

MIKE BURGIN

Edited transcript of a recording of Mike Burgin interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 16th September 2007, at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/28. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 03 January 2014.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Mike Burgin, recorded at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, on the 16th of September 2007 by Chris Eldon Lee. Mike Burgin.

Burgin: I'm Mike Burgin. I come from Sheffield, born in 1942 and I was in Antarctica 1966 and 1967: '66 was on Signy Island and then '67 at Halley Bay.

[0:00:24] Lee: And what were you doing before FIDS appeared in your life?

Burgin: Well I left school in 1960. I had no idea what I wanted to do, and I had a chat with the employment people, and they said 'What are your interests?' I liked building model ships. 'Oh you like working with your hands, then?' 'Oh yes, I love it.' 'Well technician sort of work is what you want, and I just happen to have various firms looking for technicians at the moment.' So he put me in touch with Safety in Mines Research Establishment in Sheffield, and the following day I went for an interview and got the job, as easily as that. I left there two years later because while I was there I had to do day release, which was easy enough, we were only allowed to study applied physics, and once I had passed my ONC they wouldn't let me carry on for HNC. I thought 'Well, I don't want to stop my life at this point. It's much too early and much too young.'

[0:01:38] Burgin: So I looked round for something else and within a couple of weeks got a job at Sheffield University in the Space Physics Department, and it wasn't space so much as Upper Atmosphere research. They had a field station on the top of a hill just outside Sheffield with lots of radar and other monitoring equipment and I was frequently up there, two or three times a week, helping the PhD students, giving them technical backup in electronics and building equipment etc. And of course in those days we had snow in winter, and quite often you would get the Landrover stuck in the snow, 4-wheel drive. And I have had previous experience from school: a very keen teacher who used to take us up to Scotland at Easter, teaching us all snow climbing techniques.

[0:02:36] Lee: Do you remember his name?

Burgin: Sweetman. In fact I am still in touch with him. He still lives in Sheffield and we exchange Christmas cards. So I had got the right background. But also, this Space Physics Group was doing research in conjunction with various other bases in the world, Halley Bay in particular, and I think it was the Faroe Islands (I am not sure about that¹) to get 3-D images of what was going on. So one person had just come back from Antarctica². Another I helped to pack up to go. The one I was working with had been rejected on medical grounds but nevertheless the interest was there. I thought 'I rather fancy this,' from all the tales I had heard and my boss, Tom Kaiser,

¹ It was the Faroe Islands. VLF goniometers were installed there, at Halley Bay, and near Sheffield.

² David Shipstone.

he said ‘Well, apply. Here’s the address. I will give you a reference.’ And within a couple of weeks I had been down to London, had my medical, my interview, and been offered the job.

[0:03:33] Lee: Did you “walk” the interview? Was it easy or was it a tough time?

Burgin: In those days it was a general chat, as much as anything. Nothing searching. The searching parts about your character came in the references.

[0:03:45] Lee: Right.

Burgin: We had three references to give, and it wasn’t simply ‘Is he suitable for this job? Yes/No.’ There were page after page; I think about four pages, if I remember correctly from what I was told, about specific questions. ‘How does he behave under this sort of condition, that sort of condition?’

[0:04:03] Lee: So the referees were sent a questionnaire?

Burgin: Yes, essentially. Yes.

[0:04:06] Lee: A quite substantial one?

Burgin: Yes.

[0:04:06] Lee: Did you ever see them?

Burgin: No, not the answers, no. I was just told that was the sort of thing. But it worked. I got the job.

[0:04:15] Lee: And when you got there, you fitted in quite well?

Burgin: Yes, yes. The journey down was interesting because I went on the *Kista Dan* from Southampton, 3 weeks chugging across to Montevideo, then down to Port Stanley. There I had to change ships because, I believe it was the wife of the Governor of the Falkland Islands, was going on to South Georgia. Because it was still a political area at that time, and she had to make routine visits, or he did. So a berth had to be found for her on the *Kista Dan*, which was the ship going. So the doctor was kicked out of his berth, because he was on his own so she got the cabin on her own.

[0:5:01] Burgin: Well I was there to be the doctor’s sidekick, looking after his equipment and helping him with his work, so who more appropriate to kick off the ship than myself? So I then transferred to the *Biscoe*. The *Kista Dan* disappeared off to South Georgia and goodness knows where else, and eventually Halley Bay, but I was on the *Biscoe* then and got a trip down Grahamland as far as Stonington. There I changed ships again because the routes were different and the *Shackleton* was in at the time. So I came back on the *Shackleton* visiting some of the bases that I had been to on the way south, and two months after leaving England, I arrived on Signy Island for my first year.

