

TOM WOODFIELD

Edited transcript of a video interview with Tom Woodfield conducted by John Tolson at Stoke Gabriel on 29th July 2009. Transcribed by Simon Taylor on 30th April 2014.

[0:00:09] Woodfield:

I'm Captain Tom Woodfield. I was born 1933, the middle of three children, born actually in Hampstead because my mother was up there with her parents whilst we were living in Cornwall.

[0:00:29] Tolson:

Tom, just take me back right to the time before you even went to sea. I guess it was just after the Second World War – that it was big in your mind. Take me through those early thought processes of yours.

Woodfield:

Well I went to sea in 1950. The family background was my father was in shipping, ashore, although his forebears had been at sea – some of them owner-masters of ships on the Devon coast, and a great-grandfather was Harbour Master of Liverpool. But my father's passion was exploring and mountaineering, particularly mountaineering. He was a mountaineer but he didn't do any exploring, but the house was full of books on Scott and Shackleton so a polar mountaineering background and living by the sea in Cornwall, and Essex latterly, gave me those two interests which I was able to combine when an advert appeared for the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey to crew a new ship that they were buying to support the Antarctic program at that time.

[0:02:14] Tolson:

I suppose before you joined the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey you must have been apprenticed with a traditional shipping company to gain some qualification.

Woodfield:

Yes. I always wanted to go to sea. In fact I ran away to sea, which is a bit of a joke 'cause my father collected me from the station, which was about two hundred yards away from the home, took me back home and arranged for me to go to Warsash, the school of navigation at Southampton where I did a year and then I joined the Port Line as an apprentice for about three and a half years and I joined FIDS as we called it almost immediately after getting a Second Mate's ticket.

[0:03:08] Tolson:

So it's quite obvious, from the start, that you were always going to go to somewhere pretty remote – isolated and with an adventurous capacity about it.

Woodfield:

Yes. Certainly always going to go to sea, and in the most romantic and extreme way as possible. Yes.

[0:03:30] Tolson:

So you turned up on the doorsteps of FIDS, which later became known as BAS (British Antarctic Survey). What form did it take then in the 1950s? I mean, it had big glamorous offices as it does today?

Woodfield:

No. It was absolutely the reverse. It was a small family affair with Sir Vivian Fuchs as the Director in charge, although I believe the Governor of the Falklands had the overall supreme

control of events. The London office was the only office in the UK of the organisation and it had about six people in. It had about three chaps and three ladies. The system was (not that I'm the expert on this side of it, but) that the science and the direction of the science was always controlled. . . I'll put it 'farmed out' to various universities. Edinburgh was Physics and Birmingham was Geology and so on and so forth. So the control, in London, was the co-ordination of the scientific work at different universities and the running of the ships – in fact ship. It had only been one ship until the *Shackleton* was bought and made it two ships.

[0:05:21] Tolson:

I suppose we should go back a few years earlier, before the time that you joined BAS (or FIDS) and look at the origins of how this whole operation started, and why, in Operation Tabarin during the war-time service. That almost . . . that really was the beginning.

Woodfield:

Yes. That was the beginning. Yes. And then there were various boosts along the way, like the signing of the Antarctic Treaty and the backing by the scientists – the Royal Society – of a 30-year scientific program. These were the boosts that came along that developed it into the organisation which it is now with I'm told about six hundred people in Cambridge.

[0:06:12] Tolson:

Take me to your first days on your first ship – in fact your first ship was the first *John Biscoe*.

Woodfield:

No. Well . . . no, the first ship was the *Shackleton*. Well the interview, as I've suggested, was held at the Crown Agents because that was . . . again it was farmed out to them to organise those sort of things. The interview was taken by the Master of the old *John Biscoe*, Bill Johnston, and Bill Sloman who was the personnel man for most of my time with FIDS and BAS. I sat on a bench at the Crown Agents with about fifty other people and I sat next to Adam Kerr – and Adam Kerr got the Second Mate's job and I got the Third Mate's job, and we always said we were the only two that they could remember after interviewing fifty people. So we joined up, and the ship was in Denmark in Frederikshavn, refitting, and we went across by ferry in December – an extraordinary voyage because the North Sea was in one of its worst states, absolutely tempestuous and I always remember we were the only two people in the dining room and the bar the whole evening. We arrived in Frederikshavn and found the ship being refitted, and joined her. We were there about a month putting the finishing touches. Captain Johnston who interviewed me was the Master, and Tom Flack was the Chief Officer, who'd just been recruited.

[0:08:22] Tolson:

So then it was . . . once the refit was done you presumably came across to the UK, did you, and took stores?

