Bill Block

Edited transcript of a recording of Bill Block interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 16th September 2007. BAS Archives Ref: AD6/24/1/32. Transcribed by Barry Heywood, 2014.

This is Bill Block, recorded at Peterhouse College, Cambridge on 16th September 2007 by Chris Eldon Lee.

[00:00:11] Block: William Block, known as Bill Block, living in Cambridge now, and born on the 27th February 1937 in Lowestoft in Suffolk. Educated as a local Grammar School boy, and then went up to Durham University where I read Zoology under Jim Cragg who was Professor and Martin Holdgate who was one of my lecturers and after graduation in 1960 I stayed on for PhD research at Moor House National Nature Reserve, again first under Jim Cragg and later under John Coulson, and completed a PhD in 1963 when I took my first job which was abroad in Uganda.

[00:00:58] Lee: Uganda? Not South?

Block: No! We went to the Tropics first, to Makerere University College, as it was then, where I was lecturer in Zoology.

[00:01:11] Lee: How then was it that you came to go South in ’71?

Block: Well, very interested in soil fauna – that was my main PhD work – and so I was very keen to go to the tropics to see how the soil fauna varied and lived under those very extreme conditions, and so then I got involved in looking at the adaptations of various members of the soil fauna, particularly the insects and the mites and to see how they adapted to very hot conditions, and when I got back to the UK in 1967 my thoughts turned to sort of more temperate climates and temperate soil conditions, and then I became interested in cold conditions , and through my friend, Peter Tilbrook, we began to think about a possible visit to the Antarctic, and so I went from the hot through the intermediate to the cold.

[00:02:10] Lee: But your first trip to the Antarctic in ’71 was purely leisure, was it?

Block: No, no! It was work. I had a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, and I got a Leave of Absence from the University of Leicester, where I was then lecturing, for seven months. Of course, going as a visitor, a visiting scientist to the British Antarctic Survey at the invitation of Dr Dick Laws, who was then Head of the Survey, to visit various sub-Antarctic and Maritime Antarctic islands with Peter Tilbrook to conduct a research programme during the ’71-’72 Season. So it was purely as a visitor but as a working scientist.

[00:02:55] Lee: Thinking back, had you had a kind of secret hankering after going South? If you had worked with Professor Cragg as a student, had you been inspired, or injected with the passion at that point?

Block: I was indeed, yes…From a very early point in my undergraduate career I always wanted to go and look at difficult places, extreme conditions. I was President

of the Durham University Exploration Society for a couple of years. I lead expeditions to Libya, to the Libyan desert, and also I was a member of an expedition to Arctic Norway. So I was very keen to travel. I was very keen to look at different climatic regimes and their effect on the biology.

[00:03:39] Lee: But no special desire to go to the Antarctic?

Block: Well, there was really in a way, because I was very envious because, at the time as an undergraduate, again as President of the Biological Society we used to organise talks every week or so in term time, and Professor Cragg came up and said, " Block, I got Bill Sloman coming up from the British Antarctic Survey, or FIDS as it was in those days. I want you to organise a Biol. Soc. Meeting for him". So I organised it and chaired it, and Bill Sloman came and gave us a most wonderful talk on Antarctica. Not just the Biology but all the scientific work that FIDS were doing in those days, and of course Peter Tilbrook was in the audience. And afterwards we all went to dinner. Peter Tilbrook expressed an interest to Sloman that he was interested in that sort of thing. Peter graduated the following year, was appointed to FIDS and off to the Antarctic. I was left in Durham doing my PhD on Moor House. So I had always had that kind of interest and longing to go, and was rather envious of my friend Peter going. And so it was marvellous in 1972 to go down there with Peter and do this work.

[00:04:57] Lee: Was it what you expected when you got there?

