutely not. I really had no real knowledge of the British Antarctic Survey. Like most members of the public, my only thoughts about the Antarctic were ... I was at school of course during the Trans Antarctic Expedition by Vivian Fuchs and so on.

[Part 1 0:09:07] Lee: You were following it?

Curry: Oh yes. It was very interesting, but that was probably about it.

[Part 1 0:09:12] Lee: Did it capture your imagination particularly?

Curry: At the time, as a schoolboy, yes. But it was not something that dominated my thinking really.

[Part 1 0:09:26] Lee: You hadn't suggested to yourself that one day you might like to go down there in person.

Curry: No. Absolutely not, no.

[Part 1 0:09:34] Lee: So what made you look at British Antarctic Survey as a career move? Was it to escape or because there was a better job coming up? What was the reasoning?

Curry: Well it was quite simple really. At the time I was detached for two years, to the Joint Services College at Greenwich, which was an extremely interesting job. I was on the Directing staff, and the Cold War was just ending. In fact the course was in Berlin on the night the Wall came down. We were all so wrapped up in the Cold War in MoD in those days. When the Soviet Union collapsed and so on and so forth, we were asked by MoD to do quite a lot of thinking about the role the military would play in a post Cold War world. And it was quite clear that there would have to be a peace dividend and reduction of financial underpinning for the armed services, contraction and so on. The sort of roles we were looking for were the sort of roles that actually turned out to be the case, particularly Yugoslavia, the collapse there. We did a lot of work on that. And thinking about supporting UN operations and so on and so forth. So after the excitement of the Cold War it all seemed a bit ...

[Part 1 0:11:14] Lee: Routine?

Curry: Less interesting and I simply saw this advertisement. In those days government departments used to circulate, or quangos like the BAS used to circulate things round. And it seemed to me the sort of person they were looking for would ... They couldn't promote (I discovered this subsequently), they couldn't find somebody internally to fill that sort of role. The other influence on me was my boss at the time at the Defence College, who was a Naval captain called Pat McLaren, had previously been captain of *HMS Endurance*, and when I mentioned my interest in this post, he then took a great interest in it, and he knew David Drewry. So I went to the interview with a good sort of backing, really, from Pat, and it is as simple as that really. The MoD actually said 'We will loan you for three years.' David Drewry said that wasn't very acceptable but MoD told me confidentially that if I wanted to come back, there was no problem really.

[Part 1 0:12:28] Lee: So who was paying you then?

Curry: Oh no, the Survey was paying me. It was a full transfer, but I knew that if I wanted to go back to MoD within about three or four years, I could do so.

[Part 1 0:12:41] Lee: You weren't burning your bridges?

Curry: Not entirely no. I am quite a cautious person actually and it seemed a very exciting prospect at the time.

[Part 1 0:12:51] Lee: What was so exciting about it, because it is unusual? At that time it was unusual for BAS to appoint people from outside so I would think you were one of the earliest incomers, shall we say.

Curry: Yes, that's probably true actually, David Blake being another one.

[Part 1 0:13:13] Lee: What was attracting you to it?

Curry: Well I think need for a change. I was used to moving jobs quite frequently anyway in the MoD and moving locations and so forth, so it wasn't a big move in that sense. I was quite used to moving around and doing odd things and I guess Pat really. He had a big influence on me at the time. He became, as you probably know, chairman of the Antarctic Heritage Trust and he was a close friend of mine, and he inspired me I suppose you could say.

[Part 1 0:13:54] Lee: Fids tell good tales, don't they?

Curry: Yes, absolutely. But I had misgivings about it because the job at Greenwich was extremely interesting. It was on a different level really. It was an 8-month course set up originally by Montgomery to get the Services working together but it had a big scope. So I knew I was going into a much smaller organisation, but nevertheless one makes decisions in life and I didn't mind moving around.

[Part 1 0:14:29] Lee: So if you had a line: one end was the attraction of BAS and the other end was wanting to leave the Ministry, whereabouts on that line was your decision taken? Halfway 50/50?

Curry: Yes probably. I think I had one more course to do at Greenwich, then I would be posted somewhere else and I suspected that that might not be such an interesting prospect. One never knows.

[Part 1 0:14:58] Lee: So it was a calculated gamble?

Curry: Well I don't know about any calculation in it but it was a decision I took.

[Part 1 0:15:07] Lee: What did you make of BAS? First of all, tell me about the interview. Do you remember much about the interview, who interviewed you and ...

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 0:15:13] Lee: How grilling it was?

Curry: David chaired it. Barry Heywood was on the panel. No he didn't chair it, sorry. The Chief Personnel Officer of NERC chaired it, and here again I must confess to a bit of inside influence in that he, David Griffiths, who was Chief Personnel Officer of NERC at the time, had come from the same background as myself. He had been in the Royal Naval Supply & Transport Service and I knew him, not terribly well but I knew him and he knew of me, and I guess that probably had an influence.

[Part 1 0:15:52] Lee: So was it a foregone conclusion?

Curry: Oh no no. I didn't think about it in that way. I felt with Pat's backing I stood a reasonable chance but there were some other good people that they interviewed that I knew as well. So I think they had sorted out some good choices. It was one of those things. One goes for interviews – I am sure you have done the same – and you don't know what the outcome is going to be.

[Part 1 0:16:19] Lee: Do you remember them bowling you any googlies, any difficult questions? What sort of things did they ask about?

Curry: Well they asked about what I had been doing. They asked me quite a lot of questions about long distance logistics and so forth. I don't think any of the questions that they asked me floored me, exactly, but my memory of them I am afraid is ...

[Part 1 0:16:45] Lee: And what do you feel you took with you from your previous career which was particularly useful in the new role?

Curry: Well I think two things mainly. One was obviously long distance logistics because I was very much involved in that when I was Fleet Logistics Officer. I had 35 ships to programme all over the world. It was that sort of background that I suspected on a smaller scale was relevant to the Survey's mission. So that was that. The other side was knowledge of Whitehall and negotiating in Whitehall; the money side really,

and that sort of thing which I think I was well qualified in. I had managed a very big programme prior to my Greenwich appointment.

[Part 1 0:17:36] Curry: I was Assistant Director of Navy Works which sounds a bit prosaic but actually was an enormous programme. I had a programme of billions really. At the time we were bringing Trident in and needed a decision to increase the Defence spending which was agreed between Callaghan and Schmidt back in '78. So we were getting 3% increases each year which was enormous in Defence terms. Putting in all the Trident stuff; it's all big stuff really, and I had to write a lot of the cases that went to Ministers and so forth and to the Treasury and make presentations and that sort of thing.

[Part 1 0:18:22] Lee: I would think that was a major playing card, wasn't it, for you?

Curry: I don't think I made too much of it at the interview but thinking back afterwards, you asked me the question what I brought. In retrospect, I think that was probably quite important.

[Part 1 0:18:35] Lee: The Joker in *Jeux Sans Frontières*?

Curry: Yes, indeed.

[Part 1 0:18:40] Lee: Was there then an element then of perhaps ... Would they perhaps see an element of gamekeeper turned poacher, in that because you knew the inner workings of Whitehall you were therefore quite well placed to actually apply to it for funding for BAS, because ...

Curry: Yeah, I mean I realised subsequently that the whole Whitehall scene and the relationships between NERC, BAS, the Foreign Office, the Department of Education (as it was in those days) ... Education and Science was the Ministry which funded NERC. All that sort of thing, and the difficulties they'd had in the mid '80s with the funding for the additional infrastructure that had been agreed by Mrs Thatcher, all that sort of thing. I only became cognisant of that after I joined of course, and read the paper and discussed it and so on and so forth. But I realised that must have been in the backs of their minds when they were interviewing me, yes.

[Part 1 0:19:50] Lee: The middle Eighties was a huge expansion time for BAS because of the post Falkland funding. The famous line from Mrs Thatcher was 'It's cheaper to give BAS a million than build a new battleship.' I paraphrase perhaps, or even misquote but still ...

Curry: That sounds very plausible.

[Part 1 0:20:05] Lee: What was the state of BAS when you arrived, then? Was it ...? You were moving into a smaller organisation with much smaller budgets, much tighter controls required because there was no leeway. How was BAS when you got there?

Curry: Well they were riding the crest of a wave really, was the impression I got. They'd had the enormous fillip of the ozone hole discovery.

[Part 1 0:20:29] Lee: In '85?

Curry: Yes, and I realised a lot later how important that was to them because if you actually looked back at NERC reports, back in the '70s, you began to realise that scientifically BAS was really not a big player and some of the research was probably a bit prosaic. Not that I am in a position to judge it, but I got that impression. So I think the ozone layer tended to put them in the big league. So they were very chipper about that and then of course on the logistics and administrative side, the new infrastructure that was going in was very exciting to them. Certainly my predecessor John Bawden and other people that I met, David Drewry, they were full of optimism. It was a good time to join I felt.

[Part 1 0:21:25] Lee: Was John Bawden a difficult act to follow? Because he had been there for 40 years?

Curry: No, I'm not sure about 40 years.

[Part 1 0:21:32] Lee: Thirty perhaps?

Curry: No, not as much as that, I don't think. He originally started his career as a civil servant, I think in the Department of Nature Conservancy or something, quite a prosaic area, and came into the Survey back in the '70s I think. I am not absolutely sure. You would have to check with Joanna.

[Part 1 0:22:02] Lee: But he was your predecessor?

Curry: Oh yes, and as soon as I joined (I joined at Christmas 1990), we both went down, on New Year's Eve actually, down to the Falklands and did a tour of Antarctica and came back on the *Bransfield*. So we had a lot of opportunity to discuss things. David was with us at the time. And then, as you probably know, we were due to leave from Halley in January, late January/ early February 1991, and the *Bransfield* had lost a motor and within I think 24 hours we realised that we were stuck in the ice. And at that stage David and John felt that their place was really back at base. There was only room on the Twin Otter ... There was only one Twin Otter left at Halley. I have got a picture of them leaving. So they flew back to Rothera and then came out, I think they came out on Twin Otters to Punta Arenas – I am not absolutely sure.

