

DENNIS ALLSOPP

Edited transcript of a recording of Dennis Allsopp interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, during the Signy Island 60th Anniversary gathering on 14-16 September 2007. BAS Archives reference AD6/24/1/026. Transcribed by Dawn Sutcliffe on 9th May 2014.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Dennis Allsopp, recorded at Peterhouse College Cambridge, on 15th September 2007 by Chris Eldon Lee: Dennis Allsopp.

Allsopp: I'm Dr Dennis Allsopp, and I was born in Rotherham, South Yorkshire in 1946.

[0:00:18] Lee: And you are rather unique at this conference in that you were never employed by BAS.

Allsopp: That's right.

[0:00:24] Lee: So what were you doing before you went south?

Allsopp: I used to work in a specialised unit at Aston University, which was part of the Department of Biological Sciences, and this was an information centre, which collected scientific papers. It published information journals, both primary journals and bibliographic ones, it carried out contract research, and it taught on University courses. The nature of the unit was Bio-deterioration, and this is the breakdown of products or materials of economic significance by living organisms. At that time I was actually doing a PhD on the decomposition of cotton cloth for a Biocide manufacturer and I was also the information and service officer of the unit. So I got a fellowship after I graduated and I was doing my PhD part-time.

[0:01:36] Lee: All of which sounds fairly cosy.

Allsopp: Yea

[0:01:39] Lee: Until something happened.

Allsopp: Well what happened, one day into my room came David Walton of the British Antarctic Survey. He was a native of Birmingham and he'd been doing some research on cellulose decomposition in the Antarctic, and I think probably by looking at the literature he'd realised we were working on it too. So as he came up to visit his parents in Birmingham, he popped in to see me and we found we had quite a few mutual interests, photography and the micro

biology I was talking to him about the standardised cotton cloth that we use for industrial work. This was a cloth called a Shirley Test Cloth by the Textile Shirley Institute¹ in Lancashire, and although it was well known as a test substrate in industry, the purist, shall we say, biologists had never heard of it. Anyway, to cut a long story short, it was out of stock at the time, and we got the Shirley Institute to weave another set of this very precisely defined cotton cloth of which David bought a stock in for work in the Antarctic. So we collaborated on this test cloth, and we did some experiments to show how it decomposed, not that that was in any doubt, but just to set standards, and that was published in one of our own journals.

[0:03:22] So getting to know David, I asked him to come up and give a talk on the British Antarctic Survey to our Biological Society at the University. Well, whilst he was doing that, he came up and showed us all fantastic pictures and all the macho clothing and whatever. So it's a very popular sort of topic. One of my professors, Geoffrey Pugh, who died a couple of years ago, Geoffrey was always on the lookout for a jolly trip somewhere and he asked David whether or not visitors were ever taken to the Antarctic. Well, the answer was yes: we then sought to get research grants, ... about a year later we got the funding in place for a proposal for him and me to go down and look at decomposition of plant and animal remains, the fungal side of it. Not a lot of micro fungal work had been done, some had been done by BAS, but very few independent operators had done any. So the thing was wide open, there was a lot to do.

[0:04:43] Lee: Why did you feel it was worth doing?

Allsopp: Well, not a lot was really known about how things happen microbiologically in a cold climate. We knew that some of these residues were bound to decay, but we had no idea at what rate, and we'd no idea what the causative organisms were. We knew that some of them did accumulate. The moss banks for instance: moss becomes a thick carpet, feet thick with peat below it. It just gets bigger and bigger and bigger because there's very little decomposition. And when it came to animal remains we don't know: it's all really to do with the bigger picture of the recycling of elements in that biosphere really.

[0:05:29] Lee: Did you feel the work would be only important in the Antarctic itself, or could you relate it back to other work you were doing?

Allsopp: No, it's of more general significance because what's in the Antarctic can relate to cold zones anywhere and... we had problems with what happens

¹ Established in 1920 as a research centre dedicated to cotton production technologies

with cold stores, for instance, in Britain. Regularly we freeze food, we know all about that. What happens to other materials? Can they stand it? Not a lot was known if you were to say ‘What happens, and how fast do things decompose?’ This is a question that laymen often ask and it’s ‘how long is a piece of string?’ [laughs]. The answer is ‘it depends’. And it’s something that can be measured and looked at quite quickly and quite cheaply. It’s not rocket science: You just need a matchbox of soil and the usual lab techniques. Which begs the question ‘why go and do it all the way down there?’ [laughs.] One of the things is a lot of these organisms are quite fragile actually... If you just bring them back, it’s not quite the same, otherwise you could do a great deal of Antarctic work by just getting samples, but it’s not the same thing.