Block: Very much so. I [had] seen a lot of pictures and slides and been to talks and things in those days and, yes, it was very much what I had expected. It was probably…A little bit…Living conditions were fairly basic but that was understandable. What was most interesting was meeting this wide spectrum of characters on Base. Hitherto I had been nestled in Academia, you know, living and working with Academics, and so on, both abroad and in the UK, and particularly here in Cambridge for a while, and then being exposed to this very wide spectrum of humanity – builders, carpenters, electricians, diesel mechanics, other scientists, and so on, base commanders – or base leaders in those days. And it was quite a revelation to me, an eye-opener, that all these people, we could all work together as a team. And that was very impressive for me, at that time.

[00:05:59] Lee: Was there a moment of adjustment for you?

Block: I think there was, yes. But I am fairly naturally an outward going sort of person and I enjoy meeting people, so it was great having a crack with all these different sorts of people. Yes I enjoyed base life enormously.

[00:06:14] Lee: How do you adjust from Academia to laying concrete and chipping rust of metal blocks?

Block: Oh very easily. I love that. I mean I love 'Do It Yourself' stuff anyway. So I love to get involved with general work about the Base. One of my greatest pleasures, even subsequently on subsequent visits to the Antarctic, is doing 'night watch' 'cause on Base I think it happens now as it did then, because most of the buildings are potential fire hazards we used to have a night watch. So from about 11 or midnight in

the evening, one person would be awake all the way through the night, and doing his rounds around the building complex to make sure there was no fire. And of course if there was one you raised the alarm. This included places like the generator shed, which was with the diesels running, all the science labs and so on, the met room and so on. And then at six-o-clock in the morning listening to the 'World Service', getting the world news, writing it out, pinning it up on the board, so chaps when they came to breakfast at 7 30 could read the latest news. And then I would do a fairly normal day's work until about 4 in the afternoon and then go to bed and get up about midnight, and of we would go again. And you did this for a week. And I loved to do this because it was a contribution to base life. As well as doing things like gash, which is being the cook's assistant for the day. You can't really do much scientific work during that period. You actually just help the cook wash the pots and pans, and lay the tables and things, and wash up afterwards. And so night watch and gash were very fine ways you could contribute to a base life. And I very much enjoyed that.

[00:07:57] Lee: You are the first person to admit enjoying night watch.[laughter] Is it because you were kind of alone in a strange place? What was the special…Was there something in here…In the heart?

Block: I think it was being alone that I enjoyed. I mean, because you appreciate on Base normal days people moving about, noises, being interrupted and so on. The need actually, to help each other, which I enjoyed also. But you know, if somebody had a difficult dive or a lot of samples to carry to somewhere or bring back, then we would all join in and help. So that's another part of the team-work. But at night you were alone, and at night of course you were in charge of the Base. And I think perhaps that was the nice thing about it. Going up the back slope to the sunshine recorder, just actually changing the chart paper in the sunshine recorder as dawn was breaking and so on, even during Summer, was a real thrill you know, and that was…You were just alone in this world…It was just magical.

[00:09:00] Lee: Did you form some sort of spiritual bond with the place? 'Cause you are still now, all these years later, organising reunions so it obviously meant a great deal to you.

Block: Yes it did, and it does. Yes, I think there is…And I am not alone in this. A lot of Signy Fids probably have this sort of allegiance, if I may put it so, to the island, and to the Station, and the particular buildings that we inhabited during our times there. And this was evident yesterday, I think, after John Shears' talk on Signy today when a lot of older folk were saying. "Ah but we lived in that building. Why did you knock that down? Why did you do this? They were curious, because that's part of their, if you like, their almost emotional heritage, if you like, in the Antarctic. And I think we all have a little bit of this. And I certainly do, yes.

[00:09.51] Lee: They were also concerned about the growth of tourism. And you spoke from the floor, from the stage, saying that they shouldn't be concerned. One didn't get the impression that they were completely convinced by that.