[Part 1 0:23:28] Lee: Leaving you behind?

Curry: Leaving me behind on the ship with Stuart Lawrence who you have doubtless met, and a large team of builders that had been building the then new Halley² (the one on the stilts) and we were stuck for a long time, I think six weeks maybe, two months or whatever. Because the ship lacked one motor, and the sea ice was particularly bad at that time of the year, we had actually mentally felt that we would probably be stuck there for the winter really. Everything is uncertain in the Antarctic. I was completely new to all this, so it was a question of keeping everybody reasonably happy on board, because the building team had been working extremely hard and building workers

² Halley V.

don't like to be stuck in their cabins all that time. It was morale issues really. Anyway we did get out and there we are. So I then came back and John ...

[Part 1 0:24:34] Lee: Tell me more about that because what a baptism, a baptism of ice. You had only been within the organisation a short time. Already the Antarctic was teaching you about its preciousness.

Curry: Well yes, somebody used that term actually. It must been quite depressing, Andy Clarke I think when I got back: 'a bit of a baptism of fire'. But yes, it was a very useful experience. Once we had got out of the ice, the ship lost power off the South Orkneys completely. Some generators went and that wasn't a comfortable time, to be spending a whole night beam-on to the sea with no power. So it certainly impressed upon me the hazards of working in the Antarctic and the fact that there were no rescue services or anything like that, really, to speak of. Other national operators if they were around, but there weren't any around at the time. So yes, absolutely.

[Part 1 0:25:34] Lee: Ironically it sounds like a perfect introduction to the Antarctic because having gone through all that yourself, back in Cambridge in your comfy chair, you would have had a much clearer idea of what your staff were going through.

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 0:25:47] Lee: And the risks they were taking?

Curry: Yes, absolutely yes. As things worked out, it was a good experience, thinking back, yes.

[Part 1 0:25:58] Lee: What was done in that crisis to try and maintain morale? Did Stuart Lawrence have a few tricks up his sleeve or did you get out your concertina or ...

Curry: Well, it was then I realised that I was in a sort of different culture really. When David was on board – I think they must have been on board maybe as much as two or three days, something like that before the decision was taken to return to Halley and then for them then to transfer out. The culture change was that it was a sort of expeditionary culture. I was used to a very much authoritarian regime in the Navy. If you are on a Naval ship, you get constant broadcasts telling you what is going on and you were left in no doubt the commander was in charge. When I was Fleet Logistics Officer, if I sent a signal to a ship in the name of the Commander-in-Chief, the orders were carried out. The Commander-in-Chief would be behind you. But in the Survey, David used to conduct these meetings at 12 o'clock and everybody would come along and they would all talk about it.

[Part 1 0:27:15] Lee: Was that an outbreak of democracy?

Curry: Well yes, and that was probably the biggest culture shock I had really, and I think Stuart and I were then, after they left, we were bound to try and do something on the same lines. Not quite as dramatic as that but yes, that was certainly interesting.

[Part 1 0:27:37] Lee: Can you elaborate a bit on that? What happened after David had gone?

Curry: David and John, yeah, and one or two other people I think went with them who'd had a hard season, which was fair enough.

[Part 1 0:27:51] Lee: What was the daily routine? What sort of things did you do to maintain morale?

Curry: We got a sports programme going. One of the fortunate things was that one of the holds of the ship was completely clear at that stage because they had supplied Halley and so on and so forth. So we were able to rig up a badminton net and I think I enjoyed that more than anything, and trying to get some of the builders interested, some of the staff on board to come and play badminton. That's all you can do really. They had a reasonably good library on the ship; there were videos but there was quite a lot of drinking done, particularly by the building workers, who were on contract of course, short term contract. I think they found it, because they'd had a very hard season and were looking forward to getting home and then suddenly realised they weren't going to see, might not be able to see their relatives and so forth for a long period of time.

[Part 1 0:28:53] Lee: Did you have anybody at home that would be missing you?

Curry: Well, Sue you mean?

[Part 1 0:28:58] Lee: Yes. I didn't know you were married at that point.

Curry: Oh yes. We were still living here actually. She was used to me being ... I spent 35 years living away from home of one sort or another, with the MoD constantly. When I was up in Scotland I was on my own up there and so she was quite used to me being away and we were able to send faxes, personal. I gave a letter for David to carry back to tell Sue what I was going through and the Survey are very good with ..., the personnel staff are very good about keeping relatives informed about what was going on.

[Part 1 0:29:34] Lee: One of the recurrent themes of these interviews is that, certainly in that era, was the autonomy that the bases felt they had from London in that because communications were so distant and so fragile ...

Curry: Yes, indeed.

[Part 1 0:29:46] Lee: ... that actually you had to make your own minds up. You couldn't rely upon somebody in Cambridge sending you a fax, so that culture of making decisions corporately on the spot, with a leader, was already endemic I think in BAS at that time.

Curry: Yes, it was very good and very appropriate really I felt. Cambridge had to run operations and so on and coordinate things. I think the problems came, in my view, when we had the Internet; email came in. I was very sceptical about introducing that.

[Part 1 0:30:33] Lee: Really?

Curry: Yes. It's part of modern life. You can't oppose it but my experience in the Navy was that there was an enormous premium put on sending very clear messages of what had to be done or whatever. And we were very limited on words; it was all HF transmission (and still is in the Navy because of the security involved). All your signals were looked at by the Commander-in-Chief every day. There was an enormous premium on getting it right, that the captains of ships understood. When you start with email, it's a horror show. It's just ...

[Part 1 0:31:15] Lee: How do you mean, then? You mean liberalisation is a horror?

Curry: No. You lose all discipline really. People just express what they are thinking. Half the email is probably about personal matters and not work. It's one of the things I regretted most I think. In the old days, as you say, base commanders had a lot of autonomy and that worked pretty well. But once you start allowing staff to send messages from all over the place, rumours start. I will give you a concrete example. Once email had started, we had a ship stuck in the ice, which is a fairly regular sort of thing that happened. Messages would go back to the relatives. The relatives would get in touch with local newspapers and you would have the *Grimsby Herald* or the *Manchester Evening News* ringing you up and saying ... Rather like this thing we have had over Christmas / New Year.

[Part 1 0:32:14] Lee: The Russian ship with an Australian team³?

Curry: You get all that. It becomes terribly confused and coming from a military background, I don't like that. But it's no good fighting the computer people.

[Part 1 0:32:25] Lee: There are some Fids who also agree, modern-day Fids who would agree with that, who don't want their wives to tell them that the boiler has broken down when they are the other side of the planet. and normally all that was sorted out. Instead of which, they tell their husband who can do nothing about it.

Curry: Yes, that's another example, isn't it?

[Part 1 0:32:43] Lee: OK. So anyway you were eventually released from the ice and back at Cambridge, back behind your desk, to get on with the job in hand, and you were there for nearly ten years.

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 0:32:54] Lee: What were the first things you had to address?

Curry: Right!. Well the first thing was the money side of life really. When David and I were travelling down, we talked about the future, and the Survey at that time, as you know, had acquired additional Twin Otters, was going to be introducing the *James Clark Ross* which was a much larger ship than that the *John Biscoe* it was replacing. Introducing the Dash-7 aircraft, gravel runway at Rothera, a new unknown type of

³ *MV Akademik Shokalskiy* with the Spirit of Mawson expedition.

structure at Halley, and all the ideas he had for scientific programmes. So it was very very clear to me and he asked me to get on with it, was putting a submission together. Well first of all doing some rigorous estimating of all this.

[Part 1 0:33:58] Curry: I think the Survey had done tremendously well in the procurement side of life and getting Halley set up and the gravel runway, and the *James Clark Ross* but what perhaps they weren't so used to was actually looking at what future running costs might be of this larger infrastructure, because Government is very good at handing out capital grants but they never give you the running costs. So I guess the most important thing was doing that job and then going up to Whitehall. You have heard of the BAS Review Group? And getting stuff started on that and that quite startled the Department of Education. Because they had gone through this very embarrassing business of the money not getting through to BAS, you know all about that?

[Part 1 0:35:00] Lee: No no.

Curry: Oh right.

[Part 1 0:35:04] Lee: In a nutshell, what happened?

Curry: Well it was before my time but I had all the papers and knew all about it. What had happened was that after the Falklands War, as you rightly said, the then Director Dick Laws was summoned to Downing Street and asked what he wanted, and all the things that I have just described, Dick identified. Greater accessibility into Antarctica and you know, so on and so forth. The capital sums had been approved but what had happened was that the money – NERC had somehow obstructed the money getting through in a timely fashion. As a result the programme was not proceeding at the speed that had been originally envisaged.

[Part 1 0:35:51] Curry: And matters came to a head. I am not quite sure what precipitated the thing but it got to the ears of Mrs Thatcher who sent one of these handbag letters to Baker at the time, who was the Minister for Education and Science, basically 'What is going on here?' So they appointed a committee of enquiry chaired by a senior diplomat from the Foreign Office to enquire into this which was in Whitehall terms extremely embarrassing and NERC had their knuckles rapped over it. And the Department of Education and Science were also extremely embarrassed over it so that when I came in and we had these early meetings it was under that sort of shadow you see.

[Part 1 0:36:47] Lee: So the shit had hit the fan before you ...?

Curry: Oh yes, absolutely, but what they weren't prepared for was another bid for enhanced running costs, so I think it was only a week after I got back from Antarctica that I was plunged into these discussions and I remember the senior civil servant at the time said 'My God, you want a PES bid!' You understand what a PES bid is do you? The terminology has changed nowadays but the whole Public Expenditure round, and if you make a bid it is a PES bid for more money and so on. It is a big thing. So they were a bit shocked by all this and of course I had to provide a lot more data on what would be the consequences if we didn't get the money.

