

RUSSEL THOMPSON AND NEVILLE JONES

Edited transcript of a recording of Russel Thompson and Neville Jones, interviewed at Peterhouse College, Cambridge on 15th September 2007, by Chris Eldon Lee.

Thompson, Russel and Jones, Neville. BAS Archive AD6/24/1/30/1, transcribed by Barry Heywood, 9 January 2016

Thompson: I am Russel Thompson, and I was born in Neath, South Wales on 16th June 1937

Jones: and I am Nev. Jones, also a Welshman from North Wales, just to balance him up, and my birthday was the 13th February 1936.

[00:00:32] Lee: And you were born in?

Jones: Bethesda, North Wales.

[00:00:37] Lee: and I am sure you both [mumble]

Jones: Oh yes, OK

[00:00:41] Lee: What were you doing before BAS

Thompson: Well I went straight on to FIDS [Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey – Transcriber] or BAS from University. It was my first job. In fact, interestingly, one of my lecturers at Swansea University was Derek Maling, who was down with Dick Laws, the three-man party at the end of the 40s. He was lecturing in Cartography at Swansea, and over the three years, I used to borrow his diaries and photographs. I got really turned on with FIDS so at the end of my degree I applied and went straight down to Antarctica from Swansea via the Met Office training school in London.

[00:01:18] Lee: You were gripped by the Antarctic, as a teenager?

Thompson: Mainly through Derek's diaries and photographs. I used to read Scott and Shackleton as a schoolboy, but when I was exposed to the real Antarctica through Derek's diaries and photographs it really...In fact I applied at the end of my second year, I was so keen to go down. But FIDS said no, hold on, get your degree first and then head south. So I did. So I graduated in July '58 and went down on the [RRS] *Shackleton* in the October 1958.

[00:01:50] Lee: Was it the work that made you want to go or the environment?

Thompson: The environment really, and the way of life. It sort of appealed to my exploring instincts. The science but the way of life was more important; the chance to travel and to visit this rather unique part of the world.

[00:02:09] Lee: How about you Nev.?

Jones: I am a biologist, and I didn't really build up to this very quickly. I remember being very impressed with the book on the crossing of Antarctica, and the photographs and so on in there made me think, "I would like to see some of that".

[00:02:26] Lee: Fuchs'?

Jones: Fuchs and Hillary. That was '57/'58. I did my first degree in Zoology. Then I did Teacher Training, but before going into teaching, I had heard Bill Sloman, coming round on his recruiting round. I decided I would apply before settling down to teach. They had one job as a biologist. I applied but I didn't get it, but they then said "if you would like to go as a Met man, we will give you a crash course in meteorology". So I thought "Right, that will do me!"

[00:03:03] Lee: This crash course; how effective was it?

Jones: Well it allowed me to know what a cloud was; you know, the different types of cloud. But I had to learn really 'on the job' as to the heights and things, because they are different down there from up here. But, I was just a Met Assistant. I wasn't forecasting or anything like that. So I was doing a bit of biology on the side.

[00:03:27] Lee: So you both worked side by side in meteorology?

Thompson: Well, I went down with some meteorology. Doing a degree in Geography at Swansea, I had done Meteorology, Climatology and Geomorphology. So I had some inking. I still went to the Air Ministry training school. The most valuable part of that was 'repairing instruments' because I knew that we would be doing that on a regular basis. In those days they took virtually anybody as a Met Assistant. These days you have to be a professional Meteorologist. So I was a Geographer with a BSc in Physical Geography. Nev. was a Zoologist, and other people without degrees were taken on as Met Assistants really. If you had some common sense and could recognise the clouds in the sky; that was your big qualification. The Training School was a bit of a joke, wasn't it? It was only about six or seven weeks.

Jones: It sounds as if you had a full course! I didn't because I can't remember fixing anything much.

Thompson: Did you actually go then to an Outstation? I went to Cardiff Airport for 5 weeks outstation routine, which was very helpful again. So I suppose that was quite thorough.

Jones: Which accounts for mine being a crash course. It was a shorter, sharper one I think!

[00:04:49] Lee: Your prime purpose then as meteorologists was just observation or were you doing some forecasting as well?

Thompson: No! We were basically assistant observers.

Jones: Observing, recording and sending them off to the Falklands. There was a Forecaster in South Georgia.

Thompson: Yes, and also the Chief Met. Officer in Stanley use to send the forecast down to the Bases and, at least, we did plot them up on sort of crude synoptic charts. So we had some forecasting skill but it was very generalised. So we did the Met, and we all had a hobby. Nev.'s was the Sheathbill [*Chionis alba* – Transcriber] and mine was studying the Orwell Glacier round the corner; a glaciology project. We were primarily Met Assistants, Met Observers really. We weren't Meteorologists.

[00:05:34] Lee: So the Met was the 'bread and butter' and then you had other passions. You were studying Sheathbills, right?

Jones: Well I ended up studying Sheathbills yes, because the operation, on FIDS part, was they were getting two jobs for the price of one, in a sense. I was actually supposed to be trying to develop the insects and mites, little things like that, because the main birds and seals and so on had already had some attention. But some of this little stuff was what I was really interested in anyway, because I was in agricultural zoology, which was on pests and things. So this seemed to me to fit in quite nicely, so I started to do that, but I ended up on my first Base, which was Admiralty Bay where you could not find an insect at all because there was no vegetation or anything there at that time. Then I moved up to South Georgia for the summer to assist a guy from Birmingham, who was doing mosses – Stanley Green. There, of course, there was lots of stuff. Then I came back down to Signy for my second winter. At that time, Roger Filer had died there, having started to lay down the foundations for the study of the Sheathbill. So I also knew by this time that proper Biologists were coming down, by that I mean full-timers, the following year, with Martin Holdgate. One of them was going to be an entomologist anyway, so he would be full time, and I was just collecting. So I decided there was more to be gained by doing the bird work, finishing Roger's base...build on Roger's foundations. So I spent my last summer doing that study on the Sheathbill.