[0:06:56] Lee: OK, so you had a project, innovative and pioneering project. You had the funding. What happened next: how did you actually get to go?

Allsopp: Right, well first of all we had to get the University to let us go.

[0:07:12] Lee: Was that problematical?

Allsopp: Well, it was and it wasn’t really. Geoff Pugh being a Prof (Professor) can do what he likes. We had another Professor, who shall be nameless at the time, who was really very good at curbing enthusiasm for anybody who wasn’t in his field. I was very junior at the time. Anyway when we got the grant there was really no reason why we shouldn’t have gone, but I remember my immediate boss had gone on holiday when we were told we could do it. So I had to track him down on holiday and get him to phone the Prof and he really couldn’t find an excuse to say no. So we were sort of signed up for it: we then came down to BAS and picked our kit and we were delighted to know that we could keep it, not realising what it looks like and smells like when its covered in seabird vomit! And what’s left of a pair of boots while walking on razor sharp rock for weeks on end. So we got our bags packed and prepared to go down.

[0:08:27] Lee: So this was 1979/80?

Allsopp: Yea, we left on Boxing Day 1979.

[0:08:35] Lee: How much preparation did you have? Were you sent on courses to teach you how to operate in the Antarctic?

Allsopp: Nothing!

[0:08:46] Lee: Nothing at all?

Allsopp: Not really, no. It was just assumed you were grown up and you were field biologists who put a project forward ...

[0:08:56] Lee: No induction course?

Allsopp: No. I believe there was something but I don't think...I'm not sure whether I was never invited or it was inconvenient or Geoff Pugh couldn't go. No we didn't: nothing at all really.

[0:09:13] Lee: And the fact that you were not a BAS person didn't seem to matter?

Allsopp: No! No, we were known to BAS personnel by then. We'd met them; we'd done work with them. It was just assumed that you were competent.

[0:09:29] Lee: And how did you decide what to take in terms of technical support?

Allsopp: Well, we had to check what was available on the base.

[0:09:39] Lee: Which was more or less what you expected?

Allsopp: It was quite adequate. As I say, it's not rocket science what we did. We do consumables: you need a lot of glass bottles, a lot of media, and a microscope. We did in fact send down a microscope of our own because they are usually the things that are in a bit short supply and I think we sent down one of our own, and some consumables. But we didn't require, in those days certainly, any big analytical machinery. We weren't doing DNA work, and we weren't doing cloning, and sequencing. Some of that had not yet been invented. We were just growing up organisms, not even with incubators. We sort of did it: either warm was on the lab, cool was on the window sill. We were just growing them up, identifying them, and taking it from there really.

[0:10:40] Lee: So you travelled light?

Allsopp: Pretty much. We didn't carry much at all with us. We'd sent stuff down through BAS, but it was mainly consumables, media. Microbiologists always ran short of these glass dishes, petri dishes or plastic ones or whatever. You get through these whatever project you're doing. You've never got enough of these, or bottles or media. We did manage. There's also a limit to the amount you can actually look at in a day, so it's no good making ten thousand plates because you'll never actually look at them....

[0:11:20] Lee: The trip down, I've just been reading the beginnings at least of your journal, of your three months trip to the Antarctic. The trip down reads extremely chaotically.

Allsopp: It was, yea! It was an adventure in itself really, the trip down. We set off ok, we got out of Heathrow ok, and within hours we were diverted into Portugal. We were stuck there overnight. We got down to Rio, tangled with all the Brazilian bureaucracy. Got another flight down to Buenos Aires the next day, then we got stuck and, for various reasons which were always quoted as being political or security, they wouldn't let the *Bransfield* put into places where we were. So having set off on Boxing Day, we ended up down in the Patagonian desert on New Year's Day 1980. The final problem was getting out to the *Bransfield*. The BAS organisation had got a lot of contacts obviously, and the *Schmidt Lloyd III* salvage tug was in Comodoro Rivadavia², and the crew had obviously had a fantastic New Year. The barbeque was on deck and they'd all got hangovers. I don't know what money changed hands but we were taken out on this. It was a beautiful morning, I remember it very well, but there was quite a swell running. Having smashed several big wicker fenders between the two ships, decided they'd swing out the crane from the *Bransfield*, and take us with the tomatoes and potatoes, and just lift us in a net, two or three at a time onto the *Bransfield*. So we ended up on the *Bransfield*.