[Part 1 0:37:39] Curry: So we went through all the exercises and we could take a couple of Twin Otters out of service and park them in Utah or somewhere (a dry area). We could do this, we could do that, all the sort of comic horror things that people don't like to hear, and that is what led to the Way Forward programme that Joanna has mentioned in her thing. They were prepared to give us some extra money but they wanted to see us make economies in the operation because essentially what we couldn't do was accept all this new infrastructure which everybody wanted us to accept but keep the old show running. So that is when we looked at what we could do in terms of savings and it was at that point really we looked at the utility of Faraday.

[Part 1 0:38:38] Lee: When you say 'we', were you taking direction from David on this or did David give you the job and tell you to get on with it, David Drewry?

Curry: David Drewry? Well yes. I mean essentially he was a great travelling man, as you know. I always seem to have Directors who were constantly in other parts of the world. David knew full well what was going on and we had long discussions about it and so forth when he was around but I had to get on with the donkey work.

[Part 1 0:39:08] Lee: So the Way Forward was your baby, so to speak?

Curry: In practical terms but fully backed by David. David signed up to everything and led it really in the sense of explaining to the Survey why we were having to do this that and the other.

[Part 1 0:39:23] Lee: So did you see it as a slimming down or a rationalisation?

Curry: Oh I think the latter really. Some staff would see it as slimming down obviously because losing Faraday was a big emotional blow, but those directing the programme, like John Dudeney, were supportive of it really. Faraday at that time was not producing very much scientifically.

[Part 1 0:39:38] Lee: Tell me a bit about the thinking behind that then. Why was Faraday selected and how did you deal with it? I know you transferred it to the Ukrainians. Tell me about that process. What do you remember of it?

Curry: Well the reason Faraday was selected was twofold. One that it absorbed running costs obviously. It was a fairly largish base and by reducing it we would save X amount per year but the complication was that the UK had signed up to the Environmental Protocol, '91 I think it was, which was very much David's baby. He was very enthusiastic about that but one of the consequences of that was that if you abandoned a base, you had to remove it. And when I had done the calculations on that, that was going to be very expensive because it was a largish base, a lot of concrete there but the main problem in removing it was the ship time required. We couldn't manage it with our two vessels because they were so busy, so we would have to charter shipping.

[Part 1 0:41:00] Curry: So I think I came up with an estimate, a million, a million and a half to do it, which we didn't have of course. So David said 'Why don't we just ...' It was his idea actually. He said 'Why don't we just give it to another Antarctic

country? Hawk it round the circuit, Frank.' Which I did. We wrote to all the other Antarctic Treaty nations saying 'Are you interested in acquiring this?' And of course at that stage the old Soviet Union had split up and Ukraine became a separate sovereign state. A lot of Ukrainian scientists had been involved in the Soviet programme. The ownership of the Soviet bases in Antarctica fell legally to the Russian state and not to the Ukrainian state, so there was a corps of scientists and logisticians who were out of a job really.

[Part 1 0:41:58] Lee: They were homeless?

Curry: In the Ukraine, that's right. They had been shut out by the St Petersburg headquarters and so they expressed interest and that was a long process, getting them to sign up. David and I and Mike Richardson from the Foreign Office went to the Ukraine initially and had a look at their setup, talked to the people, and a lot of vodka was ... I went back several times thereafter and they came to us and it was a very very difficult process really, the whole negotiation, because what we didn't understand was the internal politics in the Ukraine itself. They were in a difficult position financially. They were very suspicious, not the people involved in the Antarctic but the politicians and the civil servants, very suspicious that the UK was going to give them this base.

[Part 1 0:43:11] Curry: I remember I was called to give evidence to one of their parliamentary committees in their Kremlin setup there or parliament and I always remember everybody was terribly suspicious. The chairman asked me through an interpreter why were we doing this, why were we offering an island base. They were very suspicious that it was an island, you see. There was no magic behind it really but I had a moment of inspiration. I said 'Because we are an island people.' And everybody burst out laughing and we seemed to get past that hurdle. And then of course they came to us and we had the training and all the rest of it. And the other side of it: Mike Richardson and I trailed round their foreign ministry because one of the things David insisted on, quite rightly, was that if they were going to take over the base, they had to sign the Protocol, and it took a long time to get that across to them.

[Part 1 0:44:14] Lee: There were strings attached because there was ongoing recording science based at Faraday which had to be maintained by the Ukrainians?

Curry: Yes. I am sure Jonathan has made those points to you, and the scientists (our scientists) were very keen that those long-term data sets were maintained. And that was certainly one of the strings, yes. I have to say the scientific side of the Ukrainian setup was very good. There was a good relationship built up I think between Jonathan and the other Ice and Climate scientists and that was really good, yes.

[Part 1 0:44:49] Lee: Is there an anecdote from your time in Ukraine?

Curry: Well I have just given you one. I am just trying to think really. [Pause] Not specifically. It was a very difficult time for the people in the Ukraine at the time. You had to take brand new dollar bills and all that kind of thing. It was very difficult to operate there.

[Part 1 0:45:20] Lee: The other rationalisation was the transference of some of the biological work to Rothera and that meant that Signy would become summer only and

I was at the Signy 60th dinner a few years ago. People were still bitter and twisted about Signy.

Curry: I know. I can understand that. Signy was the other part of it, the Way Forward programme. I forget whose idea it was originally that we would make it summer only. I think it was probably David again actually. I was looking at the costs of Signy and the difficulties of the modern ... You see we wanted to modernise it. That was part of the PES bid, to modernise Signy because there was that dreadful plastic building there.

[Part 1 0:46:03] Lee: The Plastic Palace?

Curry: Yes, the Plastic Palace you have probably heard all about and the fuelling facilities were a bit worrying too. Anyway that was the decision and again all my staff had no experience of running summer only bases actually. So we went and saw the Italians. Did you know this?

[Part 1 0:46:30] Lee: No.

Curry: OK. David and I and the Head of the Building Section at the time, Al Smith.

[Part 1 0:46:38] Lee: Big Al Smith.

Curry: Wonderful guy and we knew the Italians operated at Terra Nova on a summer only basis, their base the other side of Antarctica. I don't know if you know much about the Italian programme. Probably not, but their programme came about back in the '80s when Italy decided to become a non-nuclear nation. So they had a big Harwell type complex south of Rome, about 40 kilometres south of Rome. I forget the name of it now, and they put all this out to alternative technologies, a lot of engineers there, and they said 'We want to be in the Antarctic.' This was presumably a politician's idea, I'm not sure. So that what you had basically there, in addition to their pure scientists was a bunch of nuclear engineers who were very talented I think, and they put a lot of money into it. The Italians were spending as much money as we were, funnily enough, at one base and they were very ingenious. We were very impressed.

[Part 1 0:47:45] Curry: While we were in their Rome outfit, south of Rome, they were able to switch on the generators. It was during the winter we went, UK (northern) winter and they were able to switch on generators and do scientific experiments down there completely remotely and they gave us a lot of good information about winterisation and how to do it and so forth. They were very very helpful the Italians, I have to say. When we asked them 'Why are you doing summer only?' They said it was purely cultural. They didn't want to be away from their families during the winter. The other curious thing that they did: they took enormous quantities of bottled water down there, which was extremely heavy. They count that necessary really but again that was a cultural thing.

[Part 1 0:48:42] Lee: But again, in turning Signy into a summer only affair, there were some measurements that had to be carried out throughout the year. I read about a chap called (and I've probably got the name wrong) Afansiev?

Curry: Afanasiev, yes.

[Part 1 0:48:57] Lee: Afanasiev, who was being very innovative under your guidance.

Curry: Well David really. That was one of David's triumphs actually.

[Part 1 0:49:05] Lee: Tell me about that.

Curry: Well obviously there was a lot of opposition internally to Signy becoming summer only and one of the crunch points was that they had these sea ice measurements that had gone back all the way to 1948 I suppose, when Signy was set up. It was something we had to take very very seriously, so David Blake took on the job of looking at what could be done, and he and Vladimir ... He was an interesting character in his own right. He had got out of Russia during Brezhnev's time but he was a very good engineer. He and David came up with the idea of continuous daily photographs during the winter when the base was not manned to record the sea ice measurements. There is a hill at Signy about 900 ft high where you could place a camera looking down on the bay to be able to carry out the measurements and the records. And I don't know whether it was David or Vladimir came up with this. The only camera that could do the job was a 1938 Luftwaffe camera powered by lead acid batteries that would take a daily photograph of the quality required by the scientists. So we were able to meet that particular obstacle, as it were.

[Part 1 0:50:50] Lee: Did it have a windscreen wiper to clear the snow off the lens?

Curry: Well I should be able to answer that question because I was out at Signy when ... I was on the last ship to clear out Signy which was the *James Clark Ross*, funnily enough. We were there at the end of the season and setting up the camera became the job of the radio officer at the time, a technician, nice chap. We all had to do jobs, in my case knocking it was down a shed I think. It was snowing at the time and we had no heat in the base and it was quite difficult. Anyway he said 'You can come and help me Frank to get this bloody camera and the batteries up to the top of the hill.' The snow was very very thick and I was carrying the batteries in the rucksack and he was carrying the camera and we struggled up the 900 ft ...

[Part 1 0:51:50] Lee: Up to your waist?

Curry: Yes. I always remember that, to get it set up. So I should be able to tell you whether there were windscreen wipers. I am pretty certain there weren't actually but David will be able to tell you.

[Part 1 0:52:01] Lee: Would it send the pictures back electronically, by satellite, or did you have to go and empty the film at the end of ...?

Curry: I think it was a film at the end of it, yes.