Thompson: Because Roger died in his second year, so he had one year's fieldwork under his belt before he died, and I was on Base the night that Roger died. So when Nev. came down he was the ideal person to continue Roger's project.

[00:07:39] Lee: What sort of impact did Roger's death have on Base?

Thompson: Well, I had two earlier. I was at Admiralty Bay before Signy. I had two deaths at Admiralty Bay so...I left Admiralty Bay to get away from the atmosphere. Then within two months we had lost Roger at Gourlay on Signy! It was devastating because you know them so well, down there. And even though we talk about them now...but still I fill up now 40-odd years later. It is amazing but to lose three in two winters was tough! The empty bunk would haunt you a long, long while afterwards. It really took the 'icing off the cake' in that respect.

[00:08:18] Lee: Would there have been...just talking that subject generally with 3 instances, would there have been some kind of practice or procedure that the Fids who survived would observe for the missing person, laying a place at table or something?

Thompson: No! All we did was carefully make an inventory of the dead person's possessions and pack them up and send them back to the parents or next of kin. The bunk was left empty. I remember, at Admiralty Bay, 'Tink.' was on the bunk opposite me. 'Tinker' Bell, he was the one down a crevasse on July 1959. No one dared to move into his bunk, after that. It was just left empty for the rest of the winter.

[00:09:04] Lee: Respect or superstition?

Thompson: I think it was basically respect really. It was his bunk and he was a tremendous character. I remember one night on Met. Obs. I was up at three-o'clock to do the Met. Obs., and Tink. was up from 12 to 3, and he had found a Met. balloon and he painted a 'ghouly' face on it and put a light-bulb inside the Met balloon and hung it at the bottom of my bed so that when I woke up I saw the ghastly red apparition [Laughter]. He was a tremendous, tremendous character.

[00:09:33] Lee: Just give me his name again.

[Thompson]: This is Dennis Bell, and we called him 'Tinker' Bell. The first one was Alan Sharman, and I was involved with that. I was out walking with Alan, and we had a fall. I walked away and he didn't! Roger Filer was the one on Signy, in February 1961.

[00:09:57] Lee: Stop me if you don't want to answer these questions but is there any kind of sense of inappropriate guilt after somebody has been killed and the rest of you think 'we are lucky to be alive'?

Thompson: Not really. I felt guilty the first one with Alan, because I was with him and we were going...we'd been round the beach for Sunday afternoon stroll. We had taken two dogs and were coming back over the Peninsula at Admiralty Bay to do an Ice Ob. It got pretty steep and pretty icy and the dogs began sliding and slithering. We got towards the top. It got very icy. Alan was an experienced mountaineer...RAF Mountain Rescue team. I think what happened, a dog slipped and knocked Alan off balance...I can still hear him shouting "Save

me” as he careered head first down the rocks. I panicked and went after him and I landed up, literally, alongside his pulverised head. It gave me nightmares. I feel guilty that I had gone down on my backside. I was nearly 18 stone then so I had a lot of blubber to go down on. Poor Alan had come down headfirst and hadn’t survived. I felt guilty that I had survived and not Alan.

[00:11:03] Lee: After an event like that, it takes a long time for things to return to normal as a group?

Thompson: It’s amazing, no...Nev., you were on South Georgia when Roger died...It is amazing, looking at my diary, first the shock of the day itself, and the next few days, and then the burial, and then...you have to be resilient and get back to normal. You can’t harbour any grief really because it’s a lonely, lonely outpost down there. So, it’s surprisingly quickly you do get back to normal and back to the routine things. You don’t learn by the mistakes. I mean, months later we were still taking stupid risks. It can’t happen today with risk assessment and that sort of thing. So we didn’t learn from our mistakes. I remember, one day with Nev. we had been with the dog team going round Signy and Moe Island. We were coming back with the dog team and near Gourlay, where Roger’s grave was, and we were looking at the dogs, and the sea-ice was literally bending under the dogs so we had this big “Haaa” [a command to the dogs to ‘go on!’ - Transcriber]. We kept the dogs going, and they got onto *terra firma* before we went in just up to our ankles. We were not far from Base to go back and change. We didn’t learn, we didn’t learn! We took risks. We used to. You can’t now of course, it’s different days.

[00:12:25] Lee: You went to Roger’s funeral, I think?

Jones: I wasn’t there for when he died. They had a memorial service for him the following summer, and I was there then. But I wasn’t there when it happened.

Thompson: The [*HMS*] *Protector* came in, and the Padre from the ship took the service, and I read a few lessons. That was a good 12 months later, wasn’t it, after he had died?

Thompson and Jones: It must have been.

[00:12:55] Lee: That was the first Vicar on Base, effectively.

Thompson: Off the *Protector*, he was on the *Protector*. He just came ashore to do the service, and put up the Cross.

[00:13:06] Lee: So there was 12 months of just an unmarked grave of sorts.

Thompson: No we made a cross. Ironically, on Admiralty Bay, this Dennis ‘Tinker’ Bell actually made the coffin for Alan Sharman! Ironic, isn’t it that he would actually die just two

months later. We made a home-made cross...Derek Clarke, I think, did it, and Ron [Pinder – Transcriber]. So we had a temporary ‘Rest in Peace, Roger Filer’ for about 8-9 months until the Protector came in with the official cross which came down from the Stores [in Stanley, Falkland Islands – Transcriber] in the following November.

[00:13:44] Lee: The Cross had been made back in the UK?

Thompson and Jones: Yes! That’s still there. Saw it there last November [2006 – Transcriber].

[00:13:50] Lee: Tell me about Roger. What was he like? Roger Filer.

Thompson: He was a great lad. Nev., I think came down with Roger on the John Biscoe.

Jones: No, I didn’t.

Thompson: You didn’t really meet him then.

