

## PETER JOHN TILBROOK

Edited transcript of interview with Peter Tilbrook conducted by Chris Eldon Lee at Peterhouse College, Cambridge on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2007. Transcribed by John Arthur Edwards, 17 June 2013 (with elaborations which were made to the transcript summary by the interviewee added in red where these give extra detail or clarification)

Track 1 [0:00:00] Peter Tilbrook: This is Peter Tilbrook interviewed at Peterhouse College, Cambridge on the 16th September 2007 by Chris Eldon Lee. Peter Tilbrook.  
Peter John Tilbrook. Place of birth: Romford, Essex. Date of Birth: 12th December 1938

Track 1 [0:00:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well what did you do before Fids arrived into your life?*

Track 1 [0:00:24] Peter Tilbrook: Well, not a lot really. I mean I went through the normal education process. A grammar school in Essex. I went to Durham University, where I had a tremendous three years doing Honours Zoology, and I think that was pretty formative in my life but near the end of that time I went on an expedition with the exploration club to Spitsbergen so I'd sort of got a slight taste for the polar regions but never dreamt of the Antarctic until my Prof, Prof. [Jim] Cragg, suggested that I'd be interested in listening to a chap who was recruiting for Antarctica, BAS, which at the time was FIDS still. I duly went along; was impressed by what he was saying about the Antarctic work and the bases and he was doing his general recruiting tour and so I thought this sounds very interesting. My Prof. subsequently called me out of my Finals Practical, very informal in those days, because he said "Oh Bill Sloman wants to have a word with you."

Track 1 [0:01:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was it Bill who had been giving the talk?*

Track 1 [0:01:28] Peter Tilbrook: Bill Sloman had been giving the talk. And he said "Oh, don't worry we'll sort out the practical, just come out and have 20 minutes with him." So I duly did and Bill more or less said, "Well you're the sort we're looking for; we're wanting to start a biological programme so if you're interested formally apply." So I duly did and got in. So to the question what I did before BAS, was really just the formal education system and, looking back on it, I'm absolutely amazed that in those days they took a raw graduate to actually start a programme, which is ridiculous really.

Track 1 [0:02:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *There was no psychological study of your nature and your compatibility with other men?*

Track 1 [0:02:15] Peter Tilbrook: No, in those days I think there was always the likes of Bill Sloman to assess people. There was an awful lot left to that. It is pretty ridiculous and amazing looking back that they didn't get more failures because, either Bill was magic at doing this or it was a hellishly lucky thing, but I think we all slotted in OK. And myself and Barry Heywood, who was also taken on at the same time, were then sent to Signy to do this study and I think they selected all the other youngsters going to Signy at the same time on the same basis and we all rubbed along OK for two years.

Track 1 [0:02:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you know where Signy was at that point?*

Track 1 [0:03:02] Peter Tilbrook: I don't think I did, no! I mean it was that talk from Bill Sloman, pointing out as he did where the bases were situated - the South Orkneys, Signy - it came to me then when I realised what I was actually applying for was a position at that base. Obviously I then

focussed on it and worked out about it and read about it. But no, I don't think that before then I knew where Signy was. Certainly, I probably about knew where the South Orkneys was but I didn't realise that Signy was part of the South Orkneys

Track 1 [0:03:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was there any clear biological plan, any clear plan of the work you would do?*

Track 1 [0:03:37] Peter Tilbrook: Absolutely not. That was the other amazing thing, a raw graduate I thought great! I knew we were the first biologists. Well, not the first, but the first to start a full-scale biological programme, other than the seal people and the eminent people had worked on a few species, but in a very piecemeal fashion. So I knew we were starting something but I still assumed that somebody would be saying "this is how we're going to deal with it." But I mentioned and...did you go to the dinner last night? ... Yes so you'll have heard Martin Holdgate, he was very key in this whole story, talking about Jim Cragg, the Prof., and he was my Prof. as well and how he knew what was happening and he would obviously have had some ideas on how to start things but he had been set aside, and we were then taken over by Prof. Smith, who was a marine biologist at Queen Mary College and, as I put in my little article recently, we went, Barry & I, walked into his study, first time to meet the guy, and he smiled and shook us by the hands and said "Well, what are you going to do down there?" (laughter)

Track 2 [0:05:00] Peter Tilbrook: And so we thought, you know, is he really expecting us to suggest what we do and we cobbled together very quickly. It was obvious really that there wasn't really any plan. And we cobbled together very quickly the idea that, since we were the first, we were sussing out Signy for biological work so we'd better look at the terrestrial, freshwater and marine systems. Barry will do freshwater, I'll do terrestrial, because of my Durham background where there was a lot of work on simple terrestrial systems in the Pennines at Moorhouse. And we'd both have to look at the marine system.

Track 2 [0:5:23] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you ever find out how or who decided that doing biology was be a good idea, because clearly nobody had thought of it beyond that point ?*

Track 2 [0:05:30] Peter Tilbrook: Not really, I mean only as much as Martin said yesterday that it appeared that, I don't know whether it was 'Bunny' Fuchs himself or 'Bunny' Fuchs in consultation with others, but I suspect someone must have said at some stage "Right we're doing a lot of geology, glaciology, upper atmosphere physics, you know, hell, there's some land down there and we know there's more than the birds and the seals; we better think about it." and I suspect it just dawned we better start a programme. I honestly don't think there was much more than that in it because BAS, FIDS in those days, was really run by people with these other backgrounds, you know, geology, surveying, glaciology and a lot of good work had been done and that was were the main thrust was. So I think it was just the feeling, probably, that we better look at the rest of science down there.