[Part 1 0:52:10] Lee: Still, quite remarkable.

Curry: Oh it was a remarkable achievement by David and Vladimir. All credit to them because they got round this demand in a very ingenious fashion.

[Part 1 0:52:22] Lee: So much of the facilities at Signy were transferred to Rothera, so Rothera had to be developed.

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 0:52:29] Lee: And that again was part of the Way Forward?

Curry: That was part of the Way Forward. That was part of the bid, that we would ... You see the logic of it was that because we were going to acquire the Dash-7, which is a story in its own right, we could get scientists in and out fairly quickly and therefore it made sense to ... and there was quite a lot of biological work that could be done there. It made sense to transfer at least part of that programme. Signy still remained in the summer.

[Part 1 0:53:02] Lee: What's the Dash-7 story, then? The commissioning of that was tricky because of the skis and wheels. What is your memory?

Curry: My memory is it was one of the projects that hadn't been implemented when I joined. The contract had been placed to modify the aircraft, put in extra fuel tanks, generator at the back and the skis, the big pontoon skis. So Paul Whiteman who was the Head of the Aircraft Section at the time, David who was like me. David and I joined at the same time, both ex-MoD so we worked well together really.

[Part 1 0:53:45] Lee: David?

Curry: Blake, yes. I forget his title now but he was Head of Technical Services, part of my 'empire', but David and I were pretty close. Because we were ex MoD, we understood each other quite well. Paul had been heavily involved in selection of the Dash-7 which I think was absolutely the right choice. I think they made the right choice of aeroplane. It was not a commercial success, as you know, the Dash-7, a 4-engined. It was originally designed as a 50-seater commuter aircraft. It was not a success for de Havilland as far as they were concerned but London City in the '80s were operating them from London City Airport. And they bought this second-hand and then placed a contract with Field Aviation in Toronto to modify it and put in the extra fuel tanks required and the other features, and convert it to the BAS requirements.

[Part 1 0:54:52] Curry: But what they hadn't done was actually, in MoD terms, work out a Concept of Operations. They selected the right aircraft. It was robust. It would have the necessary range and so on, but they hadn't worked out how they were going to use it really. So I sat down with John Hall and we looked at how we were going to operate the aircraft, given the skis and at that stage the skis were at the design stage. Field Aviation and the company that was doing the ski side of it (I can't remember who they were), they were very evasive about payload. We travelled to Toronto four or five times and Paul was based there a lot of the time. It became borne on us that the payload we were going to get, at the end of the day, ... John and I had envisaged ten or twelve transits from the Falklands to Rothera during the season. Those figures are

not accurate but at the end of the day we would be carrying about two passengers and a couple of suitcases – exaggeration, but the payload wasn't economic if we were going to put the pontoon skis on.

[Part 1 0:56:15] Curry: 'So what the hell do we do?' So I flew over there for the last time with David to make sure we had got the facts right from Field and the other company, then had to go back and write a very very quick paper for David which had to go to the Chief Executive of NERC of course, who was John Knill (geologist), Sir John Knill as he eventually became, actually saying 'We don't think this is feasible.' Embarrassing for the Survey to have to say that but we had to do it, so we abandoned ... BAS retained ownership of the design, and it was an ambitious project. No other country apart from the Americans with their ski-equipped Hercules that had been converted in the 1950s, no other country had done such a project. The Twin Otter is a very small aircraft as you know. So that was embarrassing but fortunately the other thing I was dealing with and enjoying was this National Audit Office thing and they didn't pick up on that fortunately.

[Part 1 0:57:37] Lee: Was that sleight of hand on your part, bottom of the agenda?

Curry: No not really. I think the timing wasn't quite right. I think by the time we had sorted it all out, it was about a year after the audit had stopped. The auditors were almost starting when I joined, you see, on all these projects, and as you know it went to the Public Accounts Committee and I had to go with Colin Read who was the Finance Director of NERC and Sir John Knill, and sit behind them as you do in the PAC.

[Part 1 0:58:20] Lee: Whisper in their ear?

Curry: Whisper in their ear, exactly, yes. We didn't come out of it too badly really.

[Part 1 0:58:27] Lee: But in the end the Dash was able to fly economic flights to Rothera because of the runway, which eliminated the need for skis?

Curry: Oh yes, it was fine.

[Part 1 0:58:37] Lee: It just limited its use in the field, I guess.

Curry: Indeed; that was the other role envisaged. Yes sorry I hadn't explained that very well. But again, necessity is the mother of invention, really. I forget, it might have been Paul, or somebody in the Survey, one of the pilots possibly, came up with the idea of using these blue ice runways to extend the range, which was what we wanted to support the field programme. And again, tentatively, we looked at the US experience in the Arctic and so on and so forth and very tentatively we moved to that.

[Part 1 0:59:15] Lee: So you were involved in the establishment of Sky Blue?

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 0:59:18] Lee: Down South? Is it near Fossil Bluff?

Curry: It's south of Fossil Bluff but what Sky Blue gave us was the ability to put fuel dumps there and extend the range of the Twin Otters and that was something that ... Those ideas took a while to progress. We wanted to get the Dash-7 in the main role first.

[Part 1 0:59:43] Lee: Meanwhile, you had £4.4 million to spend at Rothera?

Curry: Yep.

[Part 1 0:59:47] Lee: So how was that?

Curry: How was that spent?

[Part 1 0:59:51] Lee: The thinking behind how it was spent. What were the conceptual decisions made?

Curry: Well the first one we have already mentioned, was the biological work. That was the main ...

[Part 1 1:00:02] Lee: The Bonner Lab?

Curry: That was the Bonner Lab, which as you know, burned down. And the other side of it was the accommodation block really, which, certainly when I first went down there, it had been self-built. There were a lot of technical problems with it. The glazing was such that the pressure within the building gave you a terrible headache when you were sleeping. The plumbing was dreadful and we lacked a control tower complex, so that is largely what the money went into. And again, David and I broke new ground on that because we said we wouldn't go in for self-build; we would get a professional building outfit doing it. We thought it was going to be great for British industry, building industry.

[Part 1 1:01:01] Lee: Was this Morrison's?

Curry: Yes. Now I went to all the main companies. Memory is going now. Who are the big building companies?

[Part 1 1:01:14] Lee: Wimpey, Lang's, ...

Curry: Wimpey, Lang's, Balfour Beatty, all those people, and they weren't interested.

[Part 1 1:01:20] Lee: Really?

Curry: Yes, they weren't interested, and so eventually, I forget how we tracked down ... No it wasn't Morrison's. Morrison's came later.

[Part 1 1:01:34] Lee: They were more Halley orientated, weren't they, as well?

Curry: Yes. It was a Birmingham firm⁴. You would have to check the detail on that. I just can't remember their name, but they were a mid-sized British building company. They tendered and came up with both the Signy summer-only and for the Rothera work. That worked quite well.

[Part 1 1:02:01] Lee: Did it go smoothly or were you problem solving at several thousand miles?

Curry: No building projects of that size ever go completely smoothly. There weren't any major ... There were cultural problems with the builders and the base staff; that was an issue.

[Part 1 1:02:21] Lee: How do you mean? Friday night type things?

Curry: Well, yes exactly, and what the builders didn't really understand although we spent an enormous amount of time trying to indoctrinate them that when you are down in Antarctica you couldn't go round the corner and get some spare parts or a bag of nails. You had to take everything with you, and you had to have the right clobber and so forth. There were a lot of issues like that which at the time seemed very difficult and they were. The cultural impact of a load of builders with no real indoctrination about the Antarctic mixing with our staff ...

[Part 1 1:03:04] Lee: Graduate scientists?

Curry: Yeah, so a lot of problems like that, but in the end the job got done. Probably David could give you a lot of chapter and verse about some of the work. In some ways they were very very concerned about permafrost and building on permafrost, but that didn't turn out to be a big issue in the end, the quality of the cement and so forth, that sort of thing. I think the Bonner Lab was pretty good. It was unfortunate that there was an electrical fire later but there we are. The scientists were happy at the time.

[Part 1 1:03:40] Lee: Did you have any dealings with Greenpeace?

Curry: Ha. I didn't personally. The Greenpeace issue arose, as I remember it, in relation to the original gravel runway and David Drewry was very very concerned about bad publicity from the green lobby. He was very much into the environment and so forth, quite rightly, and on the maiden voyage of the *James Clark Ross* (on which I didn't go actually, and Jo has that wrong there) ... David went and he took with him a lady from – I'm not sure whether she was from Greenpeace or World Wildlife Fund or whatever – but anyway a prominent environmentalist, down with her, the issue being the bird nesting and whether it was going to be disturbed by the runway. And I gather she was a bit of a pain in the neck on board but David is probably the best person if you want detail on that. She had a rather depressing name, I can't remember.

[Part 1 1:04:51] Lee: Don't worry. In the midst of all this Way Forward, of course, David Drewry left, didn't he?

⁴ Structaply.

Curry: He left in ninety ... you would have the dates. '95 was it? Something like that. Most of it was completed by the time David left. All the spadework and most of the construction had been done, I think, by the time David left. Do you have the date when he left⁵?

[Part 1 1:05:21] Lee: Not ... Barry Heywood writes the Introduction to the 1994/5 Annual Report.

Curry: Oh right. Well maybe it was '94. Yes, probably.

[Part 1 1:05:34] Lee: Does that matter, that he had left.

Curry: [Sighs] This is where we get into people and so forth, isn't it? I regretted David's going enormously, and I think David Blake would tell you the same thing. People criticise David because he was a physical geographer and not a pure physicist, but that is water off a duck's back as far as I am concerned. I thought he was a good leader of the Survey, very good with people, very forward thinking, and a good thing about when David was in charge: on the whole, relations with NERC were fairly reasonable. John Knill was quite supportive of us on the whole. Of course they'd had the rap over the knuckles, and Eileen Buttle was the Secretary, the second post in NERC, the most senior post, and she was pretty supportive and she and David got on well. So on the whole I would say they were the happy times as far as I was concerned.