Jones: I met him only for a few days when I was coming from South Shetlands going to South Georgia. I knew I was going back to Signy, and the ship was going there so I left most of my gear. I met him then, and then, less than two months later this accident happened.

Thompson: I had a month with Roger, before he died. He was also a Swansea boy. He had gone through Swansea Geography and Swansea Botany and he was a great character. What was a nice touch when we got back, Derek Clarke, who made the first cross for Roger’s grave, he married Roger’s sister Anne Filer. They are still married to this day, living in Keswick.

[00:14:51] Lee: So they met as a result of...

Thompson: Yes. We all went round to see, when we got back, we went to see the parents and took memories and stories, which they clung to really. Derek did the same, met Anne...they fell in love and they are still married all these years later, which is a nice touch really.

[00:15:11] Lee: We were talking about the Sheathbill work you were trying to do. What sort of work had Roger been doing and what sort of work do you do on Sheathbills?

Jones: Basically, it’s an odd bird. It is not like other birds. Nothing much is known about it.

[00:15:24] Lee: Why is it odd?

Jones: It is the only bird in Antarctica without webbed feet. It is also quite a character and it’s around the Base all the time, or around the penguin colonies. Roger had obviously started to

describe the basic ecology of this species, because the penguins were the ones to be done first. He had already identified the nests because they are territorial and they are spread around the penguin colony. They steal from the penguins. They mug the penguins for their krill and so on. So he had marked their nests and had started...well he had rung with plastic rings and metal rings on most of the breeders. That is what he was doing on that season.

Thompson: Yes. And some of them were recovered as far away as Chile and New Zealand, weren't they, do you remember?

Jones: No, the Sheathbill doesn't get to New Zealand. It does get to South America. It does go up and down. Whereas the Petrels go round so it is Capies [Cape Pigeons, *Daption capense* – Transcriber] and Snowies [Snow Petrels, *Pagodroma nivea* – Transcriber] that go round. So basically that was the first thing that needed doing. I spent the summer, I was relieved of my Base duties, actually going round just identifying, counting and marking eggs, ringing the chicks, weighing them and so on, just to get an idea of the basic biology of this thing. That was the first paper, based on that. Since then, that led on to quite a few other things, which were odd about them; like their parasites, for example. They're an odd bird. It's really a land bird. All the others are sea birds. So that was what started that.

[00:17:21] Thompson: Nev.'s obsessed with them now! [Laughter] He's formed a Sheathbill Appreciation Society in the last few years!

Jones and Thompson: The name nowadays is preferred The Snowy Sheathbill Society. Probably the Americans...[Confusing clamour with three voices taking at once]...a world-wide association. The Snowy Sheathbill Society, the SScS..., with a Web Site. Yes, Yes.

Thompson: We've both been cruising for the last 10 years, lecturing on the 'Marco Polo', the 'Saga Rose' and the 'Saga Ruby'. We are going down again on the 'Saga Ruby' in February, which is nice to go back together. So he has collected characters from the Marco Polo from all round the world to join this sort of Society. They have an AGM every year.

Jones: We have to have one. It is in the Constitution, an AGM like any Society has. Trouble is we now have to spread out onto other ships so it is going to have to be an electronic AGM.

Thompson: But they are a dirty little bird...Nev.'s obsessed with them. But they are great little characters. They are scavengers. They clean up the rookery. They take all the muck, the eggs and chicks, and so on. They really are an interesting little bird, but Nev. got this obsession, he has, for nearly 40-odd years now with the Snowy Sheathbill.

[00:18:35] Lee: Will they stay on Signy all the year round, or what?

Jones: No, they mostly migrate across the Drake Passage to South America, but they breed down south. Then go to winter in South America. But they do move around some times, up

and down the Peninsula. They might not go across now. This is something that might be happening now, that with food now possibly becoming available in winter...some used to stay around the Bases. That was in the days when we used to throw the garbage out [Joint laughter]

Thompson: We weren't very 'green' in those days, were we!

Jones: No, all the rubbish was thrown out. We had a place called 'Gash Cove', so that was a great place for them. Also, of course, they were feeding off the dog spans. We had dogs in those days. We fed them with seal meat so there were morsels of that sort of thing... So some of them stayed with us.

[00:19:32] Lee: All year round?

Jones: Yes! But our breeders didn't. So I think that the whole lot were moving north. Some of these that we had in the winter had come from further south but our breeders weren't around. The rings would identify them

[00:19:51] Lee: So the very existence of Man on Signy would change the pattern of life for some of the Sheathbills.

Jones: It almost certainly did for some of them. Yes. But you also got gulls around. There were gulls standing around as well.

[00:20:00] Lee: In winter?

Jones: Yes.

Thompson: Skuas? I can't remember.

Jones: Skuas [Brown skua *Stercorarius antarcticus* – Transcriber] use to be more...they would move off to open water.

Thompson: Certainly Sheathbill and gulls on the gash and garbage. Yes

[00:20:12] Lee: So, you almost had a responsibility to ensure that some food was thrown away!

Jones: I don't think we looked at it that way [Joint Laughter]. Sheathbills are very practical. They would go for anything. If you went for a stroll down the beach with a bog roll under your arm, they would be following you [Joint Laughter]

[00:20:35] Lee: Why would you be going for a stroll down the beach with a bog roll under your arm?

Thompson and Jones: Well, there is another set of stories!

Jones: Well if it was a lousy day, you didn't actually brave...well, the toilet facilities were inside the hut and was basically the old fashioned thing...Was it two holes we had?

Thompson: Yes, a two seater...

Jones: I don't think I actually went in there with somebody else! But it was bitterly cold down at that end [of the hut – Transcriber]. Didn't have any heating there, whatever. At Signy we had actually an additional toilet down the 'bottom of the garden' – felt-lined - just down on the beach, with magazines!

Thompson: No heating in there but it was quite pleasant.