[0:13:24] Lee: Were you comfortable with that?

Allsopp: Yea, I was actually! The bottom actually slipped so we were at an angle. It's a lot nicer doing that than grabbing rope ladders in a moving sea, or jumping from boat to boat, that's very dangerous [laughs]. I've done it a lot but it's still very dangerous. So, that was alright. And then we sailed on and I think we ended up on Signy on 7th January. So it was quite a...

[0:13:53] Lee: And what did you find? One of the reasons for doing these interviews is to see how Signy has developed over the decades, and you were there right at the very beginning of the 1980's. What impressed you about Signy? What were your images of Signy at that time?³

Allsopp: We were told that it was always full of mank,⁴ it was always going to be very grey and dank and whatever. And it never was that bad actually. I think it was a fairly gloomy day the day we arrived. But, very different I suppose. You got the instant impression that there is wildlife around. You got the

² In Southern Argentina

³ Allsopp was a 'visiting summer scientist' at Signy Island

⁴ 'Claggy' weather

impression that it's a very rugged place. Anyone if they'd been and had a history of walking in hills and going to the Lake District and the Scottish mountains and this sort of thing, probably expect something fairly rugged, and it certainly is. At the time I was 34, and Geoffrey was well into his 50's, and all the young men, most of them anyway were in their very early 20's. [inaudible] Our base commander was Dave Rootes, a wonderful bloke, but he looked then so youthful, it was quite incredible. I was expecting a base commander to be a wizened old sea captain, then this child who never shaved appeared and he used to get his leg pulled a bit [laugh]. He'd already done several winters there, and he ended up getting the Polar medal and the Fuchs medal⁵ and he's still very active... and he's quite famous for his Polar work.

[0:15:43] Lee: So there's potential for a barrier or a gulf between the two sets of people; the two scientists from Aston, and the much younger regular Fids. Did that ever raise its head?

Allsopp: I don't think that ever raised it actually at all, because we were all in the same boat, you're all dressed the same. I think if anyone had raised any 'airs and graces' or asked for special treatment they'd have been told in no uncertain terms to get a life and get with it. You realise there is so much you didn't know, it's like going to a new school. You had to learn the jargon. You had to learn the routine. You had to fit in. You have to fit in with the routine of the base. You took your share of the cleaning, the washing and everything else, and heavy work and chipping rust and mixing concrete and all that sort of thing: which is quite right.

[0:16:47] Lee: Did they tell you that before you went?

Allsopp: Oh Yea. We were told. You can't go and say 'I am a scientist'. That does not go down well. I'm sure it must have happened from time to time with visitors, but that's not the way to win friends and influence people at all.

[0:17:07] Lee: So socially there was no real trouble at all?

Allsopp: No.

[0:17:11] Lee: And when you saw your quarters were they what you imagined?

Allsopp: Oh they were fine, yea. It was in what they call the Plastic Palace now, which has now been demolished. The pit rooms were shared bunk rooms, 2 or 4 people, but that was ok. The place was very warm. The food was fantastic.

⁵ Fuchs Medal in 1986 (Wikipedia). No date for the award of the Polar medal found.

[0:17:37] Lee: Really?

Allsopp: Yea! Oh yea, I put weight on no end. I think the calorie allowance was 7 or 9000 calories a day, designed for young men using dog sledges, not older men sitting in laboratories looking down microscopes [laughs.]

[0:17:58] Lee: Was the food by that time mostly brought in by ship or was it stuff that was caught and captured locally?

Allsopp: It was all brought in. Caught and captured nothing. We ate a penguin while we were there that was found dead, but interfering with the wildlife for food was long gone. Dogs had gone by then so you weren't shooting seals for dog meat. (There was) little fresh stuff. Occasionally when boats had been to the Falklands you get some fresh material, fresh oranges. I remember some oranges coming during one call of a ship, and we had a fantastic burst of Penicillium infection on all our samples. It was bringing an infection on oranges onto the base, and we wondered what on earth was going on. We'd got this Penicillium, and it took us a couple of days and we realised. The actual normal atmosphere is better than an operating theatre out there. You can take a Petri dish and take the top off, leave it outdoors. It's a common enough trick to show people to test. I remember, I think we left one out for 6 hours once. I think we got 1 colony on. The air is incredibly pure, even though there's animals' crapping all over the place; Lots of bacteria, but not a lot of fungal spores. Anyone who suffers from hay fever, which is in many cases fungal rather than pollen, it must be a wonderful place to go.