[0:05:45] Lee: Had you been given a job as such?

Burgin: Yes. In fact I had two months or so training in Hampstead, North London, at the Medical Research Council, to learn how to look after the equipment that I was to keep going down there.

[0:06:03] Lee: You went as a medical technician?

Burgin: Essentially, yes, but technician in the sense that I was on instrumentation rather than the physiological side of things.

[0:06:15] Lee: That sounds a bit over the top, doesn't it?

Burgin: It does, except that of course an extra GA on base, and I could muck in with the doctor's research as well, collecting his samples and what have you, so ...

[0:06:29] Lee: Were your skills in that field ever called upon?

Burgin: Oh yes. Yes because the equipment he had was all second-hand stuff, scrounged. Some had been on the British North Greenland Expedition, and in some respect you couldn't get spare parts. So it was quite tricky to keep some things going.

[0:06:56] Lee: Were you making spare parts?

Burgin: Occasionally yes.

[0:06:59] Lee: Such as?

Burgin: Erm. Ooh now then ... It was probably not so much making spare parts but making one instrument out of two, so you were taking bits out of one to keep another one going. Certainly flowmeters – the sort of things you see in hospitals for measuring breaths and oxygen and suchlike. We had three of those, but one eventually I had to pillage to keep another one going. I was taking little cogs out of the bearings, that sort of thing, to put into others.

[0:07:34] Lee: And was the doctor busy, or was it a fairly ...?

Burgin: Well he'd a regular research programme.

[0:07:39] Lee: He was monitoring the men, was he?

Burgin: He was, yes. He was monitoring human energy expenditure. So essentially the equipment measured the amount of air people breathed and took samples of that air throughout the whole of the experiment. And then he would analyse that for carbon dioxide production (oxygen consumption if you like) and from that you can work out how much energy has been used. And then in addition to that, he was doing skin fold thickness measurements, dietary measurements, weight and height measurements and also routine step tests every six weeks or so, where you step up and down onto something a little bit higher than this table actually, every two seconds or something. I know I made the equipment to ... Well we had a big sugar drum, where I built in a little oscillator to operate the hammer to strike it like a gong, and they had to

step up each time it struck and then because sometimes they couldn't keep going for the whole time. It was really strenuous. We needed to know how far through the experiment we got, so I devised another method of counting the number of times they had actually stepped up onto this bench, and that was made from a hacksaw blade.
[laughs]

[0:09:10] Lee: Can you describe a bit more detail? How did it work?

Burgin: Essentially a switch to make electrical contact and then into a counter – one of these little things that, well the modern equivalent: you press a button and it just moves the counter on one.

[0:09:26] Lee: Clicking people into a room or whatever?

Burgin: That sort of thing, yes.

[0:09:27] Lee: So it was quite innovative stuff then, really?

Burgin: Yes, quite simple stuff but nevertheless ingenious in the way it was applied.

[0:09:37] Lee: What was the doctor's name? Do you recall?

Burgin: Yes. Brotherhood.

[0:09:40] Lee: Ah, right.

Burgin: Yes, the very famous John Brotherhood,

[0:09:43] Lee: OK.

Burgin: ... who fell down a crevasse at Halley Bay.

[0:09:45] Lee: All the men were studied on the base?

Burgin: Yes, yes. They had to do a big ...

[0:09:42] Lee: A special project for that particular season?

Burgin: I believe so, yes.

[0:09:56] Lee: And what happened to the gear afterwards? Was it saved or was it gashed?

Burgin: A bit of both. What was fit to send back to the Medical Research Council went back for somebody else to use, and some of it, which was too improvised or could be used on base for something else, was left.

[0:10:13] Lee: What was Brotherhood like?

Burgin: A very exuberant person, noisy. In some ways a bit overpowering and couldn't care less. Signy Island had that plastic hut with the two storeys, and if you walked along the floor there, it would reverberate throughout the building, and he was heavy footed. So every time he went along a corridor, no matter what day or night, you knew about it. He had no respect on closing doors. He just let them slam. So that annoyed people a bit. But otherwise I think ... He had a sense of humour as well. Saturday night, round the bar, we had only enough booze for one session a week: two cans of beer and two tots of spirits a week, so we saved it all until Saturday night and had a decent evening round the bar. But there was probably enough then for people to get a little bit merry and quite often he ended up in the gash sack being carted round the base.