Woodfield:

Yes. That is a quick summary – and as usual with me there's an extraordinary story because we finished the refit in Frederikshavn and one of the last things we did was what's called an 'inclining test', which is tipping the ship over and measuring the distance she goes over with a particular weight hung from a derrick and so on, and this provides the information to give the details of the ship's stability, which then goes into a book which is called the Stability Book – which all ships carry so they know what they can load and how. The inclining test showed that the ship was slightly dodgy with regards to its stability, but the conditions when the test was taken were not very good. It was windy, and the harbour was a bit choppy, so the naval architects accepted the information saying that it was the conditions that were throwing the readings out. Well we set sail, in December, for Southampton from

Frederikshavn and the weather was atrocious and it took us two days to get through the Kattegat around the lighthouse and come down into the North Sea. What we found is that the ship was rolling to such an extent that she was nearly putting her gunwales under, and there was something very very wrong with the stability. And we got to Southampton and Tom Flack the Chief Officer was . . . extremely clever chap – he'd got an Extra Master's Certificate, and he went along to the Department of Transport (or Trade – whichever it was. Department of Trade, I think, now.) and he took with him some calculations and figures and said 'This ship is unstable. We've got to do something about it.' So we went through another inclining test in Southampton and sure enough she was very very unstable. In bad conditions she could have sunk – just turned over. The result of that was that instead of loading and sailing south we put ninety-eight tons of pig iron in the bottom of the ship. That sorted the stability out. What it also sorted out was the marriage problems for some of the officers, because we'd linked up with the local nurses, and out of ten officers on board three of them got married to those nurses, and are still married to them. However, off we went South, with Captain Johnston in command, for what for everybody on board (except I suppose Bill Johnston) was truly a remarkable voyage – an unbelievable voyage.

[0:12:16] Tolson:

Just take me back to Southampton where you were loading up the stores. Can you elaborate a little on . . . although you yourself wouldn't have seen anything of the Antarctic yet, did you have any perception of what it was you would be doing? I mean, there was all this, presumably, food and equipment coming on board – did you have any idea of the number of bases that were involved? How many bases were you having to re-supply, and the numbers of people?

Woodfield:

I think at the time there were about seven or eight bases, each with about ten or a dozen people on board. Quite frankly at that time it was all so brand new that we either learnt by talking to the Captain or reading up a bit. The stores were very straightforward, from oil drums full of fuel, great big boxes containing Kelloggs, baked beans – everything and anything you can think of that was required to survive. The interesting little bits at that stage, giving us a taste of what was to come, were things like skis, Nansen sledges, tents, radio equipment designed to work outdoors. But we were all very very green and I don't actually think we had a great deal of idea what we were going into to – weather-wise, ice-wise or work-wise, but we were . . . [*break in the recording – new viewpoint*]

[0:14:17] Tolson:

Tom – a bunch of greenhorns heading South on a ship that you're unfamiliar with, conditions that you know nothing about – tell me: What's it feel like? Big ship? Small ship? Seasickness? How's that take you?

Woodfield:

Well she was certainly a small ship. She was 180 feet long, 980 tons deadweight. We all without exception (except the Master) had come from much larger cargo ships, semi-passenger ships – so she felt very small. She moved about a bit, but fortunately we were all good sailors. Both Adam Kerr and myself had been small-boat sailors, so we were used to being tossed about. The real surprises came when we got South. Our first port of call after the Falklands was Admiralty Bay in the South Shetlands, and we were just staggered at the scenery – and looking back now, having seen the Peninsula and the Weddell Sea from top to bottom, the Shetland islands aren't all that dramatic, but to us arriving – the first sight of them . . . it was absolutely outstanding. But it was then that we began to realise the shortcomings of the *Shackleton*. She was very very thinly plated – three-eighths plating [*9.5 mm thick*], whereas later ships had steel plating of specialised steel of an inch-plus thickness

[25.4 mm +]. She was very under-powered. She was in fact a Baltic Trader. She was built as a Baltic Trader. [pause] I've lost track. [pause again] OK. Shall I just roll on?

[0:16:36] Tolson:
Yes.

Woodfield:

The important deficiency was that she hadn't got enough watertight compartments. That is, if you flooded one or two areas the volume of water inside would sink the ship. Ships these days are made with several compartments so you can flood at least two or three compartments and the rest of the ship will keep the vessel afloat. We found out to our cost because we nearly lost the ship in a subsequent year because of this defect.

[0:17:30] Tolson:

When you were down, in the Peninsula region now, of the Antarctic you were starting to re-supply the eight or so British bases. Take me through the process it involved. Presumably the ship had to anchor off at each little harbour, if there was a harbour, and do the cargo transfers by boat, or barge . . .