Jones: But the thing that I found was quite odd, when you opened the door it had a curtain of canvass, and when it was cold, that thing was frozen virtually solid, so you had to get your way in there. You are out of the wind and you can think in peace. But if it was a nice day you just 10 went down on the beach [Throughout, Thompson was interjecting, often repeating what Jones was saying]

Thompson: The trouble with these latrines was they had huge doors for carrying out the urine trays and so on, and if the trap door was facing the prevailing wind you would be sitting on the seat trying to get the toilet paper down between your legs or it would be flying all over the place! I have a little story. Because I was one of the first people to change...we used to use tin cans, in which we had dried veg and sugar and so on, and we used to use these tin cans, and it was...

[00:22:15] Lee:...below the drop

Thompson:...below the drop [Laughter]

Jones: That is...watch you didn't touch it though...

Thompson:...and so I was...It is normally the gash hand job to take the excreta away. And we were using these tin cans, and of course they were a problem. We dumped them on the sea ice, hoping they would float away towards South America, to make it more fertile or something. It [the ice floe – Transcriber] would invariably get blown back onto the beach. There would be tins and rubbish everywhere. So Derek Gibbs, I think it was, devised a new system, rather than use tin cans, - biodegradable cardboard with a polythene inner, you see, and much bigger, so it could take days of accumulation rather than 4 or 5 days. So we popped

one of these in and I was 'Joe Bloggs', the first person, you know, to empty this new experimental bag. So I opened this trap door – it wasn't at Signy, but Admiralty Bay – and took out this big bag, tied the top up and put it on my shoulder, and I was walking down to the sea ice when I heard this dreadful ripping sound [combined Laughter] and the whole thing opened and dripped [combined Laughter]...That's my '*semper in excreta*' - a nice motto I think for Signy Island.

[00:23:25] Lee: Again?

Thompson: '*semper in excreta*'. Its 'always in excreta' It's in the photograph [of the Signy Base hut – Transcriber]

Jones: It's always in the photographs, or on the menus

Thompson: Always in excreta, always in excreta. And this was a prime example.

[00:23:41] Lee: You were hinting there that it was inadvisable to let your nether-regions touch the tins.

Jones: Absolutely! It was a necessity. In the winter there was no heating there at all, so it was really very cold. If you touched it you would freeze to it. So not only were these cans cold and therefore not to be touched, but they were also very jagged because we used to open them with a great big can opener thing. So it was pretty jagged and bent back. But if you did touch it, you would freeze to it. So you didn't hang very low, if you could possibly help it.

Thompson: At minus 5 in that little latrine, you didn't hang very low, did you! For all men are equal at minus 5 or so [Combined Laughter]

[00:24:29] Lee: The whole process was fraught with danger! [Combined Laughter] That sounds very primitive, there in the early 60s. What advances were made in your time there - either technological or, indeed, in terms of comfort?

Thompson: Nothing. I mean, when we went down there we had no training, apart from meteorology, no training what so ever. When you were Base Leader, you were the dentist, the doctor, the magistrate and so on. We had no training in First Aid, mountaineering, crevasse rescue – nothing at all. We did our trip to Stanmore, to the Air Ministry, did our short course there, and all headed South, as green as could be, down to the Antarctic. We were very lucky, sometimes, to get away with the things we did, because we had no training whatsoever.

Jones: I describe it really as we were there in the period between the Heroic Era and the Modern Era. We were somewhere in between with really very poor preparation. Now-a-days, seeing it now...

Thompson: The biggest change was that toilet arrangement – swapping the tin cans for that bag. That was the technology in our day, because we still had the same tinned and dried food. We lived off the land – we hate to say that these days, but we did...

[00:25:50] Lee: You killed seals...

Thompson: We did, seals and penguins, for the dogs mostly, but also for ourselves. We collected one and a half thousand penguin eggs to keep over the winter in boxes of flour...

[00:26:02] Lee: To eat?

Thompson: Oh yes, omelettes. When they first came back we would have ten a day, wouldn't we, when they first came back. It was basic! Even the hut itself was basic. The chairs were these dreadful utility things, which cut your back in half. In the hut in Signy, we had three permanent fires. It [the Hut] was 90 ft. long, and we had a fire in the lounge, in the kitchen obviously and one in the workshop/bathroom for washing up/washing water. The rest of the hut was '*au naturelle*' really.

Jones: We did have a stove in the bunkroom, but we never used it.

Thompson: We had to watch the coal as well. We didn't have a lot of spare coal and so...I was reading my diary last week...it got down to minus 12 in the bunkroom on one occasion. So it was pretty basic!

[00:26:57] Lee: Would you sleep in minus 12?

Thompson: Yes, we had sleeping bags, didn't we, on the bunks

Jones: I never used a sleeping bag, I just had sheets and blankets, but also you put your clothes on. I know I used to take my sweater and shirt off together and leave them on the top. They had a bit of the heat from my body, so you could just put them all back again, as you got out of bed.

Thompson: We had a mobile hot-water bottle – a cat, a ginger Tom there [Laughter]. He was a useful little bed warmer.

Jones: But we couldn't all share him, could we! [Laughter]

Thompson: No, no...he would pass down the line, and the last one was stuck with him for the night [Laughter]. Nev. can't remember this. It must have been before he came down. I remember passing the cat down to warm the sheets.

[00:27:54] Lee: What was the cat's name?

Thompson: Tiddles or Ginge

[00:28:00] Lee: Culinary skills, were they advanced in 1961, Signy?

Thompson: We all did our fair share of cooking. We had the wonderful Cookbook, Gerry Cutland's '*Fit for a FID*'. How to cook seal and penguin, Shag, and goodness knows what.

Jones: Hungarian goulash...exotic things that I had never heard of! Modified suitably for the kind of dried and canned stuff that we had.

Thompson: And seals and penguins. I am sure that there was a recipe for penguin faggots. [Laughter] So we lived off the land in the summer, and then we were on tinned and dried stuff for the rest of the year, which was a bit tedious, but Signy always had the odd seal and penguin, didn't it, right through the year.