Track 2 [0:06:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *How much time did you have to gather together the equipment you required or thought you might require?*

Track 2 [0:06:31] Peter Tilbrook: I think we started about September and it was just graduate, a little bit of holiday and start. And they took us on as quickly as possible. So I think it was September time, although I can't remember that precisely, and we left I think in early December. So it was two, two and a half months really.

Track 2 [0:06:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you go through a training programme?*

Track 2 [0:06:56] Peter Tilbrook: We went through the normal, at that stage the normal, induction programme at Cambridge, where we stayed at a college and went to the Scott Polar and did quite a bit of lectures and things. From what I can gather again the comparison with now is ridiculous. No real preparation other than the very basic sort of “Don’t do this” in sort of health and safety terms. Very basic; nothing, nothing like now. And really a general introduction to the work of the Survey, what the Survey was about rather than, “right this is going to be an issue you will have, this is how you deal with exposure.” It was more like “you will be allocated appropriate clothing in Stanley”, “you will be taken to the base”, “you’ll pass through Montevideo, be careful in Montevideo!” (laughter) The usual health warnings there! And I think there was a bit on “you’ve got to get on together; you’re a small group on a base, you’re all different characters.”

Track 2 [0:08:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *It was Boy Scout stuff?*

Track 2 [0:08:13] Peter Tilbrook: It was very Boy Scout stuff.

Track 2 [0:08:15] Chris Eldon Lee: *And what about the equipment because presumably (a) did you know what you wanted to take & (b) could you get it?*

Track 2 [0:08:19] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, that was a real problem actually. A lot of it we had to order and expect to come down on a later ship. I was in a relatively fortunate position in that the more I realised I was working on the terrestrial system I realised that some of the equipment was similar to what I’d seen functioning at Durham University for their work in the Pennines, namely extractors to extract small arthropods or nematodes, the things you’d get. They’re sort of 2 – 3 mm size; so it’s pretty small stuff. But you need banks of them because you need to repeat things. It’s not just one core it’s 24 cores. But I knew roughly what they looked like and we just had to order the basic Perspex, Dexion and things like that to put them all together, funnels what have you. And I got most of that done and we then, for the marine system, we want to dredge and we want to net, we want a water sampler and that sort of thing so it was pretty basic stuff done in a real hurry from catalogues that we quickly got hold of. Because there was no background, we couldn’t go to the admin people and the servicing people and say “Give me your catalogues”, you had to get the catalogues. It was all pretty rushed and we had that, sort of, basically, two months to really get a grip on this.

Track 3 [0:09:59] Whip round, speak to specialists to try and get some background and I went to see a guy, an academic, who was in I think the University of Swansea, Professor Macfadien, who was the GB specialist on extracting micro-arthropods from vegetation and talk to him about extractors and things. So it was a question of trying to meet people to find out more precisely what we were meant to do. On the marine side just to do this crude, well let’s get one of these and one of those just to sample of the marine system. Part of what we were doing was actually just finding out what lived there because, really, nobody had done it. So very much belt and braces stuff.

Track 3 [0:10:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you signed up for two years, so you knew you were going to do at least one winter?*

Track 3 [0:10:46] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, I mean hopefully. You didn’t even think about doing two winters, we were on approval to some extent

Track 3 [0:11:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *When you got there, what were your impressions?*

Track 3 [0:11:03] Peter Tilbrook: Well just looking back through the diary, we ended up going on the *Protector* for the last bit from the Falklands and someone said “There’s the South Orkneys.” I think it was pretty dull weather when we got there but when you got close enough to see Signy and the islands, I remember writing in my diary I was ‘bowled over by the place’ as I always am by that sort of scenery. I just thought ‘what a fantastic place’, that’s the visual impression. I don’t think I had a major impression in terms of ‘Gosh, is this where we’re going to live in this hut?’ and ‘is this how we get around in these dingies?’ and this sort of thing, I don’t remember that. I think because I was so young and so impressed by everything, what a wonderful new experience for me, all I remember is just accepting things like living quarters and where we were, but being bowled over by the sheer beauty of the landscape, and of course very quickly by the wildlife as well, because you see that in passing through, the major wildlife that is, the seals and penguins.

So yes it was a pretty positive entry to the place but the other thing, sort of slightly hanging over me was that, as we went through Stanley I was told very late on, I think it was about ten days before we got to Signy that we called in at Stanley, and I got called into the Governor’s administrative centre where the chap in charge of the Fids in Stanley said “Oh Peter, we’re making you Base Leader” (laughs) And again, no preparation, no suggestion that this would happen.

But it was just one of these rare things. Normally there’s a half change over - half the base goes off and a new half comes in - but it just happened to be one of those strange years when all the base was leaving, so there were a completely new complement of people and obviously they had to choose someone to be what in those days was called Base Leader but is now called Base Commander I think.

Track 3 [0:13:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you ever find out why you were chosen?*

Track 3 [0:13:27] Peter Tilbrook: No, no, not at all. I assumed it was because somebody thought I was suitable but, no, I don’t know how they made the decision. I mean I suppose being one of ‘the scientists’ - Barry and myself were ‘the scientists’ - I suppose they probably thought it would be useful to have, well no I was going to say have one of those in charge but that doesn’t figure because subsequently it was very frequent to have a Met man or an Admin. assistant or something, suitably trained, as the person in charge. But it did mean I think that immediately I was told that, and agreed to it, it put a slightly new complexion on it. You couldn’t just go in and sort of be, sort of play silly buggers, you had to sort of realise that you were sort of slightly setting an example and that after the summer when all the old ones - there was this overlap in summer when all the old ones were going - you were then having to sort of make sure things held together during the winter months when you’re completely on your own and we had eight people for the winter. And, again unfortunately, the guy who was Base Leader when I arrived there, he wasn’t staying for the summer, he was leaving after three days so I had about, no it was longer than that, I had about five days I think.