[Part 1 0:06:48] Curry: David is an ambitious guy, as you know from his CV. He wanted to move on but I was very, not upset, but I think we missed him, missed his leadership. Not that I didn't get on very well with Barry Heywood. I don't mean this as a sort of criticism of Barry, He was a personal friend really, but I think Barry was not really a Number One person. He was very much a Number Two and he saw his role very much as supporting David and basically overseeing the science programme in the sort of detail David didn't have time to do. So my relationship tended to be more with David than with Barry. There was no friction with Barry at all but Barry, because he was 'old Survey' if you like, carried a lot of prejudice. Perhaps prejudice is the wrong word to use.

[Part 1 1:07:49] Lee: Baggage?

Curry: Yeah, with the NERC relationship and so forth, because he had been through a lot, the way NERC had treated BAS in the earlier days. And so he was very suspicious of NERC and of course that didn't help relationships and John Knill left as well and John Krebs took over and he was interviewed on the BBC actually, only a few months ago, where they reviewed his life. He was very much a colder personality, should I say. He seemed to pick up on the residual 'palace guard' type of thinking at NERC, which was that BAS was paddling its own canoe and ought to be under some control and maybe they are doing the science that we don't think they should, is all that important, and all that stuff.

⁵ 1994 according to *Wikipedia*.

[Part 1 0:08:54] Curry: I'm sure you've had a basinful of that in your previous interviews. And he didn't like the interference from the Foreign Office and started a bit of a confrontation with the Foreign Office which he was never going to win, as you probably know from your BBC days. And so all those politics that I had hitherto not been quite as exposed to, came into sharp relief. And David, when he was at NERC, I don't think fitted in all that well with their corporate culture and his eyes were elsewhere when he was Deputy Chief Executive. I did try on one occasion to persuade him to come back, when Barry had broken his leg. He then went to the British Council and then had some difficult times there and I did enquire as to whether he would come back to BAS, but that wasn't on the cards, but there we are. Yes, so ...

[Part 1 1:10:01] Lee: I sense a dinner gong about to be struck, so let's break.

Curry: Yes.

[Part 1 1:01:04] Lee: Thank you very much.

[Part 1 1:10:07] [End of Part One]

Part Two

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Frank Curry, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 9th of January 2013. Frank Curry, Part 2.

[Part 2 0:00:10] Lee: Frank, one of your innovations at BAS was to introduce the whole concept of PFI⁶, the way to fund things, and that was particularly applicable to the new ship, the *Ernest Shackleton*.

Curry: Yes. The way you phrased that question I think perhaps doesn't represent the truth in that I certainly did not invent PFI, nor frankly did I have much faith in PFI as a concept, and I think that judgement had been amply justified by the subsequent history of PFIs.

[Part 2 0:00:52] Lee: Especially in the medical world?

Curry: In the medical world but many many other areas, but I certainly don't want to get bogged down in the philosophy of PFI. Let me tell you about it as it happened. We recognised, certainly David Drewry and myself, that we had to do something about replacing the *Bransfield*. The voyage that we talked about earlier demonstrated the ship was getting pretty old and it takes time to procure new ships as I know from my Ministry of Defence experience. It was clear with the re-election of the Major government in 1991 or '92 (I can't remember exactly⁷), that they had nailed to their mast the whole idea of major government investment in the PFI philosophy. And we were told quite clearly at BAS Review Group meetings that the only way we were going to get a new ship was not through a PES grant but through the PFI which was certainly not music to my ears.

⁶ Private Finance Initiative.

⁷ 1992.

[Part 2 0:02:11] Curry: I spent a lot of time initially on going to presentations and meetings about PFI just so that I could get the concept clear in my own mind and the main example that was given by the Treasury at that time was that if, for example, you wanted to replace a school gymnasium, you would not put out a tender to companies to build a new gymnasium. You would put out a tender which invited companies to come up with innovative ideas to provide physical exercise for your students, you see, and that could include bussing them to other facilities and so on. I think that was actually quite a good example of the way you had got to get your head round it. Anyway I think it must have been '93/'94 I went down to see somebody in the Cabinet Office PFI Unit. They had a Unit at that time which was devoted to proselytising the whole thing, and even getting people in Government energised about this glittering opportunity.

[Part 2 0:03:29] Curry: And I saw what I would describe as a teenage banker, who, when I explained our requirement for an Antarctic resupply vessel, he said 'No problem at all. The private sector can do anything like that. You don't want to be running ships or anything like that. The private sector is much better at that sort of thing.' This was again not music to my ears because actually, in the time I had been in the Survey, and of course taking into account my previous experience in MoD, I felt that the ships were so central to BAS as an organisation, that the idea of G4S or Serco or one of these anonymous organisations suddenly doing it, I felt was not the best way ahead for BAS. And I don't think either David Drewry or certainly Barry Heywood felt that way either.

[Part 2 0:04:31] Curry: We felt that the strength of BAS was in its integrated nature: the science first of all, the personnel, the logistics, the technical support and so on worked very well and very economically in people terms, through everything being concentrated in Cambridge but having everything under our own control. And the captains I didn't see as just people that just steered ships around the place but were very much central to our organisation. For example, when new staff went down to the Antarctic, they often sailed on the ships, either all the way from the UK or further on. And they would be able to spot people who didn't fit in and so on, and give that kind of advice that I couldn't really see a commercial company doing to that extent.

[Part 2 0:05:28] Lee: You mean it was like a secondary vetting process?

Curry: Yes.

[Part 2 0:05:31] Lee: 'This person isn't going to make it on that base all winter.'?

Curry: Yes, and also the nature of the shipping task, which was very much ship to shore. All commercial shipping nowadays is containers, and sailing from A to B. These guys were doing some very very challenging work: small boat work, getting personnel and stores into very difficult locations. The ordinary Merchant Navy officer has got no experience of that. So I felt very very strongly that we wanted to keep control of the organisation but that was not something that it would be wise to front up with in the BAS Review Group. So I very much conducted the project in the way that Whitehall would expect one to do and there was actually one aspect of the PFI philosophy which did fit in very well and that was that during the UK summer the

ships came back for refit and so on, and although we could certainly charter the *James Clark Ross* out via NERC for various cruises that were nothing to do with BAS during that time, making productive use of that asset and also bring income in, we could do nothing with *Bransfield*. She was not a containerised vessel; she was very much – I forget the word for it now; it just doesn't come to ...

[Part 2 0:07:20] Lee: Right. A traditional ship?

Curry: A traditional cargo ship. Break bulk, that's the word I was looking for, break bulk. And so there was really no opportunity to charter *Bransfield* out, so she sat in Grimsby for four months of the year, four and a half months, not doing very much. So in terms of PFI, there was an opportunity there to use a new asset, or replacement asset, which could bring in income during the UK summer, when she wasn't operating in the Antarctic. So that part of PFI actually fitted in very well, and one project I did look at that was big at the time was the Northern Line Underground project, whereby – they have got a different name now but they were called London Underground It's called Transport of London now, and they put out a PFI project whereby the private sector would provide the trains, they would procure trains, they would maintain trains, but they would be run by British Underground as part of their integrated system. And I felt that fitted our requirement quite well.

[Part 2 0:08:35] Curry: It didn't involve losing control of the integrated operation, as London Underground couldn't do because they were operating an integrated system. So when I was talking to civil servants and that sort of thing, that was the main thing because they couldn't really ... It was quite a successful project from their point of view so they couldn't really criticise it, so I used that. In terms of how we set about it and David and Jeff Barnes who was the guy in Cambridge Headquarters who had technical oversight of the ships. Jeff has gone to Australia so I don't suppose you've had an opportunity to interview him. We worked together on it. What I did was: I went round most of the UK shipyards to see if there was any interest in getting involved in the PFI project of this sort, and most of the shipbuilding yards weren't really interested in PFI. They just wanted to build ships and sail ships, which I understood completely.

[Part 2 0:09:59] Curry: We put out a tender which didn't say 'We want you to build a new ship.', 'We want you to provide' (because this is the PFI philosophy) 'an Antarctic shipping service.' I haven't got the papers in front of me but it was phrased that way and we put it in the *European Journal* and in *Lloyds List* I think and so on. I should say I had worked, earlier on in my career in the Ministry of Defence, on long-term bare boat chartering some of the RFA tanker side. I had some experience of ship procurement, working for my then boss at the time. Anyway we got a variety of responses including some from the likes of Serco who said: 'Yes, we can do this; no problem.' So we obviously set up pre-qualification criteria. They had to have experience of Antarctic operation which ruled out people like that, fortunately, and in the end we boiled it down to two bidders because one of the things about PFI was that it was very costly in terms of advice. And being BAS of course we aimed to do things on a shoe-horn because we really didn't have much money.

[Part 2 0:11:33] Curry: One of the benefits of that visit that I described earlier, of visiting the PFI panel in the Cabinet Office, was that one of the people I met had

actually worked in the public sector before; he wasn't a banker or anything and he had worked at the Transport Research Laboratory not far from here, in Bracknell. And he was much more sympathetic to what I was talking about and 'Actually' he said 'I am leaving the Treasury, the Cabinet Office' (or whatever). He said 'I am setting myself up as a PFI consultant.' So I said 'Would you like to help us put in a bid?' Of course it was incredibly cheap really. Right at the end of this project, once it had gone through, the Treasury actually rang me up and said that 'You have achieved the cheapest consultancy costs of ...' I think in the end it cost £20,000 in consultancy fees. And he also engaged a Nigerian accountant to do the financial modelling.