[0:11:23] Lee: The gash psych?

Burgin: Yes. At the top of the stairs, just outside the kitchen, were two big sacks, mail sacks if you like.

[0:11:34] Lee: Oh, sacks?

Burgin: Sacks. Yes, cloth sacks. One for combustible rubbish and the other for non-combustible. And he would be put in, well the combustible I suppose, because the non-combustible had cans in with sharp edges. [chuckles] A bit of humour, yes.

[0:11:53] Lee: There are three stories that you wanted particularly to commit to recording. One was the whalers' barge which you had fun and games trying to shift.

Burgin: Oh yes, that's right. Well, let me just refer to my copy here. [rustling paper] Well Signy base was built on the site of an old whaling station, and as we have heard this weekend, there were freshwater lakes across the bay. Well that was where the whalers got their drinking water, and in their day they used this old barge, a great big rowing boat if you like, that sort of size, to bring fresh water across from the freshwater lakes across to where their base was, which was where our base was built. They left it in the shallows to pump water out for their use and then, when it was empty enough, they would go back and get some more. Well when they left, they just left the barge there. It eventually sank and filled up with rubble: harpoon heads and other junk was thrown in it, etc. So it weighted quite a bit actually and we knew that the jetty was going to be extended the following summer and that it would be in the way.

[0:13:12] Lee: It was next to the jetty, was it?

Burgin: It was yes. In fact it was a hazard to our little boats coming in to moor at the jetty, so we wanted it moving anyway. And sometime earlier in the year, Ernie Thornley who was the diesel electric chap, did some measurements and thought 'Well, it looks as if it is going to weigh so much.' He wanted me to check his arithmetic there and 'Yes, fine I agree with you.' We thought 'We have got these great big 45-gallon oil tanks, lots of them, empty now, just standing there doing nothing. We can make buoyancy tanks out of those, fasten it to the barge, and raise it, particularly if we empty a lot of the junk out, and we can tow it out of the way then quite easily.' Anyway we had a word with 'Bro' and he wouldn't let us do it. He said

'No. I have got to have authority from higher up to do this.' He didn't get authority so it was just left.

[0:14:19] Lee: How much water was the barge in? Six feet,? Ten feet?

Burgin: It would depend on the state of the tide. At high tide it would cover it certainly. What's a tide there, about three or four feet?

[0:14:34] Lee: So it was visible at low tide?

Burgin: Oh yes. Definitely yes.

[0:14:39] Lee: So HQ said no?

Burgin: Or didn't bother replying, I don't know which, but we didn't get the authority we wanted, so it was left, because Bro wouldn't let us shift it without authority. Fair enough.

[0:14:51] Lee: Was that in keeping with his nature?

Burgin: Erm, occasionally. It depends how far up the repercussions can go.

[0:15:02] Lee: How far up the ... ?

Burgin: How far up the chain the repercussions can go if he makes the wrong decision.

[0:15:07] Lee: Yes OK.

Burgin: As it does with anybody, I suppose.

[0:15:10] Lee: So what did you do?

Burgin: Well we just left it and then of course when the *Biscoe* came in the following summer, with the builders and the materials, 'Oh that barge is in the way.' So we thought 'Well we have got a great big ship here. That is only a little one. If we fasten the winch to it, we can pull it out of the way into deeper water.' So we attached a winch and pulled it and pulled and we were just pulling the *Biscoe* in towards the shore. It was so well fastened, really, with the weight and the rough sea bottom that it was resting on. Eventually (we must have been messing about for an hour or two, I don't know really) the winch snapped with a pull of 12 tons on it.

[0:15:58] Burgin: And Malcolm Bedells, who is here this weekend, he actually saw the cable snap, and that could have been very dangerous. Luckily no-one was hurt. Anyway they abandoned it for a while and just unloaded things and folks got on with their work. We then said 'No more messing about. It has got to go. That attempt is obviously authority to shift it.' So we got on with our original plan, took out lots of harpoon heads, various other things that had been dumped in there, and stones and whatever was holding it down, lightened it tremendously. Meanwhile Ernie was busy welding up these flotation drums and attaching them and of course it eventually came

up off the bottom. So we just hooked on the rowing boat fitted with an outboard motor and towed it away.