Woodfield:

Yes. All the bases were different. And what I haven't mentioned, with regard to the cargo, is that on those early voyages we also carried a complete station – a complete base so that we could erect and establish (set up) a base wherever it was required, and this was driven by the politics of the time, the international politics. It was a display of Britain's sovereignty. The more bases we had spread around particularly the Peninsula area the more it showed that we held the sovereignty and there was an obvious display of that sovereignty. The other cargo, or in fact the bases, we would either get alongside the ice and discharge onto ice or we would anchor off and discharge into what we called a 'scow'. It was an open wooden barge. The idea of the use of the barge was copied from the way they work round the Falklands with getting the stores and the sheep to and from the station relief ship round the farms of the Falklands. And also they use that style of work in New Zealand, and Chatham Islands. One of the big surprises was – Captain Johnston had been in command of the old Biscoe for a good few years, and he'd also been brought up in tugs – in other words small craft, and he could handle a ship . . . throw the ship around anywhere and everywhere and with an incredible ability, to us chaps off larger ships inasmuch as he would put it anywhere into the most remarkable positions. And we set up a base at Horseshoe Island (Base W) – we arrived there and it was just virgin rock, and no-one really had been there before except perhaps Charcot in 1910. He found that it was quite deep offshore, and instead of anchoring he just put the ship straight alongside the island. He just went straight alongside the rock and we discharged onto the rock as if it was a quay. I mean for someone who had been brought up in quasi-passenger ships going to Melbourne and Sydney this was just out of this world. And whilst we were there an amusing incident is that because of the depth of water a berg drifted in and came alongside us and banged and banged against the hull and we were actually having a film in the wardroom in the evening, which was about the only respite we had from work. And Captain Johnston said 'Oh, we'll see the last reel and then we'll deal with it.' And that little story shows his nature. He was game for anything and he had nerves of steel and could just outlast, outlive anything. Throw anything at him and he could take it.

[0:22:23] Tolson:

How did this rub off on you guys? I mean I expect some of you took advantage of this cavalier attitude.

Woodfield:

Well, we just thought it was absolutely marvellous and we realised that this is the way that we'd got to do things and I think . . . I'm probably labouring Captain Johnston a bit but there's no doubt that his style . . . the way he . . . of working the ship more than rubbed off on me. It taught me how to behave – taught me what could be done if you were adventurous and yet always cautious. Well I was always cautious. He wasn't quite so cautious, as you'll hear later on! But, yeah . . .

[0:23:16] Tolson:

During your first voyage on the *Shackleton* you did a transfer across to the wooden *John Biscoe*. I'm interested to hear about the wooden *John Biscoe*.

Woodfield:

Yes. My memory . . . it was a short period. I went across for a few weeks. I don't think it was as long as two months. But the old *John Biscoe* was even smaller than the *Shackleton*. I think she was 140 feet long. She was wooden. She was built as a boom defence vessel in the States for wartime work. She was oak-framed, pine planked, and then she had greenheart sheathing as an outer protection diagonally across the pine planks. And going through ice, which we did a lot of, the greenheart sheathing would actually come off and float to the surface. As we were going along we'd be leaving these planks behind. I suppose with her and the *Shackleton* it now leads me to say that the early days of that seafaring to the Antarctic was really the stuff of pioneers. I know the Heroic Age and the Cooks and people had sailed down there – Weddell and so on – but we were pushing the limits a bit more because we had power, in the form of engines. But when I tell you that we had no echo sounder – we used to walk the anchor back a shackle, which is fifteen fathoms, and when it bounced on the bottom we knew the bottom was coming up. Our communications were such that we used to lose contact even with the Falklands for three weeks when there was sunspot activity. And things like water – fresh water was often completely frozen. We often had no fresh water, and we used to put our stern under a glacier where there was a trickle coming off and collect water on deck because our own water was frozen. They really were pioneering days. [pause] The other thing we used to do for water is collect lumps of ice and create a boiler on deck. We used to burn paraffin or kerosene (whatever we had) in drums which used to make filthy black smoke but we used to melt the ice down to provide us with water, if we couldn't find a handy glacier.

[0:26:44] Tolson:

You came back to the Falklands on the *Biscoe* – the first *Biscoe* – and then eventually you transferred back to the *Shackleton*.

Woodfield:

Yes. Back to the old *John Biscoe*, although I wasn't there a long time I think it interesting to record that the scientists (of which I think there were only fourteen) lived in a . . . what was really the for'ard hold, with bunks in tiers of three, and they frequently had two foot of water swilling around in the bottom. And the Master was the only one who had his own cabin. I shared a cabin as Third Mate. Things were pretty primitive, and yet the ship did sterling work, because of the ambition and drive of the master, really.

[0:27:53] Tolson:

So by the end of your first trip to the Antarctic you'd sailed in two of the ships – the two ships that FIDS had – and you weren't put off at all.