Block: Yes, that's true. Yes, I agree. I've had the privilege of working on tour vessels, and lecturing and talking to tourists in the Antarctic. And I repeat, my overall view is that they are very responsible people, and the company they go with, as

members of IAATO, the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators, are themselves, extremely responsible. So I am impressed by the way they are conducted ashore, to land, to observe the wildlife and so on, and to keep their distance and so on, and to have it interpreted by people like myself, and then to go on to other locations. I think it's a very responsible operation at the moment.

[00:10:43] Lee: Yes. So you don't suspect the thin edge of a wedge, which may herald the arrival of the next wave of more cowboy site (?) operators?

Block: That's always a possibility, of course, because even IAATO, or even the International Antarctic Treaty if you like, can't stop exploitation of this kind. But because IAATO is there, I think it is actually helping to prevent, perhaps, the wedge getting much thicker. That's my feeling at the moment. Inevitably, larger ships, bigger capacity will come but hopefully they wont be doing landings, they will be cruising, which in a way, is less likely to lead to environmental damage. It's the damage to the rather fragile terrestrial ecosystems that we are concerned about. As well, of course, damage to the marine ecosystem. But then, not pumping the bilges, not discharging at sea, and so on in the Antarctic, is followed by most ships anyway in that area. So it is the sort of land, the terrestrial environment we are concerned about.

[00:11:46] Lee: There is money here though isn't there…From Tourists. There's money to be made, and when money is to be made, corners can be cut, and…

Block: Indeed

[00:11:54] Lee: and standards can be dropped.

Block: Yes, indeed, indeed. There is a lot of money in Antarctic tourism, but I think we should look on the other side as well, you know, exposing, OK, a selected group of people to the Antarctic environment as tourists – they are obviously the ones that can afford it – but giving them that exposure also gives them the understanding. And I think that this greater public understanding of what the Antarctic is about, and what science is trying to do there, and how we are trying to regulate things, I think can only be good. Because the wider this exposure, the better. The more people know about it…Obviously, everybody can't go to the Antarctic, only a select few can, but those who can usually come back with the message 'we must try and conserve it, preserve it and so on'. They come back and they are very positive ambassadors for the Antarctic.

[00:12:50] Lee: Lets go back to the 70's and your work in your lab. What were your research ambitions? What were you trying to achieve in the biological research you were doing?

Block: Well first of all we were trying to find out what species lived in the soils in Antarctica. And of course, being a very cold environment, very few species exist there. For instance, comparing with a square metre of lawn in England there would be something like maybe 2 to 3 thousand species of animal, individuals of animals, in that quadrat of soil, whereas in the Antarctica you are probably down to something like less than a hundred animals present in the same quantity of soil. So because you have this simple community – fewer species and fewer individuals of each species –

then you got a much simpler system, hopefully making it that much easier to understand, to unravel. To find out who feeds on what, what they are eating, who the primary producers are, the plant and micro-organizers involved. And how the energy moved up through the food chain to the top predators, and so on: and how the whole system functions as a unit, if you like.

[00:14:03] Lee: By the time you had got to the 70s, were you doing most of that work on Base or were you still parcelling stuff up and sending it to Universities back in Great Britain?

Block: Well, a large proportion of our work was obviously sampling, identifying what we could down in the field in our primitive laboratories then bringing quite a lot of preserved material back for verification in the UK. But then we got started on looking at the physiology of these animals, and I selected three or four species of arthropods, small insects and mites which we could actually get in sufficient numbers to do experiments on their physiology, and that's when I began to look at cold adaptation. How could an insect, which is a poikilotherm - that means its body temperature follows that of the environment, unlike the human body which is maintained in a homeostatic, stable temperature condition. The insects are not, so if the temperature goes below freezing in the Antarctic in the soil, then all the insects in that area are obviously liable to freeze. So I got interested in looking at their cold tolerance and how they coped with low temperatures.

[00:15:18] Lee: Were you still finding new species at that point or had all that been done?

Block: No, no. There is still even today, still a large amount of effort needed to look at the distribution of species we know and also to discover new ones. There are probably many more species there to look at. I think we found about two new species to Science in our work there over something…Well, in my work, over about 21 years with BAS.