Track 4 [0:15:00] I had about 5-day hand over between myself and Russ Thompson, who was the leaving Base Leader, so I didn’t even have the summer to overlap. So it was a bit of a baptism of fire in that sense and it obviously slightly influenced my initial reaction to the place because obviously you felt that you had to take account of your role as leading and keeping everybody together and not letting things, friction, get too great and that sort of thing.

Track 4 [0:15:27] Chris Eldon Lee: *With that in mind when you arrived, did you look around and think to yourself “we need to make some changes here?”*

Track 4 [0:15:31] Peter Tilbrook: I didn’t, if you mean physically, building changes. They were made, yes, but not to do with my Base Leader role.

Track 4 [0:15:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *The Laboratory?*

Track 4 [0:15:44] Peter Tilbrook: Yes the Laboratory

Track 4 [0:15:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *There wasn't one?*

Track 4 [0:15:47] Peter Tilbrook: No there was nothing, absolutely nothing, and very quickly also we realised as Martin [Holdgate?] said again yesterday, we needed 24 hour power to run our equipment and it was just all these little generators were just turned on occasionally for a bit of light or you wanted to make a radio sched [ule].

Track 4 [0:16:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did that go down? New boy arrives, been made Base Leader and says, "Excuse me chaps we need 24 hour power here." Genny operator says "What?!"*

Track 4 [0:16:12] Peter Tilbrook: Yep, not very well. I mean I think they'd been given some prior warning that this might be necessary but none of them appeared to register it very well or very obviously. There was still a feeling of 'Well, we don't really do that; it's going to be really difficult.' I didn't have to overcome opposition but there was definitely a feeling of 'Crikey, are you really going to need that?' and 'Can't we make do with 2 days and then have a 3 day rest' and that sort of thing because the gennies [generators] are not up to it. So that was getting the, changing the conception of what the Base was about, was a bit of an issue to start with. It's not that people were against science but I think they just felt that science was fine if it meant someone doing a bit of work on birds and seals because they're obvious and, you know, it's great fun and there'd been a lot of previous work done. But I think there was a slight feeling of 'someone looking at things you can hardly see in the mosses and soil, you know, is that really necessary?' And again Barry's freshwater was very similar to that, but the marine work, didn't really start that year but we were there, when we went down we were saying we wanted to do it and again there was a slight feeling of, you know, that's not real science. I think that although Signy hadn't been a major geological, glaciological, survey, dog-sledging base - far from it - I think the ethos of the Survey overall was very much focussed on these big science areas previously and there was an element of trying to make people recognise that land and marine ecology was just as important and it was just as valid a science topic to take on board and here we were starting it. OK in what was known as 'The Banana Belt' rather than in the Antarctic but it was something that applied right throughout FIDS and the British Antarctic Territories so it was necessary to recognise that and to give it due importance.

Track 4 [0:18:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you got your 24-hour power?*

Track 4 [0:18:44] Peter Tilbrook: We got 24-hour power, yes, after having to construct a new generator shed, import another little Enfield Generator at the time so we had three and could just use them in tandem and after a relatively short while – it still took two or three months that summer to get it all worked out and get the new generator in - so we were some while before we were operating half decently. And of course we had to clear some space and make some laboratory space.

Track 4 [0:19:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did the generator system work?*

Track 4 [0:19:22] Peter Tilbrook: Yes

Track 4 [0:19:23] Chris Eldon Lee: *They never let you down?*

Track 4 [0:19:25] Peter Tilbrook: Oh yes it let us down many times. They were, I mean, pretty old engines. During the first couple of years that is; subsequently we had a much bigger generator shed, bigger generators and then it was much more reliable but that first year was pretty....

Track 4 [0:19:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *So were you losing biological research because of the generator failures?*

Track 5 [0:19:46] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, losing research I think is the way to put it, we were not losing specimens because at that stage we were not reliant on deep freezes and fridges but certainly they were running, let me think, I think we ran them for two days or I ran my extractors for two days at a time and if it broke down in the middle you'd either have to abandon that sample or you'd have to make some adjustment and recognise that it might not be useable.

Track 5 [0:20:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *You abandoned the marine part of the project fairly quickly. You say there were one or two rather interesting failures in collecting marine material. Why did you abandon it?*

Track 5 [0:20:39] Peter Tilbrook: Did I say there were interesting failures? Maybe I did.

Track 5 [0:20:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *There were desultory attempts to collect specimens?*

Track 5 [0:20:45] Peter Tilbrook: Oh, I see, yes. By that I meant that the attempts were pretty amateurish. I mean we had these basic bits of equipment like little dredges and nets which we could drag along the bottom but we were not into diving then, that was to come later, so we didn't really know what was down there. You hadn't actually looked; we were doing it by what you call, these methods were you are not seeing what you're getting. I think we recognised we were getting specimens and we were trying to analyse them and preserve them and send them back for analysis, but we realised pretty quickly that we were just scratching the surface and it was taking time from our other, more specific, areas of freshwater and terrestrial and therefore it was something that just had to be deferred until we could get properly trained people down. So that was it really.

Track 5 [0:21:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *You still had plenty to do though? You had to invent the equipment to actually do the work?*

Track 5 [0:21:56] Peter Tilbrook: Yes that was again sort of the essential bit. I wanted to sample from frozen ground all year round and in winter of course the moss is frozen solid and usually under snow as well. But to do that I had no - the standard corer that I'd taken down with me was just a hand corer you just pushed it in - so I had to work on some means of actually getting that core in winter through frozen moss. And you couldn't really reliably say "dig a great chunk out, thaw it and then use it," because obviously (a) you lose the very precise size that you're after as a core and (b) you can't have a sample site and just keep digging huge chunks out of it. So I hit on the idea of using electric drill and a modified corer to fit into an electric drill which of course then meant I had to have the power and there was no sort of easy, nice little generators that you carry by hand, so we ended up getting another of these small Enfield generators, which are huge really and very, very heavy, and lugging it by manpower up the hill. We had chosen my sample site as being about a hundred yards behind the base hut up a slope, so it was a question of (a) designing and getting the Diesel Mech, who was incredibly helpful, to make this cylindrical corer to be used from a drill and then [b] getting the diesel generator up there and setting it up and servicing it. So it meant making equipment to do the work even at this very basic level, and the work we were focussing on rather than the very general stuff, took up quite a lot of time. I mean good fun and afterwards you felt very

proud that you'd managed to do it because most people would just go to the university workshop and get it done.