Woodfield:

No. Quite the extreme. I absolutely love the seafaring aspect. I relish the working in ice, and indeed bad weather, and those two things lasted me my whole career, which wasn't perhaps the best for some of those on board at times but when I saw a storm coming and the barometer dropping I used to love it. I thought 'Well here we go again. I've got another one to tackle.' But no, I formed a love, in fact when I joined FIDS, because we rather thought it was more of a temporary nature when I joined (when the *Shackleton* was bought), I was actually on loan from Cunard, with whom I'd done my apprenticeship [*with Port Line, which was owned by Cunard*]. I was on loan for two years, so the joke is I was on loan for two years and stayed for twenty!

[0:29:22] Tolson:

Bill Sloman – he was the young Personnel Officer at the time . . .

Woodfield:

Yes, he was.

[0:29:27] Tolson:

. . . did he used to refer to every trip as being an expedition?

Woodfield:

Yes. It was an expedition. It was always written of as an expedition. Yes.

[0:29:44] Tolson:

You became Second Officer and then you became Chief Officer. I want to talk about a very very important role that you were involved in, which was the survey work in Antarctica. Can you take me through the early involvement that you had – how this was being done and indeed by whom, on the ships, and were base personnel involved in survey operations – of the seas around the coast?

Woodfield:

Yes. Well, when we first went on the *Shackleton*, on the first voyage we quickly learnt that 99.5% of the antarctic coast was uncharted – probably even higher figure than that – so right from the word go we carried blank Whatman boards. (These are . . . you know what a Whatman board is? A Whatman board is a drawing board, a thick drawing board like a piece of cardboard but it is brilliant white, and . . . upon which you draw whatever you want to.) And wherever we went we drew our track and we did what we called 'shot in' any points of significance – whether they were headlands, rocks, mountains, and if you keep a fairly straight and steady course – which isn't always very easy in ice and poor weather, but if you attempt to keep a straight course you can 'shoot in' things by taking a bearing, say every quarter of an hour, of the same point until it disappears, or the same rock, and you then by seeing where your bearings cross you can see where those places are. So for instance as we went down the Gerlache Strait we would gradually shoot up all the headlands and islets and know where they lay. At the same time we would run the echo sounder, when we had the echo sounder, which we were actually developing on the first voyage but it didn't always work. (Other people had echo sounders but the cold water made it rather difficult for the standard echo sounder to work.) But however, so we did what's called a 'running survey' in this fashion, and then when we got to an anchorage we would do a 'sketch survey'. And this is well established – Fitzroy, Cook, Sullivan . . . all these sort of people did it. They put their ship in the best possible position for an anchorage and then you spiral out from the ship taking distances from the ship by perhaps sextant angles of the mast or something like that and you draw up a star from the ship of the soundings, perhaps sounding by lead in the first instance, hand lead. Later on the boats were equipped with echo sounders and sounded by

echo sounder, and then if you had time you'd go ashore and do a coastline survey where you'd walk round the coast, with a sextant and a long stick (I've forgotten the name of it, but which is graduated – it's white and graduated with black marks so you know how far away the chap with the stick is) so you could sketch in the coast by doing a series of straight lines over a particular distance, and that is called a sketch survey. [0:33:54] We went on like that for a couple of years and then a very important man for FIDS and a very important man for me came into my life, and that was Admiral Irving – Egg Irving – who was Hydrographer, and as Hydrographer he'd taken note of some of our sketch surveys (because we used to take them, or I used to take them, to Cricklewood where the Hydrographic Office was then, and put them into the archives) and he took note of these and said 'You chaps should be proper surveyors, for your own good to make decent charts, for my good because if you make proper charts under my label, as it were, of the Hydrographic Office, I can sell your charts', and for political reasons it showed that we were actually conducting . . . business, if you like, or operations in the Antarctic which again displayed our sovereignty, especially if the Hydrographer sold our charts. So I and Adam Kerr went to Chatham (it was then) – the Hydrographic School – and were trained as Naval surveyors. I think it was somewhat of a crash course. It was about six weeks, in the summer, but we were turned into proper surveyors. We were called Charge Surveyors. That's the Naval term for a surveyor who can put his name to a Naval chart. We were both Charge Surveyors. We then started to survey (obviously because we'd been trained) more accurately, and indeed our surveys began to be published. The first one that I did was with Tom Flack – on I think the second voyage of the *Shackleton* – of the harbour in South Georgia. There's so much to say . . . That South Georgia survey – that was chosen (that area was chosen) because the whalers were paying the Falkland Islands a tax on the whale oil they produced. It was that tax that was supplying the money to the Falkland Island Government which was supporting the Survey (Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey) at that time, and the Governor thought one of the things we could give back to the whalers was to chart their harbours that they used in South Georgia. So that's why our first surveys were in South Georgia. We moved on from then (I'll try to speed it up, but . . .) with the advent of HiFix (electronic surveying) when you can survey in fog and difficult conditions, when you don't need good visibility, we started to use HiFix both on the ships and in the small craft, so we were then able to survey (bringing you right up to date now) in the dark, in the fog, in snowstorms – which of course was wonderful for productivity. For me it was an absolute nightmare because you knew you could go on and on and on through the most appalling conditions, when really any seaman would have holed up and kept quiet for a day or two.