[00:15:43] Lee: Are they named after you?

Block: One of them is, yes.

[00:15:53] Lee: [Laughter] That was a guess. What is it?

Block: It's ah…Oh, *Mucronothrus blocki:* and it was named by a taxonomist for me, John Wallwork, and we gave him the specimens, and he said, "Oh yes, I think there's a new species here or two new species, and so he named them after Antarctic people. So I was very honoured to have that [Laughter].

[00:16:13] Lee: How big is your creature?

Block: It's about the size of a pin-head [Lee - Laughter] so not a massive one. No, no.

[00:16:20] Lee: Were you hampered by lack of technological support, or was everything you needed in place by then…In the labs?

Block: No, it was pretty good actually. I mean, Science does move on, of course, and one has to view this slice of time that you were operating therein. So during my time, from '76 to up to '97, when I retired, the technology sort of progressed throughout that. And as a team leader, I began to look at the way in which we could provide the instruments and technical backup for the programmes that we were running. But to give you an example, when Peter and I went down in '71, we took a Cartesian diver microrespirometer, which I had built in the University of Leicester. And we both used [it] there, and played about with [it], but it was a fairly technical thing because it involved a huge bath of ethylene glycol, which had to be kept at a very constant temperature, a temperature of plus or minus point zero one degrees Celsius. So that was quite a task to buffer it and make it nice and stable. And within that we had chambers inside which we floated little divers. And these were hand-made - little glass divers about an inch long in which we placed the animal under observation, with some sodium hydroxide, so as the animal breathed, the CO2 given out and the oxygen taken in, the CO2 given out would be absorbed by the carbon dioxide [*sodium hydroxide – Transcriber*], and this would alter the buoyancy of the very delicately balanced little diver. And so by using a pressure system of a manometer with a tube attached to the chamber in which the diver was, we could actually manipulate the position of the diver up and down in this little chamber, and by taking readings at regular intervals on what we call the equilibrium pressure, the pressure we needed to put on or take off on this system, on the liquid in which it was floating, we could actually measure the amount of oxygen that the little animal was taking up over a period of time. Experiments lasted sometimes 5 or 6 hours, slightly longer at lower temperatures. So we could set this huge glycol bath at zero, plus five, plus ten and so on, and do experiments over many, many days on many individual animals. So this was the first time we had been able to measure how much oxygen these little creatures were actually consuming, and thereby get some handle on how much energy they were actually using from their food in their normal natural habitat. So we are thinking down to sensitivities of 10^{-6} microlitres. A microliter is a millionth of a litre, so it is 10^{-6} down below that, so it was a very very sensitive thing. So we took this instrument down after constructing it in Leicester, putting it in crates, took it all the way down to Signy and set it up there, and within a week we had it running. And it stayed there for several years after that, run by our students and so on. So that's an example, if you like, of the technology that we used. And BAS over the years has gone on and progressed more on the technology side, you know, with gas chromatograms taken down to analysing the anti-freezes in the insects, and so on. We did all that on Base as well. So yes, I think the technology as it were, kept pace with the development of the science programmes.

[00:20:04] Lee: When you went down most recently, which was 10 years ago?

Block: No, more than that – '95, to Signy.

[00:20:12] Lee: What did you see that surprised you? In other words, how far had they gone with their technology that's perhaps you're envious of because you hadn't had that yourself.

Block: Yes, I think I was. I mean, much more sophistication in the way of chromatograms and things that could be done on Base. Whereas the original chromatograms that we did were paper chromatography to isolate glycerol and to

measure how much glycerol was present in particular samples. But yes, I was quite envious. It had gone on very progressively. Yes. We had balances for instance. To be able to have microbalances to weight not the individual insect itself but its individual faecal pellets, and things like that. Yes, it had gone on, and of course one was quite envious of all this.