Jones: They could pop up

Thompson: A lost soul would appear, and we would bop-it straight away for ourselves, or the dogs. At Admiralty Bay we had over 50 huskies, at Signy we had about 18?

Jones: Yes, about that.

Thompson: And we lost quite a few of those with that dreaded disease, didn't we!

[00:29:03] Lee: What was that?

Thompson: It was like a throat cancer, wasn't it? A horrible thing.

Jones: Well we didn't really come to the bottom of it because they had...the main symptom seemed to be a large fluid filled growth under the chin. We got on to the doctor, who was in Hope Bay, on the radio and asked him about it. He came back and he thought it something called erisipolis (?) [erysipelas ? Unable to track down a medical term that meets the symptom description – Transcriber]. I had no idea what that was about. As we said we had no first aid training formally, but I had done a bit of St Johns Ambulance and whatever. Being a biologist I suppose I was the nearest...

Thompson: Well, you were the dentist!

Jones: Well, I tried filling his teeth...I think the record was about 3 days.

Thompson: It was zinc oxide...oil of cloves and zinc oxide were the temporary fillings, and Nev. tried to fill my teeth, but it didn't last long.

Jones: Also I got onto trying to actually to do some minor surgery; that involved minor surgery on people. Also, on the dogs. I was just injecting them. And we never really got to the bottom of it. I used to have a look at them. I opened them up to see what was there. We couldn't see anything obvious as a growth, whatever. But we lost several. Only one survived.

Thompson: The thought was, perhaps from the elephant seals?

Jones: Well, It was thought to be something like that.

Thompson: I am sure we sent the organs around the world to Vets but they couldn't get to the bottom of it.

Jones: At the end of course, dogs were taken away, in case they gave something to the seals. In fact, I had been working the other way round [Pause]

[00:30:54] Lee: We've talked a bit about the work you were doing. Did you feel at the time it was vital work? Looking back on it, 45 years later, does it still feel that the work you were doing was vital? Or was it just something you did just because you were there?

Thompson: Well I suppose it was a means of getting to the Antarctic to become a Met Observer but we soon realised that meteorology was perhaps one of the most important relevant sciences because of forecasting for ships and aircraft in the Southern Ocean. So I always took the Met seriously, and I felt it was. The climate record...you were building up a record, which went for nearly 50 years, of climate data. Because when we were there we drew the coldest on record, not much of a record, but it was very cold in the 50s and 60s long before the current warming trend. So I thought as a climatologist, it was so worthwhile to start building up a continuous climate record. Then the use of data to forecast was also very important. And I did a glaciology project as a hobby really but it got me an MSc at the end of the day. We took our hobbies seriously, didn't we, really, because we all felt it worthwhile.

[00:32:20] Lee: What was the glaciology project? What were you trying to do?

Thompson: Looking at the Orwell Glacier...looking at its mass balance; the balance between accumulation and ablation in terms of atmospheric controls. Even in those days it was a very sick glacier. It was losing more than...it was just about holding its own above the *firn* line. [Firn is ice that is at an intermediate stage between snow and glacial ice. The *firn line* is a line across a glacier, from edge to edge, that marks the transition between exposed glacier ice and the snow-covered surface of a glacier. During the summer melt season, this line migrates up the glacier. At the end of the melt season the firn line separates the accumulation zone from the ablation zone – Transcriber].

Thompson: You can see now looking at the maps how it [the Orwell Glacier – Transcriber] has shrunk in the last 50 years. Then again, if you believe in global warming and you worry about the loss of Antarctic ice and rising sea levels...So I, in a way, in 1961 pioneered a study...although Derek Maling, my mentor really, who lectured to me and gave me his diaries and so on, he had done some glaciology in 1948. So I was continuing 12 years - 13 years later...We all thought the work was worthwhile.

[00:33:20] Lee: Had you spotted then, in the early 1960s, the embryonic changes that we now describe as being global warming? Had it [the Orwell Glacier – Transcriber] decreased from '48 to '61 for example.

Thompson: No, it was remarkably static. In fact, it had got progressively colder over those 10 years. 1959, 1961, in my memory, it had gone down to minus 35°C on Signy, and at times you were colder than Bases well inside the Antarctic Circle. Here we are [Signy Island – Transcriber] 60° South at the mouth of the Weddell Sea, that big ice reservoir, so there were no signs of...we were in still in a cooling trend which went on into the '70s really, then it flipped back into a warming trend. But the Orwell Glacier even during this time of abnormal cold was still marginally healthy. It didn't have a great deal of accumulation over ablation even then. So ...

[00:34:18] Lee: looking back on it and knowing what we now know, are you now suspicious that it was already beginning to...

Thompson: No! I made a forecast; I reckoned that that glacier would go in 60 years. I haven't been back, Nev. was there last year, but it certainly has got a great deal smaller in the last sort of 20 to 30 years. No, at that time we were in a cooling trend, which continued all around the world until the 70s so we didn't...

[00:34:42] Lee: So in spite of the cooling trend, you were forecasting that it was going to get smaller.

Thompson; Yes, because its mass balance was very, very 'iffy'. It was slightly in positive mass balance, which meant it was very close to equilibrium. Because remember with a glacier, it is not just melting, it is with nourishment as well, and that maintains the balance, and so it looked pretty vulnerable in 1961, and hasn't improved in the last 20 years.