[0:37:57] Tolson:

The time involved in carrying out the survey work has increased and increased. Was the base work, the supply to the bases, suffering in any way as a result of this?

Woodfield:

No. I always remember Sir Vivian Fuchs' sailing orders to me. (We'll come onto him later, perhaps – what he was like to work for.) But his sailing orders for a nine-month voyage were quite remarkable. They were a short paragraph something like this: 'Go South. Relieve the bases. Assist whenever you can and you're asked in scientific work, and in your spare time do hydrographic survey. Come home safely. God speed!'

[0:39:01] Tolson:

Cut at that, Tom. [cut]

[0:39:02] Tolson:

Tom, you had a remarkable fatherly boss in Doctor Vivian Fuchs. Tell me about the role that he played, back in the London office, and how the team really integrated and worked with him.

Woodfield:

Well Doctor Fuchs was a geologist who'd made his name . . . spent a lot of time in Africa, and he was recruited by the forerunner of FIDS – the period between the Tabarin expedition and the establishment of FIDS. He was recruited to be Base Leader, I think at Stonington. I'm sure at Stonington, and the operation then was virtually run by the Governor of the Falklands. And then Fuchs became the Director, in London. But the London contingent was extremely small (as I've said before, only about six people) and every component of the operation was organised by Fuchs and the London office, but it was farmed out – science to various universities, the Crown Agents did a lot of the recruitment (assisted with the recruitment), they managed the refit of the ship, or ships (the Marine Superintendent in the Crown Agents) – the buying of stores the Crown Agents did, so Fuchs was the sort of master organiser. Now, because it was so small a contingent in the office, and then the ship or ships – really ships when I came on the scene (two ships), it was like a small family – the London office and the two ships' masters. And that feeling of Fuchs as the father figure of a small unit filtered right down to the lowliest person on the ship or in the ranks in the bases. The whole business was run as a not 'You will do that' but 'Could you possibly try that? Could you possibly do that? Do you think that's something we might manage together?' There was never any direct order, that I'm aware of, given. It was quite extraordinary, but it all hinged on Doctor Fuchs as a father figure. When I joined he was the Director but he very quickly, within months, led the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition and he was away for about two years, and Sir Raymond Priestley (who'd been with Scott and Shackleton) took over. But Fuchs, on his return and for the rest of his time (until about 1973) as Director managed to keep that fatherly figure way of running affairs rather than a Major General giving us all orders. But I mentioned Priestley and I must just say quickly one of . . . There are three joys for me of going South (apart from the obvious seafaring) – but it was the scenery, the wildlife and lastly the personnel. And the personnel – all volunteers, there were some very high-flying scientists, there were very lowly mess boys and seaman boys and so on but they were all volunteers and all keen as mustard. And joining as I did in the middle 50s there were alive – and Sir Raymond Priestley was one of them – people who had sailed with Scott and Shackleton, and so we were able to link in, in those years, with those heroic-era explorers, which was fascinating because they not only had one hell of a tale to tell – they had an awful lot to teach us. They did teach us. I learnt a lot from Sir Raymond Priestley of how to behave down south – what to do and not to do, and not to get carried away with the beauty of the place when it looked beautiful, and not to think you were the greatest explorer in the world and you could beat it – 'cause frankly down south you can't beat it. You have to behave.

[0:44:21] Tolson:

Looking to your own progression now – Chief Officer. You were Chief Officer in *Shackleton* . . .

Woodfield:

Yes.

[0:44:36] Tolson:

What was the rather gory role of sealing? . . . something that had to be done in those days?

Woodfield:

Yes. We had lots of dogs down south. I can't give you the number, but very many teams. One of the fun things was carrying the dogs around. We had eighty-two dogs on board once, snoozing in the afternoon sun when we . . . working closely with an American icebreaker and we ran into the back of it, and all the dogs jumped up and started howling. And the Executive Officer of the icebreaker wrote a poem about it and sent it over to us. However, that's an aside. Yes – sealing. We had to seal because we had to feed the dogs. That's all there was to it. There's such an abundance of the Weddell and Crabeater seal that we didn't think it was too terrible a thing to do. And the stalwarts of the explorers – the Fids – when they killed and gutted the seal, would eat the hot liver straight out of the seal, as they gutted them. But sometimes on deck we would have a pile of fifty or sixty seals . . . and it was very difficult to get the blood off the wooden decks after that operation. It was a once-a-year operation.