Track 5 [0:24:14] Chris Eldon Lee: *8,000 miles away! [both laugh]*

Track 5 [0:24:15] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, that's right. So it was good; it was seat-of-the-pants stuff but it did take time and stopped you doing other things.

Track 5 [0:24:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *What do you think were the key things you did find out? You made discoveries I guess?*

Track 5 [0:24:30] Peter Tilbrook: In this work?

Track 5 [0:24:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *Yes.*

Track 6 [0:24:34] Peter Tilbrook: Undoubtedly, I was collecting not just from my routine sample site, but from any terrestrial system. My idea was to find out what invertebrates lived in [all] the terrestrial systems. Because mosses and lichens were the dominant vegetation I focussed on those mainly but I wanted to see what was in penguin rookeries, other bird colonies, around seal wallows,

Track 6 [0:25:00] on the edges of lakes - Barry was doing what was in the lakes. Just about any terrestrial system you could think of and it was mostly new. I mean a few, I suppose 50% of the species had been found by other people in other places and had been written up so we knew what they were. But a lot of them hadn't been found so I had to say "That's clearly different from the one we know about, who do I send it to?" I'd made contact with taxonomists around the world who might be able to help me. I put them in tubes, sent them off for identification and then liaised with the taxonomists in different countries to tell me whether they were new or not. We had quite a lot of new species coming out.

Track 6 [0:25:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *So were you naming stuff?*

Track 6 [0:25:50] Peter Tilbrook: Yes. Well I wasn't naming them because I wasn't a taxonomist. You've really got to be very specialist in your own group, but the taxonomists were naming them, yes.

Track 6 [0:25:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *So in some respects the work you were doing was the gathering: the hunter-gatherer part of the operation?*

Track 6 [0:26:03] Peter Tilbrook: Yes

Track 6 [0:26:04] Chris Eldon Lee: *And some other guy elsewhere in the world was doing the microscopic work?*

Track 6 [0:26:08] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, it was all microscopic anyway. All my work was done under a microscope because things were just that size. So I was doing the initial sorting, establishing what species came from where and I would call them species A, B, C and D and, obviously, sometimes I knew the genus but not the species so I would give them names and be able to recognise them. So I did a certain amount of identification in that sense but in order to make sure they were given a scientific name which would stick, you sent them to a recognised taxonomist, who everyone was going to say "Right, he's the one who knows that group and will be able to give it a name". It did

mean I was grappling with quite a lot of different groups and different species within those groups and then using code names for working out the numbers and in my moss patches the fluctuations in numbers through the year, but then feeding back in the specific names when they were identified.

Track 6 [0:27:13] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did it feel at the time that it was important work?*

Track 6 [0:27:18] Peter Tilbrook: I don't know. I felt it was very important. I was at the stage of believing that discovering species whether they were tiny or large is very important basic information which you build up around the world. And I was in the fortunate position of being able to do this on a small island. I know we're talking about Signy but I was also interested in getting material from other Antarctic bases and South Georgia and I did the same there during those first two years on material sent in or subsequently when I went down there myself, so I was able to put the Signy fauna in a broader context. It was very important to know what was there and to know if it was particularly interesting as a new organism or whether it had any characters which were specific to polar regions or the Antarctic specifically, yes.

Track 6 [0:28:29] Chris Eldon Lee: *In your spare time, of course, you also had to run the Base as well. In the early days how demanding was that?*

Track 6 [0:28:38] Peter Tilbrook: Well there was the obvious ones of just doing or making sure that the met. [meteorology] was done, the radio operator functioned and we didn't have a cook so we all had to have a go at cooking. Who was the other person? No that was it. Well there was the diesel mechanic who was doing a really specific job and a general assistant who would be doing mostly building site. I had to make sure they were functioning and doing what other people wanted them to do. You had to do the reports, the regular reports, or make sure someone did them. As soon as the ship came in you were also the postmaster, so you had to go and make sure all the bloomin' philatelic mail was dealt with.

Track 6 [0:29:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *Sounds like a chore?*

Track 6 [0:29:32] Peter Tilbrook: That was a real chore, yes.

Track 6 [0:29:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *A lot of stamp collectors taking up your time!*

Track 6 [0:29:38] Peter Tilbrook: Oh yes, huge numbers. Lots of mail every time, I mean hundreds of letters sent in. It's just amazing how many people collect stamps and you had, I forget what it was called now, International something Coupons, where it's got a financial value and it is legitimate to purchase stamps using it.

Track 7 [0:30:00] And they required these stamps to be put on the envelopes which they sent, putting them onto this envelope usually with their address on and stamp and frank it, because it's covers rather than stamps, and you'd be doing this for hours and hours. Occasionally I'd get someone else to help but I felt it was my job really, one of my burdens, and every mail brought in huge amounts of this stuff and it wasted a lot of time. It was sort of interesting occasionally, a letter sent in rather than just a 'please send this.' They'd write a little about themselves or bits of interest like that, but yes, philatelic mail was a real burden.