[0:16:54] Lee: So you fastened the floatation drums to the boat at low tide.

Burgin: I don't recall which part of the tide, because it was the buoyancy of the drums themselves which pulled it up. Oh high tide would have helped really because more of the barge would have been under water I suppose.

[0:17:15] Lee: You roped the drums to the barge?

Burgin: Yep, welded them on. I forget the details now, how they were attached. They were attached somehow to serve as flotation tanks anyway.

[0:17:30] Lee: So floated it out of the way and then dropped it?

Burgin: Yes, at the bottom of the stone chute.

[0:17:34] Lee: Well that's an achievement, is it?

Burgin: It is really, yes, yes. Yes, a very useful job done.

[0:17:43] Lee: Did you ever tell base you had done it, HQ you had done it?

Burgin: I don't know. It probably went down in the records somewhere, but ...

[0:17:51] Lee: Now there is a story concerning the late Martin White, is that right?

Burgin: Yes. Martin died a few years ago, unfortunately. I don't know any more details as to what happened. I think it was natural causes back here in England. But just one of the things he did: ski-joring was a very popular hobby there. That's being towed along on your skis by a skidoo with a long rope between. You had somebody driving the skidoo and three or four people behind on a separate rope each, and you could be weaving these ropes in and out, dodging under and plaiting them and all sorts. It was such great fun, but Martin thought one day 'Ooh I would like to have a go at this again but everybody seems busy. Nobody seems available to drive the skidoo. Then I have got to take over and let them have a go at ski-joring. I know, I will rig up the skidoo to pull me on its own. I can do it all myself.'

[0:18:55] Burgin: Unfortunately what he did was he used an elastic band to hold the accelerator lever (on the handlebars) on so that it was driving normally, and he hoped to stop it with another rope that he had attached to the brake or to release the elastic band. Unfortunately, while he was driving along ... He started off nicely, then he fell over, lost the rope which was going to control it. So of course the elastic band still held the accelerator going and the skidoo just carried on. [laughs] Luckily Ernest was around and we'd another skidoo. So Ern jumped on the other skidoo and chased after the one that was going on its own and he was adjusting the carburettor (he said so) to get the most he could out of the one he had jumped on and he did catch the other and stop it before it got to the pack. But there wasn't much spare, the width of this room perhaps.

[0:20:06] Lee: Oh really? That close to the ...?

Burgin: Yes, before it got close to the open water, yes.

[0:20:11] Lee: Gosh!

Burgin: Yes, we were that close. But of course once he had stopped it, things were OK. We could get everything under control again then.

[0:20:17] Lee: What were the repercussions of that?

Burgin: Nothing really, other than a story like this.

[0:20:22] Lee: Nobody got bollocked?

Burgin: No, there was no point really.

[0:20:27] Lee: It strikes me that there wasn't a great deal of attention to Health & Safety in that time you were there?

Burgin: Ooh no. No, you went off wandering on your own in those days, even up to North Point or onto Tioga. Certainly trips across to Gourlay were very common.

[0:20:41] Lee: Solo trips?

Burgin: Solo trips, yes.

[0:20:44] Lee: And did Martin try that elastic band trick again?

Burgin: I don't think so.

[0:20:49] Lee: He learned?

Burgin: Yes,

[0:20:51] Lee: OK.

Burgin: The only times when we had more care from the Health & Safety point of view where you were going was on sea ice and certainly across to Coronation Island. Then we would make sure we knew what other people knew, that we were taking proper precautions. But just around base, the whole island is only just around base anyway for a regular Rambler. No we didn't bother unduly.

[0:21:18] Lee: OK. Finally there is this rather unusual story of the hijack in Stanley. What was your involvement in that? Tell me the story?

Burgin: Well just reading the noticeboards really. But apparently, on the 28th of September 1966 an aircraft came over from Argentina – it had been hijacked apparently – and landed in Port Stanley. There was no runway in Stanley in those

days, so it landed on a field just outside the town. And essentially my story really is what came over the radio and what the radio operator put on the noticeboard. So that's really all I can tell you. So as I say, the following snippet of information was received at this station, Signy, this afternoon 28th of September '66, just before the traffic sched. That's the routine radio contact with other bases.