[Part 2 0:12:47] Curry: So that was our team, as it were. The two bidders were an outfit called Stirling Shipping, in Scotland, and Rieber Shipping in Norway. We knew a huge amount about Rieber Shipping because they had been involved in the Antarctic and the Arctic, a very reputable company, and I knew that they had built a ship called the *Polar Queen* some two years previously which they had intended to be a sort of partially tourist ship as well as a cargo carrying ship, but they had not really been very successful in that. But they had done some work for the Australians down in the Antarctic on short term charter and so forth. So the bids were completely different in that essentially what Rieber Shipping were proposing to offer us a second-hand ship, albeit only two years old, and Stirling Shipping were offering to build a ship and of course one of the criteria was that the ship must be in a position to be able to do other work in the UK summer, bring in income and profit-sharing and all that sort of thing. So two completely different tenders really. Stirling Shipping in the end came up with a proposal to build a 6000-ton or 8000-ton vessel to be built in Japan, so there was going to be no UK benefit really, in terms of British shipbuilding companies.

[Part 2 0:14:36] Lee: Was that a major factor? Was that a Government condition, that British Industry should benefit?

Curry: No, but I think it weighed ...

[Part 2 0:14:45] Lee: On your conscience?

Curry: My conscience was irrelevant really but I think it would have weighed in the eventual submission that we had put through NERC and eventually to Treasury.

[Part 2 0:15:00] Lee: Right.

Curry: Rieber Shipping, on the other hand, would provide a second-hand ship. The ship had already been used in the North Sea for pipeline inspection work and so on, so we knew it was well capable of doing that sort of work. Stirling Shipping were talking about work in Brazil of some nature. That never became too clear but in our innumerable meetings that I had to chair, it was clear that Stirling Shipping were much more attuned in to the PFI sort of thinking and they wanted to operate the ship, which was something that we didn't want. And so we ended up with a sort of hybrid bid: that we would operate the ship but they would maintain it, and we could see – and you have probably seen some hospital examples – it gets extremely difficult. And so we weren't really very happy about that.

[Part 2 0:15:59] Curry: Rieber Shipping on the other hand were happy to come to an arrangement which in effect was a sort of long term bare boat charter, where they would provide the finance, and we would provide stage payments, or charter money et cetera. One of the particular criteria that was imposed by the PFI process: the thing had to be off balance sheet and if you could get the thing off balance sheet, we could get it through. Because don't forget that there was this quite intimidatory climate, that it had to be PFI and you had to meet PFI criteria. It was very tricky. The other bit of consultancy that we had to do was to get a reputable accountancy view on whether the whole deal would be on or off balance sheet. In those days, NERC's contract was with KPMG in the City, and so I went several times to see KPMG and all I really got out of them was 'on the one hand this and on the one hand that' and so on and so forth.

[Part 2 0:17:15] Curry: Anyway I had to write an enormously long paper making this proposal, that the tenders were in, so we had all the financial details and all the rest of it, and it was clear that Rieber Shipping would provide the best value over the longer term. This went to John Krebs and NERC then put it through the Treasury and to my astonishment, absolute astonishment (because I didn't think we would get away with this on/off balance sheet thing), it went through. And it's politics. They wanted to be able to demonstrate that the shipping area was something that was suitable for PFI, and it was as simple as that.

[Part 2 0:18:03] Lee: So you were, possibly unwittingly, playing them at their own game?

Curry: Well I didn't see it that way. I just wanted to get the thing through, really, whatever way we could, preserving our control of the operation, and getting the best value for the taxpayer which I honestly thought it was. I really didn't think that Stirling Shipping's bid was going to do the taxpayer a lot of good in the long term, as many hospitals are finding.

[Part 2 0:18:34] Lee: And was it felt that that the new *Bransfield* was indeed a success?

Curry: Well one of the difficulties I had was with my own staff, in that Ian Collinge, who was the Head of ... You have probably met Ian; very good chap, but he of course wanted a bigger ship, understandably. I would want the same thing, but Jeff and I had worked out that by using MoD shipping down to the Falklands Islands, we could actually manage with this smaller vessel. It was a smaller vessel but it did deliver 2000 tons deadweight which was smaller than *Bransfield's* but by operating in a different sort of way, we could manage it. The Stirling Shipping thing would have been too big to be honest. We would only have it half full, probably. So it was apples and oranges. I certainly saw Ian's point of view but at the end of the day, time was getting on. Don't forget this was '98/'99. I had to get something through because *Bransfield's* material state was getting worse and worse and we had to get this thing through, which we did. I got in touch with the Australians and said 'How do you feel about the *Polar Queen*?' and they came back (our Australian colleagues, ANARE) and they were full of praise. I found working with the Norwegians to be very good.

[Part 2 0:20:07] Lee: But was the ship, when it got into service, was the ship a success?

Curry: Well you would have to ask the people there at the time. I think it has been. It has brought in extra income for BAS. It has worked continuously in the North Sea where I gather it has ... The ship's captains would of course wanted to do it the old-fashioned way and I understand that completely. Stuart Lawrence and Co., they all wanted to go the same way as the *James Clark Ross* and the *Bransfield* and get a sum of money from Government and go and build your own ship to your own specifications. If we could have done that, I would have been more than delighted, and we would have probably got a better ship at the end of the day.

[Part 2 0:20:55] Lee: That hadn't proved to be an unmitigated success, with the *James Clark Ross*, because once you had taken delivery of it, in your first or second year at BAS, there were a lot of teething troubles, weren't there?

Curry: But you get that with most ships.

[Part 2 0:21:08] Lee: Do you?

Curry: Yes. There were problems with corrosion that gave us a lot of angst.

[Part 2 0:21:11] Lee: And the winch?

Curry: Yes, indeed. Yes, we haven't touched on that but yes, I had to deal with that issue.

[Part 2 0:21:18] Lee: Was that affecting your bank balance, or was all that ...?

Curry: No because it was done under guarantee, the work. It was very fortunate these problems exhibited themselves very early on, and within the guarantee period. It was very difficult, though, dealing with Swan Hunter at the time because they were going into bankruptcy, and in the end, some of the work we had to novate to other contractors, and we had held back money.

[Part 2 0:21:47] Lee: Ah right, OK. You had them over a sea barrel?

Curry: Yeah, pretty well on that, although it was very very difficult to get to the cause of the corrosion problem. David did a lot of the work on that. He went up to the University of Manchester; we eventually found a professor somewhere or other, and it turned out in the end that they had filled the original ballast tanks with Tyne water, which was very corrosive – things like that, as simple as that, you know.

[Part 2 0:22:18] Lee: The other significant sea change in the way that BAS was financing itself in your time was that there was an increased emphasis on scientists producing scientific research for which they got paid, so that there was: I think they called it 'backing winners'. The scientists would be obliged to produce commercially targeted research which could then be billed to other people. Am I right about that?

Curry: No. I have no knowledge of that. It may have happened after I left. I mean we were encouraged by NERC to try to find commercial outlets for some of the scientific work, that is true, and actually David Drewry did make a major effort at trying to attract the interest of the fish processing and fishing companies up in Grimsby, to interest them in fishing in the Southern Ocean. And he set up a presentation using some of the scientists in BAS. It fell on deaf ears. All they wanted to do was to go out and fish for haddock in the North Sea. So all the very good resources in the Southern Ocean are fished by the Koreans, the Chinese etc. But that is the only thing I recall where we were put under significant pressure on the commercial side of life, during my time.

[Part 2 0:23:54] Lee: The Antarctic Act of the 1990s required you to be a lot more environmentally friendly in the Antarctic, removing old bases, clearing up after years of throwing stuff into the gash, into the creek. And that also impinged on your finances because there was a danger I think, wasn't there, that the cost of complying with the new Treaty regulations would reduce your budget for science? And I guess that kind of problem ended up on your desk?

Curry: Yes, it was certainly an issue. I don't recall it being a particularly pressing financial issue. It was a practical issue really, of shipping the waste out to the Falkland Islands and to the double incinerator that MoD maintained at Mount Pleasant. It must have had a financial impact, because it involved labour and so forth.

[Part 2 0:24:52] Lee: And ship time?

Curry: To an extent, we did. In fact I went down on the *James Clark Ross* when we were clearing out some of the old bases but they were wooden, fairly simple structures. It did take some ship time but ...

[Part 2 0:25:13] Lee: It didn't keep you awake at night?

Curry: In itself it wasn't a major running cost issue. What did impact was the thing that I have already described, about getting out of Faraday. That would have been very expensive, for sure.

[Part 2 0:25:27] Lee: What about the Arctic? How did that happen, that BAS should start taking responsibility for the other end of the planet? Again was that something that you ...?

Curry: That was purely a NERC initiative really. We weren't pressing for anything. NERC had maintained a station at Ny Alesund for some years, I think, in the international station there. They simply asked us to take it on as a practical task, of running the logistics, and in fact we had somebody in Nick Cox who was ideal for the job. He was finding going down to the Antarctic ... He had previously been base commander at Signy, finding it very difficult with his family and so forth. He lived in the Lake District and he was the ideal man for it. John Hall and I went up a couple of times to see how he was managing, but he did a superb job I think. And all we did was run the logistics really.

[Part 2 0:26:30] Lee: So the ship you weren't using in the Antarctic ...?

Curry: No, not in my time anyway.

[Part 2 0:26:34] Lee: Could be used in the Arctic in the Northern summer?

Curry: No, no. I mean the scale of logistics supply out there was fairly small really. It was only a very small base. I think if you had about ten scientists during the summer, that might have been it. I can't remember the exact numbers directly but it wasn't ... and of course you had all the Norwegian commercial shipping going up there that any supplies would have been carried on. It was an international base anyway, so some of the purchasing was done through the Norwegian people up there. The main difficulty I think John and I had with it was getting rifle training really.

[Part 2 0:27:16] Lee: Because of polar bears?

Curry: Yes.

[Part 2 0:27:18] Lee: There had been a couple of deaths, hadn't there?