[00:21:00] Lee: So, by the 90's the lab at Signy was the same as a lab at a University in Britain.

Block: No quite, but almost, yes, yes – that was about the level of it, yes.

[00:21:11] Lee: Were you Base Leader at one point, Bill?

Block: No. No I was never Base Leader. No. Because when I joined BAS, as it were permanently, as a married man with children in 1976 again: I never had the chance to over-winter, because it wasn't BAS policy to allow us to do this. And I don't think I would have liked to have done, anyway, in those circumstances. But no, I became a scientific leader back in Cambridge on two of the major terrestrial projects.

[00:21:40] Lee: Back to Signy. Lets talk a bit about the diving that took place, because you were there and Peter thought the first diving was '61/'62 [*'64/'65 – Transcriber*]. It was well established by the time you got there. What sort of routines were they doing there? What were they doing? Was it a systematic programme with diving or just a bob down to see what you could find?

Block: No, it was fairly systematic. So there would be a number of marine projects running, and the diver officer, and I remember he was Paul Skilling in our day, on my first visit, and Paul would organise that, you know, we would dive that day, or that morning, for that particular project, and then in the afternoon, and so on. And so it was scheduled throughout the week, providing weather was OK. You were diving from a boat, of course – an open dinghy in those days, not even an inflatable. And Paul had charge of all that. It was all regulated and sorted out between the diver and the scientist. I never dived myself personally, but there were possibilities for some of us to do sort of what you call 'ents' diving – entertainment diving where Paul would take you down as a beginner, and show you the ropes and so on.

[00:22:45} Lee: You did that?

Block: No I didn't. I didn't

[00;22:47] Lee: [inaudible]

Block: No really, no. I did referee their water polo match on Christmas Day. We had a water polo match off the end of the jetty and I was on the end of the jetty trying to blow a whistle, and that the nearest I got to it.

[00:23:03] Lee: [Laughter] In terms of the Base, the human side of the Base, how do you think it has developed in the 25 odd years, the 30 years that you have known it? I mean, people always talk about the toilet facilities. When was the toilet break through?

Block: Well, I can't remember the actual date, but I know when I first went there [it] was on the Plan, because it was built on the site of an old sealing station where they cut up the seals on the Plan, the planks, there was a little box, which was painted black and red, I remember it, and it was away from the plastic Hut. And that was the toilet. But it had one key feature and this was a little wooden flag on a fulcrum. And when you were inside you put the flag up. And when you had finished and came out, you put the flag down. So people on a cold wintery blustery day could actually look out through the window and see whether the flag was up or down, and see whether it was worth their while going to the toilet. And of course there were those amongst us who forgot to bring the flag down when we'd finished. So there were a large number of us standing up at the window with our legs crossed and various other positions waiting for the flag to go down, which it never did. [Laughter]
So there was that.

There was another toilet we had…Funny you get to talk about toilets but they become important in your life…And I remember this, it was at the end of the Tønsberg House, and I think this was in my first visit in 1971: it was just a large bucket underneath a seat. And it was full of Elsan of course, which we had to keep topped up, and I think it had to be emptied every 24 hours. And it was the job of the gash man to empty it. And this meant getting this large bucket full of rather nasty looking liquid out of the door and down, often an icy slope, down to the sea edge and tipping it into the water in the summer. In the winter of course it went through the tide-crack, which is the bit between the sea-ice and the land. And I remember one day doing this, I fell over, slipped over. Fortunately, it all went away through the shingle, but, I mean, it was a precarious business doing this. And I remember that. Later on of course, on subsequent visits, you go back to find there is a toilet, then there are two toilets, and then there is a radiator put between the two toilets. You know the level of sophistication was growing by the year. It was quite magical.