Jones: That has just reminded me; at that time it was being predicted that we were entering a mini ice age. It is only that far back. About whether the work was worthwhile or whatever, I think there were two aspects. I really felt that it was important to have reports and records of the climate down there because of the effect it has on other parts of the world, not necessarily on this country directly but it did obviously in the southern oceans. Of course all this arose out of Tabarin, Operation Tabarin, during the war, the Second World War [a Royal Navy operation – Transcriber]. So I realised that this was quite important, but one of the big

differences between then and now is that in our days FIDS ran maybe 10 bases, most of them with only 5 [men]. That is the smallest complement, which has problems regarding safely and doing everything. You needed to have them [The bases] spread around to get a picture of what was happening, the weather systems. But now of course none of that is really necessary. The spread is not necessary because they are doing it from satellites. So the whole place has changed. Our very basic complement was 3 met men, a radio op. and a diesel mechanic; the 3 met men were doing other things on the side. Those were the basic...that's what we had on Signy. Now on some of the other Bases, they were bigger - the ones that were doing a lot of Geology and Surveying. This was a descriptive phase. We were describing things. Now it is investigating, understanding and looking at the way the whole systems operate and link with one another. So now you have very small number of bases with many more people on them. So it is quite different.

[00:37:15] Thompson: When NERC [Natural Environment Research Council – Transcriber] took over from the Crown Agents it became much more scientific, to be honest. We did some good basic science but it was more our good luck and judgement rather than any sort of FIDS policy. Now when I went down with Fids there were 11 or 12 Bases and it was essentially still political. We were still waving the Union Jack...being there, before the Antarctic Treaty, and the claims by Argentina and Chile were relevant and potent, and as Base Leader I had 150 union Jacks up the loft. I always had a Union Jack supply. So FIDs was really run by the Crown Agents who were mostly exiles from Africa and had some weird ideas about drink...a can of beer a week!!! The story goes that on a six man Base there should only be 5 chairs so that there would be always someone up earning his money. These were exiles from Kenya and Uganda, Uganda especially, running Crown Agents from Millbank, running FIDs. Bunny Fuchs was away running TAE. The science in those days was Micky Mouse, to be honest. We did the best we could under the circumstances and we did some pretty good work. But once NERC took over in the 60s, Meteorologists did Meteorology not any old Tom, Dick or Harry. Certainly the science became much more sophisticated.

[00:38:48] Jones: I think a lot of people would not have recognised the global significance of, as it turned out, what was happening. The ozone depletion was first noticed by a guy operating virtually under the old system, and the Americans were missing it because they were using fancy technology. He was doing it with the old fashioned way and recorded this. Now that was a serious 'wake-up' to a lot of people. Because if CFCs [*chlorofluorocarbon* – Transcriber] were causing it, ...and CFCs were mainly used in the developed world, in the Northern Hemisphere, and this was developing this thing down there.

Thompson: It was done on a shoestring, wasn't it; a little spectrometer on the Argentine Islands.

Jones: In the same way, these long-term records of say, for example, plankton in the sea, suddenly have a new significance because of global warming. So you never know. It was basic science, not applied science, but there was always 'what if'. Somebody finds coal, oil,

gas...that is still there. Even though we still have got the Antarctic Treaty, signed up to by 46 countries, people are still concerned over what if one of them wants to, or starts..., what do we do then? So now it has become much bigger, much more global and much more... A lot of people, come on these cruise ships for example, a lot of those are concerned about these sorts of aspects. They get good discussions going about how you deal with it.

[00:40:30] Lee; One more question, then we will deal with the cruise-ship era. Your work on the sheathbills, has it ever been surpassed? [Joint Laughter]

Jones: [Laughing] I don't think anyone wanted to. [Joint Laughter] There are only 2 species of sheathbill. One is in the islands south of the...in the Pacific Ocean, that is *Chionis minor*, a small, black-faced sheathbill. There are several sub-species there, and some of the people from South Africa have been doing work on them. The rest is down our way, and there hasn't been a lot done. There has been some, but it depends on what you mean, as to its value, whatever. But who wants to know? I rather fancy knowing...and quite a few people are interested. The birdy people are interested, but only some of them. They don't seem to like the bird's habits. It is not a dirty bird. It is immaculately clean. It just has dirty habits, that all.

[00:41:37] Lee: How did the... Presumably you left BAS or FIDS and went off and did other things. What did you do?

Thompson: I left in '62, I taught school in Holland, an English school in The Hague for 2 years. Then went to Australia, Armadale to do my PhD. Then Massey University, New Zealand for 2 years, Guelph University, Canada, University of Fiji for 2 years. So I was globe-trotting before getting back to the University in Reading in 1974, and I retired from there in 1999 as a climatologist.

[00:42:14] Lee: and Nev.?

Jones: Well, I went back, and I was planning to go into teaching, for I had prepared for it before I went down. In fact, I was given the offer of an opportunity to go back to my old university college at Bangor to be a demonstrator and do my PhD at the same time. That was more attractive, so I did that. That gave me a PhD, and I ended up getting my first academic job at the University of Hull in zoology. I am virtually still there. I have retired officially.

[00:42:54] Lee: Tell me how the cruise ships began for you two? What happened? Is this something you did together from the very beginning?

Thompson: No! I am 10 years into cruising now. In 1997, the Geography Club at Reading University run by the students invited a speaker from the Scott Polar [Institute, Cambridge – Transcriber] to lecture on the Antarctic tourism; Bernard Stonehouse – a well-known biologist. Bernard came down and gave his lecture, and we were having a drink of coffee in the Common Room. I said “you are a lucky devil! How did you manage to...” He said “Oh

its easy. Just write to a few shipping companies. They are always looking out for new lecturers.” So I wrote to Orient Lines, and a reply came back immediately from the Leader, Nigel Sitwell. “ we are looking for someone like you to do the Geology, Meteorology, Climatology and Life and Work so on.” So I started on the ‘*Marco Polo*’ in 1997. We have been friends for many years, and so the time came when Nev. was going to go down as my guest on the ‘*Marco Polo*’. He was to pay his airfare and it was \$50 a day, whatever it is. We would sign him up as my guest. Two months before he was to ‘guest’ with me, one of the biologist pulled out due to family problems. I said to Nigel “ I got the ideal the man for you”. When was that Nev.... 5 years ago? That’s when Nev. started. He wasn’t my guest! We actually did 6 cruises together, and went back to Antarctica on the ‘*Saga Rose*’, and I persuaded the Leader to take Nev. off the ‘*Marco Polo*’, and he is coming down with me on the ‘*Saga Ruby*’ in February. So it will be great again...to go back South again.