[0:19:39] Lee: So the oranges disturbed your work?

Allsopp: Yea, but not for long. We just wondered why we'd got a lot of this Penicillium on it, but we realised that...

[0:19:51] Lee: On the other hand fresh oranges must have been quite a treat? You were only there for 3 months. You could have been there for years.

Allsopp: Yea. Some meat was obtained from the Falklands but that was frozen. Geese and some mutton, sheep were brought in. The things that we didn't have... we didn't have fresh eggs, apart from when a particular ship called, one of these cruise liners. The winterers went out and brought fresh eggs back. That really is a big, big deal, a fresh egg. Salad, well... You're not allowed to bring any foreign plants into the Antarctic.

[0:20:38] Lee: Even 25 years ago?

- Allsopp: No, but somehow tomato and lettuce seed appeared from somewhere, and was growing in a green house. With a great deal of thought you can get a tiny little shoot of lettuce. I don't think I ever saw a home grown tomato, but a tiny little lettuce. I don't think Antarctica is going to be overrun by lettuce to be honest, or tomatoes. [laughs]... No, you didn't get fresh salad.
- [0:21:10] Lee: Were you able to maintain contact with home or Aston?
- Allsopp: Just about. I was reminiscing with someone last night. We didn't know what the rules were until we were actually there. I think we were allowed 100 words a month by telex as a freebie. If there was an emergency, you could send out and pay for yourself a telex as a telegram, which could take up to a week, which went via BAS at Cambridge. That was it! Now I believe the bases, certainly Rothera, it's got an extension from Cambridge. Just pick the phone up; it's presumably satellite phone calls.
- [0:22.04] Lee: You had no need to talk to Birmingham University?
- Allsopp: No, the motivators were ourselves. Nobody else knew about the work. We were our own masters in what we did, which is nice. So you can please yourself exactly what you are doing.
- [0:22.21] Lee: One thing I notice talking to other chaps is that they didn't really have a routine as such. They worked through the night if they felt like it and slept through the day time. Did you have a clear cut daily timetable?
- Allsopp: No. It was really governed by what was coming up on the work. We'd take samples; we'd plate them out in the lab and wait to see what grew. If a lot grew you had a lot of work. If not much grew you'd be taking more samples. So you worked on material, and you did what you could or wanted to do on what transpired. But certainly with the timetable, you can become nocturnal. You can go through and ... especially if people had difficulty sleeping with the lightness. I know I found that rather difficult. There was a tendency to stay up very late talking and chatting and going to bed very late, and then getting up late. In a way it doesn't matter but anarchy can break out like that if you're working in teams. Visiting scientists, in a way, it doesn't really matter. It's up to them. It's no good if the cook's decided not to get up [laughs], there's no lunch! So you've got to watch this sort of thing.
- [0:23.52] Lee: What about hygiene? By the time you got there in 1980 was hygiene fairly easy to maintain or were you still struggling?
- Allsopp: It was easy in a way but... Showers were limited. We seemed to manage without a big deal. I remember my wife saying when I said about washing the

towels, and she said ‘well, how did you wash them when you were away?’ and I said ‘wash towels? Don’t know whether I ever did actually.’ [laughs] [inaudible] It’s a very clean atmosphere, although that’s a bit of a contradiction in terms when you think of all the mess and vomit you get involved in. But you get that off with water beforehand. On a Saturday night you’d be wearing a suit. I’ve launched boats wearing a suit and a bow tie.

[0:24:53] Lee: Why? How do you mean?

Allsopp: We’re British for God’s sake! [laughs]

[0:25:00] Lee: You didn’t put it on specially?

Allsopp: Yea.

[0:25:02] Lee: *Did* you?

Allsopp: Not to push the boat out, no. I was having my dinner. We dressed up on a Saturday night. People would put a shirt and tie on and a suit. There was even a talk when we went down, because we were passing through the Falklands, of whether we should take a dinner jacket with us. In case the governor asked us, as visiting scientists, to have dinner. Well we didn’t and he didn’t so we were alright. We’d got a dark suit, a smart shirt and a tie and everybody dressed up. It was certainly a jacket and tie job on a Saturday night.