But the showers were the other thing. Again when I first went in '71, we had a rather cold box down by the front door. No heating in it whatsoever. And we were allowed I think one shower a week. And it came down from the hot water tank in the bathroom above, and, you know, was just gravity fed. And of course, you were allowed say 15 minutes maximum, and that was all the water you got. Because most of the hot water was used for bath water for the divers, so the divers had the preference, the priority on the bath. So any bathing was really done by the guys who went diving, after they had done their immersion to warm them up. So I remember those early days with the shower and later on of course with modern developments, decent showers came in, and, you know luxury improved.

[00:26:24] Lee: As somebody who is concerned about the environment as a biologist, when you were emptying the toilet into the water in the 1970's' did you think twice whether this was a good idea or not environmentally?

Block: Difficult to say. I probably didn't actually. It was a question of a logistic operation because you were producing the waste and you had to get rid of it. And it was the same with the cans and the glass bottles, and all the other material that we couldn't burn. We were allowed to burn in those days. Not now of course. And we put those into Gash Cove. And that meant… That was a precarious job too for the

gash man because you had a big dustbin on a rucksack frame, which you put on your back. The dustbin was filled with all the hard waste, and you then walked up the hill behind and over into Gash Cove and down to a rocky point, where you tipped this lot into the sea. And a lot of this, of course, is there today, and can be seen on the bottom. And that was the way we got rid of hard metal and glass gash. So yes you… I probably didn't think of it at the time. OK it looked bad, but on the other hand we had no alternative.

[00:27:35] Lee: What do you do?

Block: But it was very interesting. A marine colleague of mine later on was doing some experiments and analysing the chemical composition of the bodies of some of the marine invertebrates in Factory Cove, close by the Station, and it was quite amazing. He came up with this strange peak on his gas chromatogram, which was later identified as being derived from Elsan [chemicals]. So the animal had incorporated this compound into its shell or skeletal structure, and there it remained.

[00:28:12] Lee: Because you have been with BAS quite some time and you have lived through the period when all that was tightened up on, was there any sense of resentment or resistance from the bases when it was suggested that perhaps more careful thought be put into the waste products or into health and safety issues? Was it embraced straight away or were people resistant to it? Interference?

Block: Yes! I think on Base there was considerable resistance to, " Oh, here's another edict from the environmental managers in Cambridge telling us to do this", and so on. And I would guess...Yes, and I experienced a bit of this…"Oh, now we've got to do this: it's extra work" and so on. We would try and point out well the extra work is worth it in terms of damage we are doing down here to reduce it. Eventually the massage got through but perhaps something like a year or so it takes to implement a new thing properly.

I remember vividly the bonfires we had, usually on a Saturday afternoon. Because we would have scrub-out on a Saturday morning, and this is where all the Base was expected to partake. The Base Leader would organise all the various duties like cleaning up the Library or scrubbing out the Lounge, or painting or whatever. And this would all be done over about two to three hours in the Saturday morning. And then in the afternoon all the burnable rubbish was accumulated in the 'burney heap' as we would call it. And then we would then burn it on the Saturday afternoon, and then of course that was followed with the Saturday evening dinner that was a special occasion.

[00:29:48] Lee: Did you stand round the bonfire and warm your hands?

Block: Of course we did! [laughter]. Yes, indeed.

[00:29:52] Lee: Saturday night was the highlight of the week, was it?

Block: Well it was. Yes! Signy had a very nice social calendar or social programme throughout the week. When I was there it was quite well done. Because throughout the week, you tended…Well, alcohol was generally not available, perhaps

occasionally on Wednesday evenings but otherwise it was reserved for Saturday. So Saturday was a very special occasion. You washed and cleaned up. You put on different clothes. You tried to get out of you FID gear, hairy shirts and stuff like that. And you know it was very nice and comfortable to have a relaxing evening with some drinks, and of course, smoking was allowed on Base then, and to sit round the table and chat, or to listen to music, or play games, and so on, after dinner. Oh yes, Saturday evenings were the highlight. But then Sundays we would have a film, and on Wednesday there would be another film, or a slide show. And these slide shows were very interesting because they would be individual's efforts, you know. Perhaps more boring pictures of penguins or seals, but you know, but it was the commentary that used to come. You can imagine it. You would put a slide up, and someone would make a comment, usually derogatory you see, and that was the kind of way in which Signy worked. If you could endure giving a slideshow at Signy, you were a pretty hard person, because they could destroy you [Laughs]

[00:31:20] Lee: Were you destroyed in that way?