Track 7 [0:30:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *Are you talking about hundreds?*

Track 7 [0:30:54] Peter Tilbrook: Oh yes hundreds

Track 7 [0:30:55] Chris Eldon Lee: *Thousands?*

Track 7 [0:30:56] Peter Tilbrook: No, not thousands at a time. Hundreds at a time I would say, hundreds at a mail drop, because the mail drops were only 3, perhaps 4 or 5 a year and all in that southern summer when the ships were around. So each one had got quite an accumulation of mail.

Track 7 [0:31:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you think Base Leaders across the Antarctic had the same problem as you?*

Track 7 [0:31:20] Peter Tilbrook: Oh yes, you'd talk to other base leaders and there'd be a general "Oh God! how much mail have you got in today" and we were all doing the same thing because these people they just want them [*'covers'*] from each Base. I don't think I'm exaggerating, I remember it being that sort of level of mail coming in on that basis. So there were quite a lot of things in that respect but always if there was an argument or someone didn't want to do something that somebody else felt was necessary. There weren't just the 2 scientists, there were also the Met. men, apart from meteorology itself the Met. men were also doing other valuable bird ringing. One of the Met. men was doing a geomorphological job on the solifluction and soil movement. I think that was all so there was bird work, normal seal routine tagging which was part of our biologist's job as well to make sure the seal tagging programme went on so there were lots of other work going on as well.

Track 7 [0:32:31] Chris Eldon Lee: *You found yourself having to arbitrate sometimes? Having to prioritize?*

Track 7 [0:32:34] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, definitely. I had to decide it was not on for people to spend too long in their bed in the morning and because we needed to get something working. With only 8 people you had to make sure things were going. By and large they were fine; they were a super lot and I think we got on pretty well considering we'd just been thrown together from all sorts of different walks of life. But just now and again, and during the summer periods when there were more people - there were always more people in summer - there were slightly more difficult things then when we had more people [and it was] a bit more crowded. More interests vying for the Diesel Mech or the General Assistant to help them do this or that. Someone might want to go off to visit Coronation [and I'd have to say] "Sorry, no can do; it's not safe" or "sea ice isn't good enough" or "we need you on Base to do this, that and the other." Things like that. I don't remember now, it's a long while ago now, I don't remember ever having a major problem but I seem to remember it was always there. I'd got to get up and sort that sort of thing out rather than just sitting there.

Track 7 [0:34:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *Would you say your diplomatic skills were developed during that time in your life?*

Track 7 [0:34:05] Peter Tilbrook: I think it helped. They [*my diplomatic skills*] were helped by that period. It was definitely a very big formative time in my life, no doubt about that. I think I've always been relatively diplomatic and easy to deal with people. I'd been, I wasn't Head boy but deputy head boy and captains of teams and captain of house so I suppose in a sense that might have been one of the reasons I'd been chosen because they recognised I'd had some sort of position of authority, even modest, in the past

Track 7 [0:34:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you recall - I'll use the word with a small 'c' as opposed to a big 'C' - having any crises?*

Track 8 [0:34:51] Peter Tilbrook: I suppose the worst one, the most difficult one, was when we thought we'd lost a guy down a crevasse.

Track 8 [0:35:00] That was a worrying 24 hours. We'd occasionally allow people to go across the sea ice, just to walk across the sea ice to Coronation Island and do a bit of exploring. One guy who was a Met. man but an extremely competent, the most competent climber and caver, Fred Topliff, wanted to get across and climb up to Wave Peak, one of the big peaks. When I say climb, they were taking ropes but it was mostly walking, and he took the radio operator, Pete Hobbs, as well. And the two of them disappeared and went across. Lovely day. They disappeared across the ice and we said "Goodbye" and thought no more of it until much later that day we saw one figure coming back and we went out to meet him and it was Pete Hobbs and he said "Fred's fallen down a crevasse and I don't know what's happened to him but it was quite a big crevasse and he just disappeared, we didn't even know there was a crevasse there he just disappeared down this hole. I wasn't right with him but I realised he'd gone. We weren't roped up. And I can't make him hear or anything." So we thought 'Crikey, this is really pretty bad'. The other slightly annoying thing was that I'd discovered I'd had a hernia during that winter. I didn't even know what a hernia was but one of the delights of being a Base Leader was you also, unless you had someone more qualified, you were also the GP which simply meant you had access to a book of words on 'nasties'. I'd had this swelling in my groin and I was casually reading through this one day and I suddenly saw the word 'hernia' and it was obvious that that is what I'd got: this piece of intestine which kept breaking through the tissue. That was in the winter so I thought 'what do I do here? I don't want to alarm anybody, either on the base or elsewhere or be suddenly evacuated.' Unless it was a strangulated one the book said it wasn't a major problem, so I didn't say anything to anybody. I made myself a home-made truss to keep it in and just carried on but then this thing happened and I thought 'Christ, I'm not sure I ought to be the one using Jumar clamps and ropework' because it's obviously a big strain on your gut and I was really worried about that and I didn't know quite how I was going to handle that.

Track 8 [0:37:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Normally the Leader would go down?*

Track 8 [0:38:00] Peter Tilbrook: Yes, and because the guy who was down there was our main climber & ropework man. I took the next guy who I thought was very competent and two others and we set off but I was still assuming I'd probably have to do this myself and just hope that nothing happened. So anyway we went across there and marched as quickly as we could with sledges with gear on and stuff on our backs, got to the shoreline of Coronation, started up the path - not a path but the way up to this place - and got almost to the point where Peter said it had happened and we saw this figure coming towards us [astonished laugh] and I thought 'Dear me, oh my God!' Sure enough it was Fred and so immediately there was not a problem. He wasn't hurt; he wasn't hurt in any serious way. He'd fallen down through this crevasse, must have knocked himself out, but landed on a ledge down within the crevasse. His rucksack had been ripped off and was on another ledge. I don't think it was a terribly wide one but it was certainly wide enough, a lot wider than his body, so he was very lucky he'd fallen on a ledge but quite some way down and if it had been anybody else I suspect they wouldn't have been able to get out as easily as he did.