Jones: We are going back on the same ship next year. The 4 years in the middle we have been on different ships.

Thompson: We did cruise once together...6 cruises.

[00:45:05] Lee: How is it; going south again?

Thompson: Oh it’s great! We love it. It has been a tremendous bonus, really for both of us.

Jones: It is obviously different. It can’t be the same. Because clearly, the things what dominated one’s two years down there, it’s obviously going to be the people you were with, and the dogs. Obviously the place, but the people and the dogs are completely different now. OK there is good camaraderie amongst the team of lecturers and so on. The place of course is still there, but you have got much more comfort because these ships are much bigger than the ones we were on. I actually find it quite rewarding, trying to talk to people about this place and telling them about it. Because it is the effect they have on [mumble]. There is one of the book’s quotes that I use when talking to them, “people who go to the Antarctic find that this experience changes their lives”. Now I am sure that it does. Getting them [the tourists – Transcriber] to get the most out of it, because they not all knowing where they are, or what they are supposed to be doing there.

Thompson: Some of the comments are unbelievable!

Jones: Some of them are just ticking the Continents away and...You can’t expect everybody to like what I like about the place; birds, seals and things. Some of them know exactly what they are looking for. They have done their homework. Others are just on a holiday, and it is just somewhere different. So you have got to try...

Thompson: It doesn’t bother us. Some people say “Shouldn’t the Antarctic be for explorers, people who are prepared to suffer, depredation and so on. I think no! These people are

becoming ambassadors of the Antarctic. Because you [Jones – Transcriber], when you went down, you went to Marguerite Bay and I am sure you were turned on immensely. They [The tourist – Transcriber] go back home and they might boast to their neighbours about the seventh continent. But they [The Tourist- Transcriber] also are going to promote the Antarctic, green issues and so on. I just enjoy sharing the place with...and being able to help and explain things to them, the rocks, or the biology, or whatever it is. I get a thrill out of that.

[00:47:25] Lee: You slipped in a phrase. Some of the comments are amazing or...

Thompson: Oh yes! I mean. The classic one really...the Americans...they go to the lectures. Some of them are as thick as that chair. They are all rich business executives. They have been up high in industry and so on. I remember the Chinstrap [Penguin *Pygoscelis antarctica* – Transcriber] rookery at Half Moon Island; one of the Americans looking at the Chinstraps, and saying “ When do these birds fly away from here?” [Laughter] And he had been to all the lectures on penguins and birds. We’ve got a dossier on ‘Passenger Quotes’

[00:48:04] Lee: How far south do you go?

Thompson: On the ‘*Marco Polo*’ in my first season we went down to the Ross Sea, and we did the huts of Scott and Shackleton, and McMurdo [the American Research Station on the tip of Ross Island - Transcriber] which was fantastic. But the ‘*Marco Polo*’ stopped doing that in the early...I think, the 2000 Millennium one was the last one into the Ross Sea on the ‘*Marco Polo*’. So it is the Peninsula and the islands basically. We go down as far as Petermann or the Argentine Islands...the old base F. It’s the old haunts; Deception, or Half Moon, Paradise, Port Lockroy, Lemaire [Channel], Kodak Gap.

Jones: We go down the Lemaire and turn round, most of the time. We don’t make the Antarctic Circle which obviously ...

Thompson; We go close.

Jones: ...We usually 62° something...

Thompson: Yes. This year we are going to land on Petermann [Island] on the ‘*Saga Ruby*’.

[00:48:59] Lee: The boats don’t make the Antarctic Circle because it takes extra days and the economy changes and gets too expensive?

Thompson: They say that, and to what it is worth, just to cross a line...As you get beyond 63o, the pack ice even today, with climate change and so on, the pack ice becomes much more serious for these cruise ships. The cruise ships are, on the whole, luxury liners, aren’t they. The ‘*Marco Polo*’ is a 4* cruise ship, and the ‘*Saga Rose*’ as well.

Jones: We don't always get through the Lemaire Channel anyway. So it has got an itinerary. These ships are on a virtually 12-month itinerary, so they can't afford to be held up. So this is really why they can't go any further than they can almost guarantee...

Thompson: They can't! They can't pack it in. I think last year there were almost 30 odd cruise ships working out of Ushuaia. So it is big business, arranging for ship's not to be there. Other ships are there. So they have really got to keep moving, not hanging around south of Lemaire for long but to get back up to Half Moon, South Shetlands or South Georgia. So it is big business these days.

[00:50:11] Lee: So you were 100% behind all this? There was nothing inside you deep down, which says it is a shame that the Antarctic is becoming a tourist haven?

Thompson: No! We are lucky because the ships we are on, they certainly control the passengers ashore. In all my 10 years, I have always been impressed the way they keep them off the breeding penguins and so on. This experience at Port Lockroy many years ago,...we were there with our cones and our ropes, and all the 'Penguin Police', keeping them off the penguins. A yacht came in with 4 people. They just scrambled through the penguins, and sat there holding a Gentoo penguin for a photograph. And the passengers kept saying "what is going on, why aren't they controlled by IAATO [International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators – Transcriber]?". There is no expedition team to organize them.

Jones: I had been very sceptical about it all. I wasn't really thinking that it was a good idea but I decided to take the offer at that stage to just go and see it once more. But I was very impressed by the way the ship did work because they get 500 people on shore in a place like that. I thought, "How the hell can they do it?" They operate a shuttle service, and each passenger is only on shore for one hour normally, when you have got that number of people. Smaller ships, 80 to 100, they can actually land them all at one time. They can do maybe 2 or 3 landings in a day. It is a balancing up of these things. I still think it is risky, but I can't really feel I should deny anybody else the experience I have enjoyed so much seeing a place like that.