[0:46:03] Tolson:

Did you ever get the opportunity to go dog-sledging?

Woodfield:

Yes, because I . . . in the surveying role I managed to do quite a time ashore. Later on from the *John Biscoe* I spent a couple of months ashore – when I say ashore we were camped to the south of Adelaide Island and we had two boats moored up in a creek with us and we had sledges and we sledged along the coast as part of the close in-shore surveying operation.

[0:46:41] Tolson:

So you really did lead quite an exceptional role as a ship's officer.

Woodfield:

Yes. It was very varied. Yes.

[0:46:53] Tolson:

Your time as Chief Officer. Was that a period of calm and tranquillity as far as you were concerned, or was there . . . big movements afoot within the organisation? Was there anything potentially happening, or were you Chief Officer for too short a time before you became Master, to . . . ?

Woodfield:

Can we cut there, because I think . . . [cut]

[restart, closer viewpoint]

[0:47:28] Tolson:

Let's touch on events in the *Shackleton*. You had one or two near moments, shall we say.

Woodfield:

Yes, the . . . my second voyage is the most significant, when we nearly lost the ship. The ship was under the command of Norman Brown then, and we were going south in late November, off Coronation Island, South Orkneys, and at ten to midnight on the 29th of November he was handling the ship himself and he sliced her open. I said earlier that the plating was rather thin so it wasn't too difficult a thing to do – slightly mis-cued. I don't lay any blame at all on him or the event whatsoever. It was just a few inches mis-judgement on a floe (ice-floe – we were working ice) and there started from that very moment twenty-four hours of extraordinary endeavour to keep the ship afloat, which we managed to do. I was just pulling on my fur boots to go on watch, as Second Mate, going on at midnight, and felt the

lurch and I got up to the Bridge and we weren't quite sure what had happened although we knew she was already listing. And we had to get into the hold to see where the water was coming in, and then to deal with it, and to do that we first of all put the cargo on deck, but the ship was becoming very unstable so we put the cargo . . . we jettisoned it overboard. Got into the Tween Deck and found that the water was flooding above the Tween Deck itself, so we then had to get into the lower hold, and so more cargo went over the side, with the ship listing, and we found that the gash was just a foot or so below the Tween Deck level. And we went into the water . . . we – I . . . the Mate was controlling things on deck, the Captain was on the Bridge and I was in the water in the hold, with some stalwart helpers. The pumps kept losing suction – and my word it's an example of how you learn over the years . . . what we found out eventually was that the labels off the tins (like the baked beans and any other tin) were coming off in the water and clogging the bilge pumps, proba . . . clogging the suction, and that's why we were losing suction. So we had to actually dive into the water to clear the bilges for the pumps to keep working. And we got the water down to about where the hole was and we built a box, using dunnage (which is the timber you put between cargoes, to stop it moving around). We built a box of dunnage and we filled it up with sand and cement that was destined for the foundations of building a base. So we utilised what we'd got on board, and when we got the box in place we put a chain tackle from the Engine Room – we strapped it between frames, and the gash covered about six frames length which is about two-and-a-half metres, and the chain tackle strapped the box onto the inner side of the ship. What I've omitted is that whilst this was going on inside we put the traditional mattresses and things over the hole on the outside, but the trouble is although we were engines-switched-off we were drifting in the ice and the ice kept tearing the mattresses away from the outside. When we got the whole thing secure and we took stock it was almost to the minute twenty-four hours after we'd started, the night before. It was quite extraordinary. And . . . all right, the heroic-looking bit was the chap in the water, but I can tell you that there were some extraordinary feats of endurance going on around to keep us supplied and going in the water, and one lad – a mess-boy – was put up for the Lloyds . . . I think it's the . . . a Lloyds medal, any rate – one of the Lloyds medals because he continually, for twenty-four hours, kept us supplied with food and warm clothing and towels. When we came out of the water we rubbed down, got dry, put dry clothes on for about five minutes, and went in the water again. But that lad never left the hold for twenty-four hours, doing that, and there are a lot of things like that.

[0:53:40] I'm going to make a point here, because in the BAS Magazine, on the 50th anniversary of that incident, there was a lot of . . . there were two, I think – I say a lot . . . two very silly articles about . . . first of all one was about how the crew put on their life jackets and the Fids were wandering around wondering where theirs were and wondering what to do, as if it was a Greek passenger ship where the crew were going to let the passengers drown. That is absolute nonsense. The crew's life-jackets were in their cabin, as was the style in those days. The passengers', i.e. Fids' lifejackets were on deck, in boxes. That's why the crew were walking around in their lifejackets, so they'd been told to go and get them, and come on deck. That's one thing. The other thing is the nonsense about how the incident happened. There was no flaw – there was nothing done incorrectly on the Bridge. It was purely a bit of a mis-cue by the Captain – and that's the other thing that annoyed me. And there was a letter in the BAS magazine which said that the *Shackleton* wobbled into Montevideo with a Fid on the helm and he had to steer fifteen degrees off course to get the ship into Montevideo. That's just absolute rubbish.