9        40.00            But he's a really sensible guy and apparently he'd eventually come round, hadn't heard anyone calling so he'd missed all that. He realised he'd got to get out himself, managed to climb up and get to his rucksack and then worked his way along the ledge, along this patch of snow I suppose, until the crevasse was narrower so he could do this chimneying up with back on one side and legs on the other and eventually he got himself out after some considerable time. It must have been a considerable time because he hadn't got far down from the crevasse before he came and

met us. So anyway that was an event that was quite hairy and one might say I was really relieved. So I still hadn't told anybody of my medical problem and I just kept it quiet and it wasn't put to the test fortunately.

Track 9 [0:40:36] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was it dealt with when you got back to the UK?*

Track 9 [0:40:38] Peter Tilbrook: It was dealt with fine back in the UK, yes, no problem.

Track 9 [0:40:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let's talk about the dogs for a few minute. There was a change of policy wasn't there when you were there?*

Track 9 [0:40:47] Peter Tilbrook: Well yes, there was a change in policy overall running down the use of dogs. But it didn't affect us in terms of Signy, except that because of that they were going to diminish the use of dogs, other than at one or two really hard sledging bases, so they said "It's useless and a waste of time", and it clearly was, "for you at Signy to keep dogs". We were literally.... it had obviously grown up as a sort of piecemeal thing. Nobody liked killing their dogs when they'd finished working and they just pensioned them off to Signy and we just had a few desultory attempts to link them up to sledges and take gear around. They did actually serve a function on half a dozen occasions when there was good sea ice, but other than that it was done because we knew we had them there and it was good fun to try sledging. So they were a bit of a crazy luxury. And it meant that we had to kill seals, in those days we killed seals to feed them, but it also meant I could get material from the seals to send back to someone who was working on some basic material from seals in this country. And we'd eat the seals as well; it was good to have some fresh meat. But the situation changed when overall there was diminished dog numbers. "Get rid of the Signy dogs." So in my last summer of that first period a vet came down and put all but about four dogs down, and the four that were still good healthy young dogs were sent south. Previously we'd bred dogs, although the were oldish, we still bred from them and so we'd had various litters of dogs which we'd reared a bit and then sent off down to do work. So there was still a use for them.

Track 9 [0:42:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *A difficult day?*

Track 9 [0:42:50] Peter Tilbrook: Difficult day, yes, but I wasn't as close to them as others were. I wasn't the one who was looking after the dogs, I'd got one of the Met. men to do that. And I think it was very difficult for him and it was difficult for all of us in that we got attached to individuals but I wouldn't say it was like losing a pet as far as I was concerned. It was an unpleasant time, certainly unpleasant for the ones down South, where you had your dog team and you really got to know it. It must have been pretty terrible for them.

Track 9 [0:43:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *Diving began to be introduced or developed when you were there. Tell me about the diving programme.*

Track 9 [0:43:33] Peter Tilbrook: Well it was done because of the background I mentioned. It was decided we'd got to tackle the marine system seriously and diving was best way of seeing what was there even if we were subsequently going to use mechanical repetitive routine methods like dredges and things. There was nothing better than going down and seeing what the habitats were like and what species were there. So they recruited a diver and an assistant diver to just be professional. I'm sorry, the diver/marine scientist and an assistant were recruited and they duly came down in the second summer and started this programme of diving and the rest of the base was there trying to make sure it went OK and supported them and, obviously, everybody had to double up in terms of taking the boat out so that when the 2 divers were in you had someone on the surface to monitor

where the bubbles were coming up and then check where they were and make sure they were safe and help them out etc etc. I mean, let me think [long pause thinking] just trying to remember whether in my second winter if they were diving. I don't think they were at that stage, it was only subsequently they got into the winter diving and I wasn't Base Leader then.

10 45.00 When I went down in '72 it was a summer so the sea ice had gone and my only connection then was helping the diving on the frozen lakes, where Jeremy Light was diving into the lakes and in fact he took me diving in a lake. I know you've interviewed Jeremy and that was one of the experiences I remember fondly.

Track 10 [0:45:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *Summer diving in the '60's that was fairly rudimentary, the equipment I mean?*

Track 10 [0:45:47] Peter Tilbrook: Very rudimentary equipment, well compared to now, yes. You'd have dry suits now; you had wet suits then and wet suits in that sort of temperature were not ideal. I'd certainly prefer to use a dry suit but I don't think they existed in any widespread sense then. I think the equipment was as good as you would get in those days, but again it obviously looks very primitive now. They were not deep dives, I don't know what the maximum depth was but I bet it wasn't more than 30 or 40 meters.

Track 10 [0:46:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *What were they coming up with?*

Track 10 [0:46:26] Peter Tilbrook: Oh they were coming up with fantastic stuff. Because you'd never been able to see it, it was amazing these big Glyptonotus, isopods, massive sea spiders, interesting sea anemones and the fish, but obviously they weren't collecting the fish because they were too fast moving, but we'd always been fishing so we did now what some of the fish that were there. Fishing through holes in the ice and using fish traps, home-made fish traps, but that was just for food so we were doing that all the time but they at least were able to see the fish where they existed in their habitats. A range of different species which we were just unaware of so it was absolutely fascinating to see what they were getting.

Track 10 [0:47:17] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was that stuff being analysed on base or was it being parcelled up?*

Track 10 [0:47:20] Peter Tilbrook: A bit like the terrestrial. Always parcelled up for final analysis at home by some specialist but the marine guy, and we because of our interest, would be doing some basic analysis getting the nearest genus or family for each species.