Thompson: It is risky, though.

Jones: It is risky! They had a ship hole in Deception last year.

Thompson: And the '*Marco Polo*' at Half Moon Island. Were you on board when we hit a reef? Put a hole in the hull. Luckily we had an inner skin as well, but it was right next to the fuel tanks. So it could have been a disaster there. That is the worry of unchartered waters; ships blowing onto reefs, or rocks and so on, and oil pollution but, touch wood...

Jones: This is where this management of Antarctica comes in. Firstly tourism is better controlled than most tourism is, in areas not necessarily like that. It is better controlled. The system, now it is the Antarctic Treaty System but there is also IAATO which some of the ships we were on were not members of. Now IAATO is a self...a voluntary thing anyway amongst themselves. I can't really see I could wait behind them. They used to say that ships with more than a 100 should not be going down there, but now they have changed their numbers to 500. Now why have they done that? Because of their own membership putting pressure on it. Now if their system is controlling that, it is going to become even more controlled. I am sure it has to be, because there are only a few places, which are well charted, which are available to ships to go to see what passengers want to see – like proximity to penguins and stuff. They all have to abide by the rules. We do this by...we take cones, traffic cones ashore and put them round, and ropes. So if we see anybody stepping over them we can call them back. That is part of our role. When we are onshore that is one of the things we do, as the Penguin Police.

[00:54:06] Lee: So you have introduced traffic cones to the Antarctic?

Jones: We have but we take them back and we wash them and everything as they go back.

[00:54:14] Lee: One more thing from Nev., if I may? You made it back to Signy last year? Tell me about that.

Jones: It was a small ship, which was able to get in in November, which was a surprise to us. There were two of us on board who had wintered there. That is Fergus O'Gorman and myself. The rest of the party were a group of Irish people. We landed, we visited the Base and so on. We had asked whether we could possibly visit Gourlay, because just to see the grave [Roger Filer's – Transcriber] and also I had built a hut there the summer I was there. I had lived in this hut. It was still standing. This is 40 odd years afterwards, and I thought I would like to see it. When I got on shore on the Base, they said "Well, it is a good thing you have come now, because we are putting two new huts up there, and yours has been demolished [Laughter]. We got permission, anyway. It was a good day so the ship allowed us a zodiac with a couple of crew just to pop us down there for half an hour. So we had a quick visit there. It really was quite moving, because the grave was exactly as it was. Even the lichens and things on the rocks. Because the guys, who had put it together, had found flat rocks, which I remember at the time admiring. They are still there. The cross is still there in good condition. The huts are a bit further away. The penguins are still nesting round there. But I couldn't, for the life of me, remember the plot or how many of them there were, say in numbers. But the same two species, Adelie and Chinstrap [*Pygoscelis adeliae*, *Pygoscelis Antarctica* – Transcriber] were there. So it was moving, it was quick...it was nice.

[00:56:10] Lee: Did you go inside the Base itself? Was it different?

Jones: Yes. It was Mark Three. Our hut, Tonsberg House, then what I gather was called 'The Plastic Palace'. That has now gone and now there is another one. That's in our time. And there was another one, looking at some of the photographs [Tonsberg House had been preceded by a Nissan hut – the first FIDS Base – staffed by three people, Dick Laws, Gordon Robin and Derek Maling – Transcriber]. So yes we had a look around. We met the support staff that were there, because there were a couple of scientists around. They were out doing fieldwork. But they had only been there a week, because it is summer only now. So they were busy just getting the base going, operating, at that time. But it was nice to see. They had good, comfortable conditions, central heating and things.

[00:56:58] Lee: Would you have liked to have stayed?

Jones: I would have loved to have stayed there for the summer. Yes, it would have been nice, actually.

[00:57.06] Lee: Somebody said that I had to ask you about the loo door!

Jones: My wife mentioned this! Well she got it wrong. In fact it was the coal-house door which we had borrowed for 40-odd years from the coal house in the shed, in the hut, in the base hut to put on the door...as a door on the hut that I had built at Gourlay. There were two of us who were doing it –Derek [Clarke] and I. A couple of others had helped enormously by taking the stuff over the sea ice to Gourlay. Then we went over in October and built this thing. But we didn't have proper timbers and things. It was cobbled up. To get a decent piece that would make a door we had to...

Thompson: You even had to borrow some of glaciology stakes, didn't you.

Jones: Yes the frame was these glaciology stakes, and we had hard board and three-ply to be walls. We had enough tongue and groove to make a floor and the roof from that. The base of the thing was two baulks of timber that were {been part of } the old whaling plan in Factory Cove. We borrowed the door and it still hasn't gone back

[00:58:45] Lee: Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed!

Highlights

[00:03:03] Qualifications required for the post of Met. man in the '50s and '60s.

[00:07:39] Impact of the death of a colleague.

[00:09:57] Alan Sharman's fatal accident.

[00:12:25] Roger Filer's Memorial Service.

[00:15:11] The Sheathbill study.

[00:18:35] Human influence on Sheathbill behaviour.

[00:20:35] Toilet facilities at Signy and Admiralty Bay bases in the 50s, and 60s.

[00:26:03] Base conditions and Base life on Signy during the '60s.

[00:29:04] Death of Huskies through disease at Signy.

[00:30:54] Importance of the science done in the 50s and early 60s.

[00:32:21] Mass balance of the Orwell Glacier, Signy Island.

[00:37:15] Change in the quality and quantity of science being done.

[00:41:37] Life after FIDS.

[00:42:54] Working on Cruise ships.

[00:48:04] Areas of the Antarctic visited by Cruise ships.

[00:50:11] Opinions on the effects of tourism.

[00:54:14] A return to Signy Island.

[00:57:06] Building of the hut on the Gurlay Peninsula.