[0:25:39] Lee: It sounds as though the standards at the base had come a long way quite quickly since the 60’s and 70’s.

Allsopp: It wasn’t scruffy. We did a scrub out in the Plastic Hut. I think once you’ve got conditions that look as though they can be cleaned. We weren’t using solid fuel. There weren’t the old airborne stoves⁶ and things like that. The heating was electric so the place wasn’t full of smoke and soot. So, it was essentially clean. There would be a scrub out once a week and I remember polishing the brass strips at the bottom of the door with Brasso.

[0:26:18] Lee: So there was pride in the place?

Allsopp: Oh yea, very much so. Boots came off downstairs and you’d walk about in your socks or slippers upstairs or your indoor shoes. If people start walking in covered in seabird vomit or whatever, they’re not going to be very popular. So people didn’t.

⁶ Anthracite burning stoves – the prime source of heating during the FIDS era.

[0:26:40] Lee: The other thing that seems to have changed around that time was the attention that was paid to Health & Safety. Were you conscious of anything significant in Health & Safety?

Allsopp: Yes it was bloody dangerous!

[0:26:50] Lee: [laughs] Can you elaborate?

Allsopp: Unloading things was always, shall we say, rugged. One thing was barrel hauling. We unloaded inflammable stores from scows⁷ onto the beach near the old oil tank and these were brought up to the base by being pulled up rails on a little trolley, and then transferred to a trolley that followed the contours. How this was done was you attached a rope, and it's like the old Hoffnung⁸ tale with the wheel barrow going up and coming down. A load of people would hold a rope and run down the hillside, which pulled the barrow up the other end, and so you were running – with someone in front you couldn't see where you were going really – in big heavy boots over very sharp rock, and one fall there you'd either hit the rock going downhill or somebody would trample on you. Didn't happen, but it was kind of scary at the time. I remember someone saying 'go and make some coffee for us, you've had enough. You've done your bit!' But, you took part in that sort of thing.

[0:28:10] Lee: So there was nobody going round with a clipboard saying 'we ought to assess this situation'?

Allsopp: Not to my knowledge, no. Things had been going on a while. I think we were very careful. It's very eye-opening when you get there and you've got a ruck sack and a morphine syringe is given to you. An automatic syringe of morphine for when you fall into 'the crevasse' [laughs]. One or two instances: I remember going out in a boat, and I think boating has been curbed quite a lot. We took two RFD's up to North Point one day.

[0:28:47] Lee: RFD's?⁹

Allsopp: They are inflatable dinghies with outboards on. When we got there it was a bit rough, we decided we really should go back. I remember having to turn round in the troughs of the waves which is... you've got to do it quick, otherwise you broach¹⁰. During this the fuel line came off the motor and it stopped, but at least I'd got an experienced helmsman there who just

⁷ Flat bottomed boat used to haul freight, like a small barge.

⁸ 'The Bricklayer's Story' by Gerrard Hoffnung.

⁹ Inflatable boats made by the RFD Co., an airship manufacture, which trialed their original boat concept just after the end of WW1.

¹⁰ Sailing term: broaching, side-on to waves, could lead to the boat capsizing.

connected it, prayed like mad, pulled the starter and we got going again. It's not the first close call I have had, well not really close call, but it could have been. So there are things like that. It happens when you're in that sort of set up really. I think the biggest risk is food poisoning.

[0:29:47] Lee: Really?

Allsopp: Yes, and fire. Two things. Apart from falling down a cliff, or falling over in which case you are careful and you don't do stupid things. The two main risks are fire. So every week there was a full breathing apparatus fire practice with hidden bodies and all this. We always did that. And there was always a night watchman. There was someone awake who did the clearing up during the night in the lounge. So someone was on fire watch all night. And then there is food poisoning, and as far as I remember there wasn't a single outbreak of tummy bugs that were food related. Might have been a few that were drink related, but not food related, while we were there. Because the standard of washing up... And it's funny because when I was writing up my journal, although we had people on gash¹¹ who were clearing up, I don't remember how we washed up and I think it was all done by hand in big sinks. I don't think we had a dish-washing machine. I think I would have remembered it if we had. It was washed up immediately, and things like the tin opener were scoured. I've always got a thing about tin openers now. It always gets washed every time you use it. So food poisoning and fire are the main ones.