Curry: Oh yes, there are regular deaths up there because the Norwegians have nominated polar bears to be a protected species, whereas before they were extensively hunted on Spitzbergen, and as a result the bear population, certainly when John and I went up there, was about 4000. And so when you went out to do fieldwork outside the camp, you had to carry a rifle, a big old-fashioned 303, and of course getting the scientists each summer trained on it ... because they weren't our scientists. They were scientists from universities and so on. Getting them trained in firing this 303 ... I went to Bisley over there. This Health & Safety culture has just got crazy. In the end we had to use a Norwegian range up there; we couldn't get it done in this country.

[Part 2 0:28:14] Lee: You couldn't train here?

Curry: No. We did start somewhere up in Lancashire and Nick wasn't very happy with the facilities there, and getting it done somewhere a little more professional, at Bisley, just didn't turn out to be possible. So there you go.

[Part 2 0:28:31] Lee: Tell me about some of the other challenges. I've got one or two areas to discuss with you if you think it is appropriate. The Antarctic Environmental Data Centre seems to appear fairly prominently in the annual reports of the 1990s. Was that again something that ...?

Curry: Not something that fell to my part of the ship really. It was very much David Walton and Thorley⁸ (I forget his first name).

[Part 2 0:28:58] Lee: And how about restoring places like Port Lockroy? Was that again something that crossed your desk?

Curry: Oh yes, I was very involved in that. That was an initiative by the Antarctic Heritage Trust which at that time was chaired by my old friend Captain Pat McLaren

⁸ Mark Thorley.

and we were very supportive of this. I used to chair the meetings and get the thing off the ground. The Antarctic Heritage Trust obviously didn't have very many assets of its own and we could help them in a fairly cost effective way by a little bit of ship time, getting in ex-Fids who were happy to do the work, and getting some good publicity for the Survey. It was a win-win situation with the Antarctic Heritage Trust. Yes, we did spend a bit of money but it was pretty small potatoes really, in relation to the benefit that we got from the work. We had some very very good people working on the huts themselves and so on. You've probably met some of them.

[Part 2 0:30:01] Lee: You also had to take responsibility for restructuring the way that ... and the levels of pay within BAS, which I presume would have been a tricky enterprise, actually at coffee time, smoko time.

Curry: Well yes. David Drewry felt that it was necessary, and I agreed with him, to overhaul the pay of Antarctic contract staff. The permanent staff at BAS, including myself of course, were paid on NERC Civil Service type scales, so the permanent staff - that was in NERC's hands and that was that. There was no intention of doing anything about that. So we are talking about the staff that maintain the Antarctic stations who were generally employed either on summer-only contracts or the more usual long-term contract of two winters and three summers in Antarctica. And they ranged from scientific assistants through to GAs, diesel mechanics; you are familiar with the whole gamut of staff that we employ. The pay structure that had existed previously had been based on an old Crown Agents type pay and it was very very outdated really so I did embark on an exercise to reform the pay structure and I talked to a lot of people of course.

[Part 2 0:31:36] Curry: I'd had some experience of this in MoD and we simply based it on first of all the principle which held good in those days, certainly in the Civil Service, in the Government employment, that there should be some pay comparability with similar professional, technical or trade type work in the outside community in the UK. So that was the first point of call, that we would look at outside indices for say a plumber, doctor, whatever, we would look at them, and I managed to get comparability data for that. That would be that we would pay UK rates comparable to those sort of rates outside. And then the other two aspects of it was that there should be some recompense for living conditions in the Antarctic because clearly they weren't getting the benefits that we all enjoy here: in those days the Internet, going to the cinema, going out, all that stuff.

[Part 2 0:32:49] Lee: Deprivation?

Curry: Deprivation. There needed to be a factor built in for that. And the third factor was that there should be some performance element because at the end of the day, the base commanders, on whom we were depending to run the bases, had very little stick and very little incentive to people. It was a sort of flat rate. So I came up with a sort of bonus scheme which I felt was not radical, not oppressively radical, which is that most people went down there, they did a good job, they kept their nose clean. They would get 80% of a potential bonus, providing the base commander was happy. He would make the assessment. There would be an appeals system of course. And then there should be an element (I forget how much it was actually; it might have been 10% or 20%) for people that really did something outstanding, and that would be in

the gift of the base commander. And somebody that was a real pain in the neck, a real problem, they could lose their bonus altogether if it was serious enough. I felt that those were three fair enough principles. You can argue about detail.

[Part 2 0:34:07] Lee: But on the other hand, being in the Antarctic is a very good way of saving money, because if you are in the Antarctic, you can't spend money. So were you deducting the living costs: food and accommodation?

Curry: No. That was catered for really under the taxation regime. The way that worked was that they would not be charged UK rates of income tax, OK? This was an arrangement that was made originally, I think, between the Foreign Office and the Inland Revenue. But a 10% income tax rate would be levied. That was really to recognise that people down there did not get the full range of Government type services that we enjoy here, like the Environment Agency if you are flooded out, like the Fire Brigade, like the Police Force, those sorts of things. So it would be iniquitous to impose UK rates of income tax. So yes, that did give an opportunity for people to save money but they could also spend a lot of money. If you had got girlfriend trouble or something like that and you are on the satellite phone, they could get through a lot of money.

[Part 2 0:35:20] Curry: So we hoped they would be prudent and save the money and that was part of the incentive of recruiting people to go down there. At the end of the day you could be, say a young plumber of 22 or something; you could go down to the Antarctic. You could save virtually all your pay or most of your pay (subject to this 10% which by the way the Foreign Office pay back to us because we were running what services there were, if you see what I mean?)

[Part 2 0:35:54] Lee: Yes, circular money? But he could probably come back with enough money to set up his own business I guess.

Curry: They could come back with maybe £10,000, maybe more, I can't remember at the time, but yes, we were quite happy with that. We were paying a reasonable rate of pay that we would have to pay a plumber back here. The fact that they would never see their girlfriends or wives or anything like that was a big factor. They should get something for that, and they could get a bonus.

[Part 2 0:36:28] Lee: Whilst you were with BAS, of course there more and more women going South?

Curry: Yes, that was David Drewry's initiative. He very much wanted to, and he was under pressure from some of the lady scientists. The issue was not women going down to the Antarctic; it was over-wintering. That was the issue and it was a big issue really. We very much involved our medical advisors at the time. By the way, that was another big thing I was involved in towards the end of my time.

[Part 2 0:37:03] Lee: Well that was my next question, about the moving of BASMU to Plymouth. You are looking a bit grim.

Curry: Yes. Well we had a bit of correspondence between David Walton and me on that but I will come to that in a moment. Yes, so David was keen, and I think the first

woman over-wintering was at Signy. I forget her name now, Elizabeth something or other⁹. She was a doctor and that seemed to work reasonably well. And gradually, over a period of time, more were sent down there and you reminded me about the Halley winter base commander.

[Part 2 0:37:39] Lee: Vicky Auld?

Curry: Yes.

[Part 2 0:37:41] Lee: So what was your role in the negotiation, the re-negotiation, of the BASMU contract which led it to go to Derriford in Plymouth, rather than to Aberdeen?

Curry: Aberdeen. It was RGIT at Aberdeen, Robert Gordon Institute of Technology. Well the history of that ... I ought to start by setting the context. The history of that was that back in the '80s the previous Director, I think it was Dick Laws, reached a sort of gentlemen's agreement with RGIT that they would take on the role of managing and training the doctors who were going down there and providing emergency long-distance medical advice and cover. That had run very well for quite a number of years. It also had a research component attached to it which was largely the baby of a senior consultant up at Aberdeen General Infirmary, whose name I ...

[Part 2 0:38:46] Lee: Nelson Norman.

Curry: Nelson Norman, yes, he was the RGIT side of it, but there was a very well-known consultant; he was often on the radio¹⁰. I just can't remember his name at the moment, and he was running a research programme. He always comes on to talk about BSE and stuff like that. And that worked very well but David and Barry were getting concerned about the legal side of it because we were running into some problems with the General Medical Council about medical confidentiality and so on, because people like John Hall and myself who were controlling the logistics really had to know if people were seriously ill, particularly before the last planes or ships left. The GMC, although they sort of agreed to it, there was some unease at the time. There was also a problem that I can't talk to because I really don't know the details,

[REDACTED]

[Part 2 0:40:02] Curry: But Barry really put it to me that we really ought to put this on a proper legal basis and should we anyway, as a non-medical organisation, be directly employing doctors? Wouldn't it be better to actually sub-contract out the actual management, the personnel management of the doctors, which was sensible I think, in view of the medical liability and all that kind of stuff which was starting to become very public. So in the end we resolved to put it out to contract and I drafted a tender document and all the rest of it. We informed the hospitals and other likely providers in

⁹ Lesley Thomson in 1993 according to *Antarctica: An Encyclopedia*.

¹⁰ Professor Hugh Pennington.

the country that we were inviting a competition on this and it was fairly straightforward.

[Part 2 0:40:57] Curry: Having said that, the people at BASMU were very close to us, the BAS Medical Unit, but the senior medical officer there, whose name just escapes me at the moment, a very well respected guy, but he was coming up for retirement. We were also concerned that there was no kind of contractual obligation between RGIT and Aberdeen General Infirmary as well. We felt that could go wrong in an emergency, so that was another reason. Anyway we put it all out to contract. We had pre-qualification sessions and met all the likely providers, and there were quite a number. There were probably about ten major hospitals who put in for it. It was regarded as quite prestigious, and in the end it went to Derriford.