Track 10 [0:47:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *Then again you were seeing stuff for the first time? Your first sea spider [etc]*

Track 10 [0:47:48] Peter Tilbrook: Absolutely. I knew of sea spiders but not as big as this and as strange as this and I'd never come across this isopod Glyptonotus before. I'd had a bit of a marine background through my university training and I've always been absolutely fanatical about the sea, so it was really interesting as well. But yes, lots of very new, really interesting stuff, absolutely fascinating.

Track 10 [0:48:17] Chris Eldon Lee: *So perhaps being the first people to see a creature; was that a special feeling?*

Track 10 [0:48:24] Peter Tilbrook: Oh, yes, yes, absolutely. In many cases you didn't know you were the first at the time, it's just that you didn't know what it was and there didn't seem to be anything like it in the books but it was only later that you realised 'well that actually is a new species!' As you picked it up you didn't know it was new but there was always this feeling that, even if it wasn't new, not many people had seen it and it was quite something special. The whole thing, it penetrated my whole time down there, it was a tremendous privilege to be here and to witness all this fantastic landscape and experience this amazing sort of weather and conditions, and on top of that see the wildlife which was so, particularly the big wildlife, the seals and penguins, that was so human and unafraid of humans.

Track 10 [0:49:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let's roll forward 10 years to your second period at Signy, which was when you didn't winter again.*

Track 10 [0:49:32] Peter Tilbrook: No

Track 10 [0:49:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *When you walked into Signy '71 how did it differ from Signy '61, '62 ?*

Track 11 [0:49:40] Peter Tilbrook: Well, I mean massive differences in that my last summer [19]63/64 they put up the new hut. New then, the big 'Plastic Palace' and I hadn't seen it functioning because I had to leave before it was functional. I'd seen it go up and I knew what it looked like but coming in '72 there it was.

50.00 mins That was the main thing, you went in and looked around and saw relatively modern rooms, with a lab, with relatively good heating. I mean all the facilities - a kitchen that looked like a kitchen. Everything was obviously much more tailor-made and quite different to the old basic stuff we had in our old wooden hut earlier. So that was the main difference. There were a lot more people on the base. Because it could hold more people there were more scientists and others and a few visiting people as well, visiting scientists who were there for just short periods. So the physical side of it was very different:- a huge great oil tank where we'd had barrels which we'd had to roll up the path, a big water reservoir behind whereas we'd had to pull in little bits of ice floating in the bay. Well it looked like little bits of ice until you pulled up on the slipway where they looked huge and you'd break bits off and put them in the water tank, or cut snow blocks, and there they had a big water reservoir so all the necessities of life were there. There was a cook so you didn't have to waste a day every eight cooking. So the physical conditions were so different and, obviously, I wasn't Base Commander then but I had the feeling of [being] a visiting [scientist]. I had several people that I'd recruited working there, because back in this country I'd been starting to run biological programmes, to recruit new people and to take the terrestrial work which I'd just started, so we now had a specialist person for springtails, for mites, for nematodes, for tardigrades. So we had different people there looking at different elements of what I first discovered. So I had them feel I was supervisor and again I didn't want to stand over them and 'lord it' over them but there was always a slight feeling of wanting to be friends with them but making sure they got on with the work and that things were going smoothly. So it was very different in all sorts of ways.

Track 11 [0:52:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *How would you say the Base Leader's work had changed? I know you were observing someone else do the job in '71/72.*

Track 11 [0:52: 49] Peter Tilbrook: Well it hadn't changed an awful lot I didn't think. In some ways it was more difficult because of the additional strains through numbers. It was just that much bigger an operation. There were just many more bits of equipment around and that has its own problems but

there were decent, reliable generators that would give you justified power all the time. I just don't think I can recall any real differences. Some of these things were magnified. Also there was much easier help. When we were first there all the radio exchanges were done by morse, now you could actually use, it wasn't actually a phone, but you could speak to people verbally in Stanley. I'm trying to remember if we could speak direct to UK; I can't remember that, I don't think we were because, no, because I wasn't able to speak to my wife so it was still done mostly by morse but it was much more efficient and that I think was probably a help to the Base Commander, he didn't feel quite so cut off.

Track 11 [0:54:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *How had the science progressed in those years?*

Track 11 [0:54:14] Peter Tilbrook: Oh, enormously. Orders of magnitude different because, better equipped, you were able to prepare people. You took on people knowing that you wanted them to focus on a particular thing so you took on people either with research experience or with some background experience in a particular group. So unlike us just going on as bright-eyed, interested biologists they were coming along with a background. "We want to look at nematodes or we want to look at arthropods or vegetation" and the equipment was so much better.

Track 12 [0:54:55] Peter Tilbrook: I mean you had analysers to tell you everything: water chemistry;

55 mins soil chemistry, temperature probes - really sophisticated temperature probes rather than just a basic thermometer. You'd got very delicate probes you could put in at different levels in the soil so, just about any aspect you could think of, it was a good deal better. And so it should have been after 10 years; you'd expect to learn and obviously science had progressed as well, so the analytical equipment was very much better as well. But that was back 30 or 40 years ago, it's so much different now again, another order of magnitude again.

Track 12 [0:55:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *Couple of little tiny questions then. I promised to ask you what a 'wierdy' was?*

Track 12 [0:55:45] Peter Tilbrook: Oh, yes, just the layman's word for any sort of thing that they weren't sure about; any living thing. I was working on little 'wierdies' and they'd occasionally bring from diving [and say] "Oh that's a strange 'wierdy'". So it's just a generic term for anything that was unfamiliar but living as it were.