[0:31:20] Lee: The fire's obvious, the food poisoning I am not quite so clear about. What were you concerned about?

Allsopp: If standards of hygiene in the kitchen were low. If people helping with food preparation or washing up or being around didn't wash hands, didn't clean utensils, didn't wash up plates, left food around to go off, there's potentially a problem. That was always taken good account of.

[0:31:56] Lee: The cold climate didn't reduce the risk?

Allsopp: Well it was not cold indoors you see. Once it's out of the fridge, it's pretty warm on the base. We had excessive power. We had more power than we could use. So, it (the food) could have gone off.

[0:32:14] Lee: More power than you could use...?

¹¹ Gash hand. A Royal Navy term for one on clean-up duty, a usage adopted by Fids.

Allsopp: The generators were capable of generating more power. In the summer, I don't understand how electricity works but, in the summer they had an artificial load which sort of mopped up excess electricity. In the winter they did use a lot. No doubt now they've got all sorts of gizmo's and air conditioning and whatever.

[0:32:45] Lee: How was the human waste dealt with in that period? The earlier guys would simply go down to the water's edge with it.

Allsopp: Same really, except it wasn't the water's edge. There used to be a loo on the end of the jetty with a little flag but now it was indoors. There were 2 WC's. These were kept ice free by running the condensing coolant from the water stills for the labs, into the WC bowls, and that warmed the water up. There was a constant slight flow down. It was just straight raw sewage out to the end of the jetty.

[0:33:28] Lee: Into the Bay?

Allsopp: Right. Which is why, possibly, we didn't eat the *Notothenioid*¹² fish that swam round there waiting for it. The other thing, which could have been remarkable, was the fresh water; how that was collected. What happened was there was a big tank of... in the winter it was snow blocking: digging snow, melting it in a tank round the generator exhaust. In the summer it was collecting rain water. There was a big pool, as we saw earlier on today, a pool big enough to put a canoe in, on the hillside. That was fed by laying hosepipes up the hillside into puddles. As the melt water accumulated it ran into this water. Being a biologist, when I see water that is bright green, I know there's something growing in it. You've got a big tank, there's all the birds flying over dropping the old guano in, full of nitrogen. If it was your garden pond, you'd be worried because you wouldn't be able to see the goldfish. But that's what we drank. That is another blank in my memory, possibly. What did we do with the water? Whether it was filtered or not? But, we drank water. We must have filtered it in some way. But water came through taps, and water came out of showers and it never seemed to present a problem.

[0:35:08] Lee: Let's go back to the research work. You were there for 3 months which is a remarkably short period of time. Did you achieve a great deal in those 3 months?

Allsopp: Well we managed to publish a paper out of it. That's not necessarily an answer but...

¹² Fish largely endemic to the Antarctic.

[0:35:20] Lee: That was the minimum requirement I guess

Allsopp: You have to do something to justify it. Yea, we did quite a lot actually. We had a look at the plant waste; in fact we extended the project while we were there. Because we found some of it wasn't producing as many results as we might have done. So we extended our range of of sampling. Only when you're there can you do that.

[0:35:46] Lee: So you were sampling what, now?

Allsopp: We were sampling residues of the two plants you get there. The *Deschampsia Antarctica* and the little *Caryophyllaceous* thing: Leaves, fresh leaves, also the stuff that had died back, but also animal residues. We were looking at animal enriched soils, both bird colonies and seal colonies. And looking for what fungi we could find in that, being mycologists¹³. It would have been nice to actually have looked at the bacteriology more but that would have made it a bigger project and we were not bacteriologists. There are a lot of bacteria in there which rather masks out some of the fungi. We got a fair amount of results, and clarified the sort of micro fungi that are important or were important. At least that gives a marker for future work of what was going on then. So if that is repeated, whether it would be the same, we don't know. If there is any warming; there obviously is warming going on and that could well influence the fungi.

[0:37:20] Lee: In retrospect, do you feel it was quite important work?

Allsopp: I'm not going to say it's important or not. Everybody says that. It was done. It was sound. It was interesting. It's there.

[0:37:34] Lee: Was there anything which stopped you from completing the work or finding the conclusions you wanted. Lack of facilities or...?

Allsopp: Well, again as I say, it's like how long is a piece of string? If we'd been there a year, if I'd had 3 technicians, if we'd had a lot more facilities, you'd just do it bigger and bigger and bigger. I think for these basic biological studies there can be a diminishing return. You can do a years' worth, it perhaps won't be much more significant.