Block: Partially! Yes. I gave a talk in my first summer, I think, on…It was kind of some holiday photographs. Because I thought…The lads, being down here for nearly two years some of them, they haven't seen a tree. So I put in lots of vegetation and so on. And I remember the comments about the palm trees and the bananas, and stuff like that. And I think a showed a picture of my wife and one of the children. They weren't harmful comments. But, they were sort of quite, quite near the grain.

[00:31:59] Lee: A sense of humour seems to be important then, in an enclosed environment, like that!

Block: Very! Very much so, yes! And it was particularly evident when, as newcomers the summer people came on to Station because they had all… The winterers all had their jokes. And they would know, almost by innuendo, what they were talking about, whereas as a new boy, you would sit there and wonder what on earth they were talking about.

[00:32:26] Lee: A private language!

Block: That's right. And it was almost…In its extreme case there, because they had lots and lots of records on Base in those days, you know vinyls, and they would play these over the winter, and so on, and there was one, I can't remember, had a series of numbers on it, and they would merely sit in the lounge and say, " Lets think about Number Three", or, "What about Number Four"? And they would all laugh. And you had no idea. But they knew this record completely off by heart, so they would enjoy the joke but we of course couldn't.

[00:32:58] Lee: You mentioned smoking. It is something I hadn't thought of. Perhaps you know the answer to this…Is smoking now banned in Antarctic buildings since July 1st, 2007?

Block: Oh yes, yes!

[00:33:08] Lee: Do you have to go outside to have a cigarette?

Block: Yes

[00:33:11] Lee: How are you going to cope with that in the middle of winter?

Block: Well, I think you [are] just going to see a decline in the number of people who smoke on Base. I think there are rather few people on BAS Stations that now smoke. They have just declined away, I think. But there are some, I know.

[00:33:30] Lee: The date was chosen in this country to coincide with the summer so going outside for a smoke wasn't serious but in the Antarctic it is midwinter.

Block: We've always had some rules: probably since the early '80s that smoking was allowed in the lounge or the bar, but not in the labs, not in bunk rooms or anywhere like that. So the restrictions have been coming, but yes… It is a problem but I think it is going to lead to a decline in smoking generally.

[00:34:00] Lee: OK, that was an aside. We've had a fantastic weekend at Cambridge. I've been impressed through the interviews and through conversations with people, how proud people are of Signy. Being realistic, was Signy…How vital, how important a base was Signy in the greater scope of things?

Block: Well Signy was the British Antarctic Survey Biological Station. We did do some biology at South Georgia, and there were the bird programmes and seal programmes at Bird Island off South Georgia. But the basic marine, terrestrial and freshwater work for probably 40 years of Signy's existence, maybe longer, maybe nearly 50 years, Signy was the prime Biological Station, and as Martin Holdgate said last night in his after-dinner speech, the station people working there have been very productive scientifically, and have contributed an awful lot to International Antarctic Biology. So we were the lead Station, and I think it came as not only a shock but also a degree of sadness [when] we moved from a year-round operation at Signy to a summer only. Because we lost a lot of our good status at that point, in the sense that we were no longer looking at what happens over winter. Of course, biologically it is not necessarily deep winter or deep summer: it is the change-over of the seasons between summer and winter and winter and summer. This is when the biological activity really gets racked up both in the marine environment and also on the land. And I think that, without your wintering Base, you can't study that. And the other thing was the move of a large amount of the programme, particularly the marine and so on, down to Rothera to an area that largely we didn't know anything about…But that's probably a good reason for going there. But on the other hand we had this solid base of data and work at Signy that was not quite cut off but was certainly terminated and then only carried on later.