[0:22:20] Burgin: Please allow me to relate, in the very words of Dave who was the Stanley operator at the time and he says 'A ruddy great four-engined aircraft landed here on the racecourse from Argentina. Hee hee. It's been hijacked. About 18 armed men guarding the bleeding thing. All passengers off now. Load of Brens covering it. Excitement at last hee hee. I don't think she can take off now hee hee.' He went on to say what I've just said really. There was no room in Stanley in those days. Everything was brought in on the *Darwin* or the FIDS ships. Anyway the following day it had got back to the authorities and of course we got an official communication then from Port Stanley. 'If Argentinians take over radio station, our communications ought to be dealt with through the Argentine Islands to London.' So in response (seeing the funny side of this now) ...

[0:23:21] Lee: There was serious concern, was there?

Burgin: There was a serious concern, yes, but I think the number of people involved on the plane side were not that many, as reported there anyway. So we treated it rather lightly, and because we were so far from the action anyway. We sent a telegram back to Port Stanley: 'Please take special precautions to ensure that our Rita is not kidnapped by marauding Argies', and I think Rita was one of the lasses who worked in the BAS Office in Stanley. But it all fizzled out eventually.

[0:23:56] Lee: So you heard about all this in Signy, this strange incident?

Burgin: Yes.

[0:24:01] What was your reaction when you heard about it?

Burgin: A bit concerned because I knew the situation between Argentina and the Falklands, and getting on the Falklands, essentially because when I came South I brought my passport with me, which was due to expire while I was coming South. I discussed this with various people on the way and was told 'It can be renewed in the Falkland Islands if you want. Just go along to the Foreign Office. It will cost your 5 quid.' So I went along there and had it renewed, which meant of course that I had a passport which had been renewed in the Falkland Islands. He said 'For goodness sake, don't go into Argentina with it. Otherwise you will be whipped into the army.'

[0:24:44] Lee: Was that serious?

Burgin: Yes, that did happen to some of the older Fids. Yes, so well I made sure that I didn't go out via Argentina. I came back on the *Biscoe*, sorry on the *Perla Dan* that brought me out, because I had been to Halley Bay in the meantime and I got off in Montevideo instead of coming all the back to the UK, and worked my way with Dave Hill, a builder I had met in Halley Bay. And we came back up the coast of Brazil. We were in Rio for the Carnival, and then carried on, partly overland, partly by ship, up to

Belem on the mouth of the Amazon, then flew up to Trinidad and spent a few weeks there – well a week or so in Trinidad and then caught a local boat travelling right round to Jamaica calling at all the islands of the British West Indies on the way back, travelling in general overnight, and a different island each day. Then I came back on a banana boat.

[0:25:49] Lee: What happened to the rest of your life in a nutshell? Did you go back to ordinary work after that?

Burgin: Yes, temporarily a job at Cottam power station. We were building a lot of coal-fired power stations on the River Trent at that time, so again, instrumentation work, and then I got a job back at Sheffield University. I was there three years and played one department against another for promotion and got into a job where I couldn't make sense of it. I was out of my depth and didn't like it, so I decided to move and after quite a few months looking round ..., because it was when industry was winding down; so there was very little in Sheffield. The steel industry was going; the coal industry was going. I ended up at Doncaster Royal Infirmary, commuted for a few years and then eventually decided 'Well, there's no chance in Sheffield nowadays. It looks as though I am stuck in Doncaster.' So I moved out there and was there for the rest of my working life, until I retired.

[0:26:51] Lee: How does the Antarctic rate in terms of your lifespan?

Burgin: Oh no doubt at all. It is the highlight of my life. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It was really great.

[0:26:59] Lee: Why? What was so special?

Burgin: The remoteness, the adventure. Certainly on Signy Island the varying climate from cold snowy winters to overcast, slightly rainy summers, the sort of thing that you get on a November day in England. The companionship, the wildlife, the photographic opportunities. We had a darkroom there and materials, so quite a lot of black and white photographs done and even a few Ektachrome processed as well. It was nice.

[0:27:36] Lee: A special time?

Burgin: It was indeed a very special time to me. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

[0:27:43] Lee: Thank you very much indeed.

Burgin: My pleasure

[0:27:47] [End]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- The Governor's wife pulls rank. [0:04:15]
- Cannibalising equipment to keep it going. [0:06:03]
- Inventing a counter for step tests. [0:07:39]
- Memories of John Brotherhood. [0:10:13]
- Moving the sunken barge at Signy. [0:11:53]
- Runaway skidoo. [0:17:51]
- Hijacked plane lands in Stanley. [0:21:18]
- 'Don't go to Argentina with a Falklands passport.' [0:24:01]