Track 12 [0:56:13] Chris Eldon Lee: *You corrected a story from 'Of Ice and Men' about the 'mutt', which Fuchs thought was a dog that fell into a can of green paint, but wasn't? What's the true story?*

Track 12 [0:56:28] Peter Tilbrook: Oh, God yes that was just a classic! I couldn't believe it when I heard [read] it in Fuch's book. Basically myself and the guy Fred Topliff, who fell down the crevasse.

Track 12 [0:56:31] Chris Eldon Lee: *Topliff?*

Track 12 [0:56:32] Peter Tilbrook: Topliff, yes. He had, as a Met. man, he'd decided to work on birds. He was doing work on a variety of birds including the Sheathbill and he had a mechanism for catching them outside the base, because there were often a lot around the base, using a trap and he'd bait the trap, get them in, set the trap, bait them, go out, get the bird and ring it and then we'd be able

to trace the bird in future. And one day we were looking out and saw there was a lot of ice in the water and the birds were milling around and we saw one in the water very unusually. They didn't go in the water usually, and [it was] obviously flapping around in trouble. So we went out and fished it out and it was really, I don't know what was wrong with it but it's plumage had got severely wetted and therefore it was not working properly and it would almost certainly have died pretty shortly after. So we'd probably have been best to have left it but anyway we took it in, sort of dried it with towels and just left it looking very forlorn in the workshop, which was the warmest room in the hut. But foolishly we didn't put it in anything because it looked like it was flat out, so it was just on the bench in the workshop. Went off and had coffee or something and about an hour later came back in. We couldn't see it anywhere and then we suddenly noticed there was this pot of green paint on the bench which somebody had not put the top on and sticking out of the top of this was this bird. It had completely submerged itself in this pot of green paint. And again it would probably have been much the kindest thing to just bonk it on the head but being idiots that we were we thought, well, maybe we'll try and clean it up. So we doused it in all the terrible things you get paint off with and then tried to wash that off with warm soapy water. After a long period we'd reduced it to a sort of pale green colour. And then again we should probably have put it down. But we thought, well, perhaps we'll try feeding it. Kept it going for a couple of weeks by just feeding it and trying to build it up. Then we thought, well that's quite interesting because it's alive it'll probably be OK to go outside and I wonder how the other birds will treat it. Being semi-scientists I think we just thought here's an interesting behavioural thing.

Track 12 [0:59:18] Chris Eldon Lee: *A green Sheathbill!*

Track 12 [0:59:19] Peter Tilbrook: A green Sheathbill. So we duly put it outside and just watched it. It obviously wasn't completely fit but it was running around and behaving relatively normally. And sure enough the other birds did attack it, the other Sheathbills did attack it. Although they were not in family groups, presumably they would have recognised it in some way but they didn't like the fact that it was different and, they weren't attacking it violently but they clearly didn't accept it.

Track 13 60.00 Basically that's it, I think we watched it for a couple of days and then it disappeared and I suspect it died.

Track 13 [1:00:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *What's interesting though is Fuchs getting it wrong.*

Track 13 [1:00:04] Peter Tilbrook: I don't know how he did that.

Track 13 [1:00:06] Chris Eldon Lee: *The question I have to ask you is did it make you wonder about [the accuracy of] the rest of the book?*

Track 13 [1:00:10] Peter Tilbrook: It did make me wonder a bit. I have to say it's such a basic thing to get wrong. But I can only assume that someone told Fuchs and all I can think of is that someone said to him "Oh there was this issue at Cromarty where a funny thing happened and this 'mutt' got into a pot of green paint and got covered in it." Now 'mutt' was our name for a Sheathbill because, I don't know if someone else told you, but they do this.... [demonstrates nodding head]

Track 13 [1:00:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *They nod their head?*

Track 13 [1:00:49] Peter Tilbrook: They nod their head and go "Mutt, mutt, mutt" - it was this Goon Show sort of thing, and I think Fuchs, being Fuchs he was totally orientated on dogs : he just loved dogs, and he must have thought that must be a [husky] dog called 'Mutt'. Hence the change. I

think it was his transposition of 'Mutt' being a name for a Sheathbill rather than a nickname for a dog. But, I mean, a dog getting into a bucket of green paint? It just doesn't tie up, but anyway that's how it got transposed.

Track 13 [1:01:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *Are you still dubious about other things in the book because he got that wrong?*

Track 13 [1:01:25] Peter Tilbrook: Not particularly, but it always makes me nervous about books which I don't feel have been well researched and it did make me think: 'Mmm, there's an awful lot of detail in that book'. I'm sure, knowing 'Bunny' as I did then, he would have checked on most of it, but it does throw a few doubts in your mind.

Track 13 [1:01:47] Chris Eldon Lee: *You mention Cromarty. Was that a different place to Signy?*

Track 13 [1:01:51] Peter Tilbrook: Did I mention Cromarty ? Oh God that was a slip

Track 13 [1:01:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *The inference is you meant to say Signy?*

Track 13 [1:01:56] Peter Tilbrook: Yes. That was a Freudian slip. I live at Cromarty. [CEL laughs] I didn't realise I'd said that. It's got nothing to do with the Antarctic. Long, long after I left the Antarctic I moved to Cromarty so that was a weird slip.

Track 13 [1:02:10] Chris Eldon Lee: *Don't worry. Peter, thank you very much indeed.*

Track 13 [1:02:13] Peter Tilbrook: Pleasure.

END [1:02:15]

## **PARTICULARLY INTERESTING PARTS TO ME**

**Way of working with new / unknown species Track 6 [0:26:08] up to Track 6 [0:27:13]**

**Crevasse incident Track 8 [0:34:51] up to Track 9 [0:40:36]**

**Changes on base between 1961 and 1972 Track 11 [0:52: 49] TO Track 12 [0:55:42]**

**Green Sheathbill Track 12 [0:56:28] up to Track 13 [1:00:04]**