[0:38:11] Lee: You came back feeling quite satisfied?

Allsopp: Oh Yea!

¹³ Mycology: the branch of biology concerned with the study of fungi.

[0:38:17] Lee: Were there special days? Were there days when something unusual happened? Were there any particular incidents that you recall?

Allsopp: Workwise?

[0:38:25] Lee: No, just generally at Signy?

Allsopp: Oh yes, I think there always are. The general climate can change very quickly. So if you're out and about doing your work or just touring as it were, you can come across things you've never seen before. You can get sights you've not seen. Everyone took pictures like crazy. I took hundreds and hundreds. Suddenly you get a different view. An hour goes by and all of a sudden the straits full of tabular ice bergs. You think 'where have they come from?' Or you get a sunset the like of which you've never seen before.

[0:39:11] Lee: Never 2 days are the same?

Allsopp: No. No 2 hours are quite the same really. People had said how awful the weather was there and I really wasn't expecting the breaks that we did get. We did have dull days, but we got a lot of spectacularly good days too.

[0:39:32] Lee: Are the key days the arrival of a ship?

Allsopp: Oh yea. Mail, getting a letter is very important in these things and you work out whether or not you're likely to get a letter because you've plotted the route. You've said 'if my wife writes, and if she wrote last week, it'll have got to Cambridge, and then it'll have got to the *Bransfield*, and the *Bransfield's* at Rothera, and then it'll pick up mail at the Falklands. You've worked out yea, there could be a letter and there isn't one [laughs]. Or you get nothing. I got several letters on the day I left.

[0:40:11] Lee: On the boat that took you away?

Allsopp: Yea, on the boat that took me away. There were about 4 letters from my wife at that time. And when you look at the people who'd been there a long time, some of the lads who were on the base then who got a pile of stuff from home; they'd get their mail and they'd go away and read it quietly for a little while, just to check on the bad stuff if there is any. Then everybody gets together, and they've got the local newspaper maybe sent down. There is the odd nick-knack that someone's put in. I remember one little thing where somebody's sister had sent down 2 little wind up bath toys. These obviously were thought of as being really cool. There's all these hardened Fids rushing to fill up the bath and race these 2 plastic penguins or ducks or whatever up

and down the bath. [Laughs]. Complete nutters! You get things like that. They were very light hearted in that they'd just got their mail from home.

[0:41:26] Lee: Did you feel homesick? For example: you were in the Antarctic on your wife's birthday weren't you?

Allsopp: Yea, I was yea. And I'd got 3 small children. I wrote things down... yes, I do get a bit homesick but a) my wife is very capable and she's not a pathetic sort of person. So I knew she would be able to manage. On the other hand that's no reason to think 'Well what the hell, just go off for 3 months and no consequence'. So you're conscious of that and conscious of what they're giving up. Having 3 small children my wife never murmured about me going there. She realised it was something I wanted to do. She looked after 3 small children, including one who was 6 months old, and ran the household. When I got home, she was the tired one. I think this is probably one of the reasons why BAS stop married men going. It can lead to too many domestic problems if you're actually missing for a year. If you go to prison you get visitors, if you go down the Antarctic you don't. It's not really fair to send...

[0:42:53] Lee: Some people describe going to the Antarctic as one of, if not the most significant things they've done in their life. Would you go along with that?

Allsopp: Yea, I would, yes.

[0:43:05] Lee: What's so special about it?

Allsopp: It's not just visiting a place. I've visited China, I've visited India, and I've visited South America, Central America, various places in the world. That's visiting a place and meeting people. You've always had the option there of saying 'Right, don't want to be here, I'm going home. Take me to the airport'. When you go to the Antarctic, that's not possible. So you can't have the dubious luxury of not getting on with people. You have to get on with people and you have to fit in with them, and you have to act to a greater or lesser, usually a greater extent as a team. You are depending on other people for your life. If the boatman's an idiot you're in trouble. If the cook's incompetent you're in trouble. If the wireless operator's no good you're in trouble. If the [inaudible] you'll freeze to death. You are dependent on this. There's no room for arrogance, there's no room for saying 'we're the scientists; you are the workers in the vineyards sort of thing'. The remarkable thing is that when you try, at least in my experience, when you try to get on with people, you don't just rub along with them, you actually do get on with people.