[Part 2 0:41:47] Curry: I think the Derriford bid appealed to us, both financially – it was competitive financially with RGIT – but because they were proposing to locate the BAS Medical Unit and the training in the A & E Department at Derriford, which was part Naval manned and the head of A & E at the time, he had been in the Navy, and they were very very used to dealing with problems at sea, and long distance and so on. And they put in a very good bid on that. The weakness in it was that their research part of it, which was quite a minor part of the contract financially, was a link-up with the University down there, Plymouth University I think it is called, and David Walton particularly felt that their bid wasn't anything like as good as the ... But the two had to go together, and so I can imagine he would be ..., in fact he wasn't very happy about the research side of it going to Plymouth, which I understand.

[Part 2 0:43:04] Lee: Tell me about Chris Rapley's arrival.

Curry: Oh Chris, yes. Well we had gone through a very difficult period really. Barry, as you know, fell off a cliff in the Falkland Islands, broke his leg. We had a Deputy Director, Dougal Goodman, who had come to us from BP and had not really been a success particularly with the scientists and really rubbed NERC up the wrong way as well, not that that was hard to do. I think he rubbed up John Krebs in particular, and at the time we were at ... it's the leadership thing again. Our relationship with NERC had got to a pretty low ebb really, at that time, which I very much regret. I tried to keep good relations on my side of the house but at the scientific level it was not too good.

[Part 2 0:43:55] Curry: Not that I didn't have my clashes with NERC as well, but when Chris came it was a bit of a breath of fresh air really because he came into it purely as a scientific manager, because the science side of it was being criticised. And he set out straight away to try to reform the way the science was operated, changing the structure and various things that you have probably heard about from him. I am not qualified to talk about all that although I was involved in all the discussions, So he was a very very good acquisition for the Survey I think. They would have been sorry to see him go. Yes, I found him a good Director.

[Part 2 0:44:43] Lee: Why did you decide to go, at the end of the decade? This is a Prisoner question. Why did you resign?

Curry: Quite simply, I was due to retire in 2005. I had been used to moving job a lot and at the end of ten years, particularly the last bit, of getting the *Polar Queen* (the *Shackleton*) into service, was very difficult. I didn't mention that part of it, where we were trying to get the ship classified on the British Register, something that you would think the Maritime and Coastguard Agency would be ecstatic about. But they put every obstacle in our way, getting it transferred from Norwegian registry to the British registry and Falklands flag.

[Part 2 0:45:31] Lee: So the *Polar Queen* became the *Shackleton*?

Curry: Yes, and that was one of the things in the contract. It had to be transferred to effectively the British Registry.

[Part 2 0:45:42] Lee: And it was the *Shackleton* that replaced the *Bransfield*, effectively?

Curry: Yes, and it got down to the wire, really. We sorted out the contract with Rieber Shipping and all the rest of it, and then suddenly these people were saying 'You can't carry 2000 tons.' And we had to go to the extreme. I flew over to Norway. They were quite happy with it carrying 2000 tons. We had to go to the extreme measure of putting the ship in dry dock in Hull, taking every single fucking bloody thing off the ship and putting enormous water bags on in what is described in maritime terms as an inclining experiment, to see where the ship's centre of gravity was, which is normally something that is done when the ship is built. And the centre of gravity remains the same. And all the time the *Bransfield* was almost off our hands. She had been de-stored and all the rest of it, and we had the Antarctic summer coming. We had to get the stuff down and relieve the bases and were these people really going to stop us doing it? I lost weight over that. That was the worst crisis I had in the Survey.

[Part 2 0:46:49] Lee: How was it resolved?

Curry: In the end the inclining experiment worked out OK. It was a big exercise. Poor old Stuart Lawrence, my heart went out to him at the time because I was almost on the point of issuing orders to re-store the *Bransfield*. It was that bad. I think it was June/July and the ship was due to sail in October.

[Part 2 0:47:13] Lee: Did that push you over the edge a bit?

Curry: It did but I think the main two things – I am coming back to your question – the main two things were that I was exhausted at the end of ten years, to be quite honest. I was used to moving jobs much more often, and I did miss that very much because when you are in an organisation for ten years, a lot of the stuff you are doing is the same. So I was ready for a change in that side of things. Secondly NERC asked me. It is always nice to be asked, isn't it?

[Part 2 0:47:44] Lee: Oh right. You were invited to apply to British Geological Survey, were you?

Curry: Oh yes. They wanted me to go there. They had a crisis up there to do with money and redundancies, and the guy who was doing the job up there, the Director of

Finance and Administration, was retiring, and they wanted what they described as a safe pair of hands up there. And the third reason was money. I will be quite blunt about it. I was maintaining two ... I was maintaining this house and my flat in Cambridge at my own expense and I wasn't paid a fortune, and if NERC were going to send me up there, I said 'Well my price of going is you provide the rent for a flat there.'

[Part 2 0:48:30] Lee: Where is 'up there'?

Curry: Nottingham.

[Part 2 0:48:32] Lee: Nottingham, OK. One more question, because I am aware that you have to go to a meeting. Working at BGS and also having to have a relationship with NERC when you were with the British Geological Survey, did that in any way, when you look back at your time at BAS, did that make your time at BAS any clearer?

Curry: At BGS, do you mean?

[Part 2 0:48:56] Lee: Mm.

Curry: Very different to ...

[Part 2 0:48:59] Lee: You looking at BAS from the outside now.

Curry: Yes, two very different organisations. BGS was very much bigger, nearly 800 staff. The oldest scientific organisation in the country. I don't know if you knew that.

[Part 2 0:49:12] Lee: I am not surprised.

Curry: Half their income came from commercial work, commissioned work. So it was different sorts of pressures. BAS was a much younger organisation, both in terms of when it had been started and in terms of the age of staff. So BGS was much more a conventional Civil Service type organisation. People had been in there since the year dot etcetera etcetera. It was a much more settled culture. They very much envied BAS because BAS's income came all from the Science Budget from NERC. They didn't have to get commissioned research and that was ... Whereas a lot of staff up in BGS, geologists and geophysicists and so on, they were on what was called soft money. They had to go out and win income all round the world and so managing up there was an entirely different kettle of fish. New Director: an Australian with whom eventually I got on very well. He asked me to stay on two extra years after my retirement date. I enjoyed my time up there but that was as hard work as it was in BAS to be honest; harder really.

[Part 2 0:50:24] Lee: How did it affect your thinking about BAS, looking back at BAS, having had the BGS experience?

Curry: A lot of things were very similar. The relationship with NERC was equally bad at BGS. I spent a lot of time fighting NERC. Also because NERC had asked me to go up there, I was seen initially as a NERC plant which I really wasn't. Yes, I missed a

lot of BAS. I think the BAS culture was better. It was a more open culture and they were much more open to new ideas of doing things, because of the throughput of staff and so forth. Of the two organisations, both have their merits. More fun working in BAS, for sure. You had got the trips down to the Antarctic and so forth, but BGS: it's all involved in fracking now, isn't it? There you are. It will probably grow again, because they had a huge staff during the North Sea boom, 1500 staff I think.

[Part 2 0:51:40] Lee: Are you comfortable with fracking?

Curry: Yes. Funnily enough I chaired the board which appointed the guy who is the expert down there, a chap called Stephenson. Yes, I am. but the scientific side, as it were, I am happy with. What I think will be very difficult in this country is the road movements and all that.

[Part 2 0:52:01] Lee: Is the ...?

Curry: The road movements. That is what will make it unpalatable here. We are a much more crowded country than the States, but I think scientifically the concept of fracking: I trust the guys up there. They know what they are doing.

[Part 2 0:52:16] Lee: You don't think there is any credence to be given to the environmentalists who are nervous?

Curry: No. Contamination of aquifers, you mean? No, not if it is done properly. You can contaminate aquifers but you can do that in other ways.

[Part 2 0:52:31] Lee: Being a farmer?

Curry: Yes, sure. But whether fracking is feasible, with a number of road movements and all the rest of it, is an entirely different question. I think it can be extremely difficult, particularly down in southern England.

[Part 2 0:52:44] Lee: Not far from here, in fact.

Curry: Yes indeed.

[Part 2 0:52:46] Lee: So it's not the answer to all our problems, then?

Curry: No, not the answer to all our problems but it could make a major contribution.

[Part 2 0:52:53] Lee: It's been fascinating, Frank. I am very grateful to you. Thank you.

Curry: No, I have enjoyed it.

[Part 2 0:53:01] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [Part 1 0:20:29] Importance for BAS of the ozone hole discovery.
- [Part 1 0:22:02] 'Baptism of Ice'.
- [Part 1 0:25:58] Difference between BAS and Navy ships.
- [Part 1 0:29:46] Undesirable effect of the Internet.
- [Part 1 0:35:04] Battle with NERC for enhanced running costs.
- [Part 1 0:39:08] The Way Forward programme.
- [Part 1 0:41:00] Transfer of Faraday to the Ukraine.
- [Part 1 0:43:11] 'Because we are an island people'.
- [Part 1 0:46:38] Learning from the Italians.
- [Part 1 0:49:05] Automatic sea ice photography at Signy.
- [Part 1 0:53:02] The Dash-7 pontoon ski fiasco.
- [Part 1 1:02:21] Tensions between builders and BAS staff.
- [Part 1 1:05:34] Effect of David Drewry leaving.
- [Part 2 0:00:52] PFI (Private Finance Initiative).
- [Part 2 0:04:31] The integrated nature of BAS.
- [Part 2 0:09:59] The procurement of a replacement for *RRS Bransfield*.
- [Part 2 0:18:34] The *Polar Queen* becomes the *Shackleton*.
- [Part 2 0:25:27] BAS involvement in the Arctic.
- [Part 2 0:27:16] Health & Safety makes rifle training difficult.
- [Part 2 0:30:01] Pay reform for Antarctic contract staff.
- [Part 2 0:37:41] BASMU moves to Derriford.
- [Part 2 0:43:04] Arrival of Chris Rapley.
- [Part 2 0:45:42] Problems getting *Shackleton* on the British Shipping Register.
- [Part 2 0:48:59] Comparison of BAS and the British Geological Survey.