[00:36:11] Lee: Did you spot some disillusionment in your colleagues when you came back. This was the first reunion since the switch.

Block: Yes, I think there is quite a feeling amongst the attendees at this reunion that moving the big biological programmes from Signy… And I think it is reflected actually in what we might call the Signy Community, probably at this reunion, you get the sense that we have all shared similar experiences and lived on base winter and

summer, and we have contributed to a fairly focused programme. But there are very few people who go to Signy now who are present at this reunion. That maybe that they do not like reunions but I think it is also a symptom of the fact that they… There isn't this `Signy Community effort anymore. They go…It's quite like going to the office but it's a long way away, unlike the UK but it's that sort of feeling I think. And I think these kinds of reunions may well begin to die out as we move on and our members die as well. The actual spirit of Signy will probably not be quite as it was.

[00:37:19] Lee: Ok. Did you learn anything about Signy this weekend or have something about Signy reaffirmed?

Block: Yes, difficult to say without…I am still full of it and still quite close to it. I think some of the stories that go about and about Signy what happened and so on, I think, were quite new to me.

[00:37:40] Lee: Was there a good one that you could relate?

Block: [Pause] No I can't…Not to bring to mind at the moment but…Yes, and the loss of tradition and so on, was evident this weekend, yes. I think that the loss of the 'Hunting Lodge'. The 'Hunting Lodge' was the little field hut out at Gouley which Nev Jones, who was here was able to revisit as a tourist the other year, which must have been good for him, because it has now been pulled down and replaced by a garden shed, a rather expensive garden shed [laughter] from which the people can do their penguin work and so on. Yes…Changes are inevitable.

[00:38:29] Lee: Did you enjoy the week-end?

Block: Fantastic! I enjoyed it because names became people for me, sitting there booking them in. And the E-mails, and so on, coming in. And putting faces to them this weekend has been absolutely marvellous. And meeting all their friends and colleagues: people who have come as guests. It's been really lovely to meet all these folk again. Some I never thought…Well, some I hadn't met since 1972 in my first visit.

[00:39:00] Lee: This is a toughie, but it's the last question so…If you can't answer it, don't worry. What do they have in common these people, apart from the fact that they had been to Signy? What is the common characteristic of a Signy person?

Block: [Pause] I think…My view of that would be – it a person who is able to get through and solve most problems, solve them in their own sort of way. I mean, at Signy we were very much back on our own endeavours, and therefore if you had a problem, a broken piece of machinery or something that didn't work, or some scientific problem even, you would throw it out at dinner time, and most people would have a go at trying to give you an answer. And I think that this is inherent in the Signy individual, that we have this ability to tackle problems, some of them very large. And in some way, get through them. The name 'FID Bodge' is often made towards making things do, you know, mechanically, but I think that the FID Bodge also applies a bit to the sort of mental processes, the philosophy that we apply to life, and the problems in life. That would be my opinion.

[00:40:15] Lee: Thank you Bill. Thank you very much.

Block: Thank You.

Points of Interest.

[00:04:00] Sloman's visit to Durham University, giving a stimulating talk on FIDS (BAS)

[00:05:35] The revelation to an Academic, that builders, carpenters, electricians, diesel mechanics, scientists, and so on, could all work together as a team.

[00:06:28] Block's greatest pleasure: doing 'night watch'

[00:10:10] Block's optimistic views on the overall effects of Antarctic tourism.

[00:13:00] Block's research ambitions in the 70s.

[00:26:36] Waste disposal in the 1970's and Block's reaction as a biologist/environmentalist.

[00:32:26] The sense of humour, developed between those who over-wintered.

[00:32:58] A probable effect of banning smoking within Antarctic buildings, since July 1st 2007.

[00:34:00] Reception of the news that Signy was to be only a summer base.

[00:39:00] Block's view of characteristics Signy FIDs had in common.