[0:44:52] Lee: Do people subdue their own excesses? Do you notice people modifying their character or reducing their eccentricities? Was there a dampening effect?

Allsopp: No, I think people were quite characters but I think they must modify their... They must realise consciously or subconsciously that they can't just be utterly individualistic. You'd have anarchy then. It wasn't a military regime. It wasn't one where we all assembled for muster at 9 o'clock in the morning and got our daily tasks. We knew what was going on that day and that was that and we got on with it.

[0:45:48] Lee: So people didn't subdue themselves, they were more tolerant of each other?

Allsopp: Yes, I think that's probably how I would say that. I don't know what they were like when they weren't on a base to be honest. So maybe they were a bit different when they were back here.

[0:46:08] Lee: How did you feel when you had to leave?

Allsopp: Quite upset actually. It was very emotional. I remember going out to the ship and standing on the monkey bridge and normally what happens is as you leave they blow the ships sirens, and the people left on the land set off distress flares. Then you steam off. I was in tears to be honest. And I thought 'Why?' It was a greyish day and a lump of frozen rock, I was going home and I thought 'well what is it?' I thought 'well I've had a great experience with great people. I've had a very intense experience which one's come through'. You've not been eaten by anything and you've done the job and you've had the experience and you've got some good tales to tell. So it was really a very positive experience.

[0:47:17] Lee: Is it losing innocence, is it leaving a place of innocence; a simplistic place?

Allsopp: There might be something in that because it is rather, shall we say spiritual, in a sense of reducing things to essentials. When I got back I was irritated by certain things. One was advertising, the necessity for locking things away, having to use money. These sorts of essentials of civilisation, so called, and realise the importance of people. When you've had a glimpse of that, you think 'why doesn't the world wake up and actually get on with doing it like that?' There's not so much squabbling.

[0:48:22] Lee: This may sound like an odd final question Dennis, you're the first JP¹⁴ I've interviewed who's been to the Antarctic. Did that experience in any way help to shape your sense of justice?

Allsopp: I became a JP a long time after I'd been to the Antarctic but [pause] you're the first person who's actually suggested that, but actually there might well be something in that. I think seeing another point of view and realising that people live in very different ways, and realising that human beings have to try and rub along. I think probably it gives you some sense of humanity. You'd have to be a really, really arrogant bastard to remain an arrogant bastard if you went down to the Antarctic to be honest. It's a humbling experience and I think most people are probably shaped for the better.

[0:49:35] Lee: Have you had people in front of you on the bench who you'd like to have sent to the Antarctic... [Allsopp laughs]... because it would do them good?

Allsopp: It's funny actually; a lot of people you see in front of you are not hardened criminals. They are people who are inadequate, unfortunate, or whatever. I'm not saying it's just all society's fault. People break laws and they know they shouldn't do it. But I've often said 'wouldn't it be nice if we had the solution of the safe, clean interesting place people could go to, to develop. We need some farms in Scotland and people say 'what have the Scots done to deserve being sent a load of criminals?' If you could say to young men 'Right, come on, you've got a lot of energy. You've got to rely on people'. You see these things with young criminals go abseiling to learn to trust one another. Apparently that's a good experience for many people. I'm not saying it would work for everyone. That sort of experience, if it could be provided, I think would do a lot of people a lot of good. It would stimulate them, give them a different vision.

[0:51:03] Lee: The Antarctic is a healing environment?

Allsopp: I think so yes. But it would be rather expensive to set up camps there.

[0:51:12] Lee: Dennis, thank you very much.

Allsopp: My pleasure.

[0:51:14] <ENDS>

¹⁴ Justice of the Peace. Up until at least 1960, FIDS Base Leaders were sworn in as Stipendiary Magistrates, which carried a slightly enhanced salary.

Possible Extracts:

- Experiments to understand decomposition of the Shirley Test Cloth. [0:01:39]
- The decomposition of plant and animal remains in relation to general decomposition in Antarctica. [0:04:43]
- The trip down to Antarctica. [0:11:20]
- Signy in the early 1980's [0:13:53]
- Penicillium infection brought into base via oranges [0:17:58]
- Health & Safety at Signy in the early 1980's [0:26:40]
- Research on residues of *Deschampsia Antarctica* and *Caryophyllaceous* plants. [0:35:46]
- The personal significance of living and working in Antarctica. [0:42:53]
- Experience in Antarctica shaping the sense of justice for a JP [0:48:22]