[*The transcriber has seen the Bransfield struggling to steer into Montevideo, owing to 'slippery sea' – fresh water on top failing to adhere to salt water beneath.*]

I'm sorry. I've made a point, but it did annoy me and I was unwell – I was in hospital when I read it and I couldn't write to reply. [*laughs*] Right, where do we go now?

[0:55:26] Tolson:

Moving on, your time as Chief Officer was almost a stepping-stone to becoming Master. Nothing of great event happened during that . . .

Woodfield:

No. There were lots of incidents on the ship, but I don't think anything personal. We had some very bad ice years, one of which caused circumstances which were quite remarkable: We got stuck off Adelaide Island for 55 days. Fifty-five days in one spot is quite a long time and, relating it to being Chief Officer, it was quite amusing that after a couple of days a Mess Boy would come along and say 'Well, if an American ice-breaker gets near us I'd like to get off', and then after two weeks it's someone else, and just before we became unstuck I'd worked out a scheme whereby I could go on the relief ship and the Captain could stay behind and look after it for the Winter! The psychology of it was very very interesting. But the mechanics, if that's the right word, were very interesting because we decided . . . we were about five miles off Cape Adriasola where we were stuck, and we decided we would relieve the base by dog sledge over the sea ice, onto Adelaide Island and then down the remaining length of Adelaide Island – all by dogs. And we did that and that was quite a remarkable operation. Fortunately of course (the time of year) it was all daylight. The only other thing about that instance was that the wind was constantly in the wrong direction. It was onshore and pressurising the ice, and we just couldn't move. And that was extremely bad luck. But when the wind shifted the whole mass of ice – the whole field – expanded and moved, and without turning our engines to any effect to move us in any direction we travelled at fourteen knots with the ice in the direction it was springing back, away off the land, and we were dragged past a berg – our stern scraping the side of a berg – and we were actually doing fourteen knots. We measured it. It's a correct figure. So that was a remarkable instance.

[0:58:34] Tolson:

What year are we talking about now? What season was this?

Woodfield:

Well, this is the *John Biscoe*, and it's before I took command in '63, so it's about 1960. Yes, I went to the *John Biscoe* in '59. It must have been '60 or '61.

[0:58:56] Tolson:

During this sort of time, the early sixties, who now were the other senior officers? Who were the Captains?

Woodfield:

Captain Turnbull was the captain of the *Shackleton* and Captain Johnston was captain of the new *Biscoe*. Now we haven't mentioned the new *Biscoe*, that arrived on the scene in '56. She did sterling work. She was a remarkably robust little ship, but unfortunately she was built very very conservatively. Bill Johnston was a very conservative sort of chap. He was a very adventurous seaman but he was conservative otherwise, and she was underpowered, she had a straight stem that wasn't right for the ice, she had a crow's nest which was no more than a bucket up the mast and completely useless – unheated, no controls. She had ordinary derricks, she didn't have anything sophisticated to lift the boats with, so she was a sturdy little ship but she ought, in 1956, to have been a lot better. But nevertheless she's the one I took command of in late '63, because Captain Johnston became ill and was flown home.

[1:00:28] Tolson:

So really you didn't have a great deal of time to ponder a new command. You were not able to sit and think 'Well now, I'm going to be Captain in a few months' time – I'm going to act

in this way and that way'. You were thrown into being a captain. How did you take that on board, with everything that you'd seen around you, all that you'd read on Scott and Shackleton and a wonderful . . . examples you'd had of your own captains? How were you thinking you were going to run the captaincy?

Woodfield:

I think it was so sudden – I mean it happened in minutes – that I didn't have a great deal of time to think. Captain Johnston had been wounded in the war, in the leg, in the Malta convoys and he had poor circulation on one leg, and he stubbed his toe and the leg went gangrenous and he had to get off quickly – be flown home. He went down the . . . it happened in Port Stanley, in the Falklands. He went down the gangway and when he stepped onto the quay I was in command. So I didn't have much time to think about it. As he left me he said 'I'll give you one piece of advice, Tom. Don't change anything for a year. You'll have had all your own ideas, but sort it and yourself out before you change anything.' And I followed that, to the 'T'. And he was absolutely right. All the bright ideas you have as Chief Officer – hang on! Don't put 'em into practice 'cause most of them are wrong! So, he was a very good tutor – quite a hard taskmaster at times and I have never been very happy doing things when someone's looking over my shoulder so I often did not perform as well as I could have done on the Bridge with him watching, but once he'd gone . . . it sounds a bit harsh but once he'd gone I found it fairly easy – the ship handling and dealing with the weather and dealing with the ice, in fact I loved it. I relished it. So not much time to think about it. Basically I was very happy. The strain didn't show obviously, but when I got back to the Falklands I went along to Doctor Slessor, who'd been a Fid, who was the Chief Medical Officer of the Falklands, and I had a row of three or four boils on the back of my neck, and he said 'Oh, that's all right, Laddie, that's stress coming out. That's where your stress is coming out.' So I might have felt calm, but perhaps I wasn't. That first voyage everything was marvellous. People were very very nice to me on the ship, and very supportive. And of course it had always been 'Captain Johnston' in command and I'd been 'Tom' the chief officer, and they very kindly started to call me 'Captain Tom', which lasted until the end of my career, I believe – I'm not sure, but I'm told by some it did.

That first voyage was brilliant, everybody supportive, until almost the last night, in Signy – in the Coronation Islands [*sic*] when I tied up right inside to give the last of our surplus fuel to the base at Signy Island. We tied up very close-to, put a hosepipe ashore, and there was a deep depression passing to the north of us and we expected the wind . . . I expected the wind to be from one direction which not only was not a bad direction but also from which we were sheltered. The darned depression altered course and just as it got dark we got a hundred and twenty knots from the wrong direction, blowing me onshore, dragging two anchors which I had down, and with the stern and the propeller just inches off the beach – and the rocks. And I decided I'd have to get out, and I think it was Malcolm Phelps, who was the Chief Officer – I think so – and he went forward, in the gale, and we took hours and hours to pick up the two anchors and let go, and keep her off the beach, and then I had to get out between the Small Rock (which is in the entrance to Signy anchorage) . . . between Small Rock and the land, which isn't very wide – I'm not sure the distance now, but . . . in the dark, and the rock is only a breaking rock so it doesn't show on the radar. Quite frankly it was an absolute nightmare. It was horrific. The howling wind . . . you couldn't see . . . I felt my way out, really. And when I got outside into the sea, a few miles off Signy, I went down to my cabin (it was about five or six in the morning, having started at eight o'clock at night) and I sank to my knees. I was exhausted – absolutely exhausted. I sank to my knees, and I thank Somebody [*glances upwards*] for helping me get out of there. It was a pretty interesting experience, and in hindsight I should have stayed there. I should've stayed inside. I should've done what Bill Johnston would've done, and which I . . . (a story I could've told you about Hope Bay, when he was in command). I should've stayed inside and got blown

onto the rocks, and accepted a few holes in the hull. It would have been safe. I might have damaged the ship badly but I would have been afloat. What I did chanced hitting the rocks on the way out and sinking the ship. So in hindsight it was a mistake, and I recognise that now.

[1:07:55] The Hope Bay incident, with Captain Johnston in command of the *Biscoe*, was something that happens a lot at Hope Bay – a föhn wind developed, while the base personnel were off having a film, and when we were seeing them ashore in the boat that evening we were walking about in shirtsleeves on deck to see the boats off and the wind was warm, and getting stronger and stronger. Before . . . from a gentle warm evening by midnight we had 120 knots and we dragged anchor. We couldn't hold. Hope Bay was a very poor holding ground. We were blown onto the rock and we got several holes in the hull. And Bill Johnston, at about two in the morning – we were on the beach with holes in the hull – water coming in – he went down and he turned in and he said 'I'll have a look at it after breakfast.' That was Bill Johnston, and that's how I should've behaved and didn't.

[1:09:05] Tolson:

Fundamentally then, after a year or so of being in command you didn't really see there was a great need to change anything at all that Bill Johnston . . .

Woodfield:

Well naturally no. No, you do change, but that advice 'Don't change anything until you really know what you're doing' was very very sound. Oh yes, I did change things because there were some things he . . . uh . . . He was much older, a different era all together. I had different equipment. So yes, some things did change. I don't think I can pinpoint them, but you naturally put your own personality into how you run things, and I did that.

[1:09:56] Tolson:

Do you feel that your style of leadership was very authoritarian, or did you try to keep the style of being – not one of the lads but . . . the Master should never be one of the lads but did you try to keep close to your crew – your officers?

Woodfield:

I did try to keep close to them. I tried to befriend them all, right down to the little mess boys, and I hope that they saw me as a sort of father figure that they could come to, and they did used to come to me with their problems and so on. And yet I'm told that I was pretty authoritarian. Uppermost in my mind all the time, and I did think about it a lot, was the safety – safety of navigation, keeping the ship afloat, getting . . . pushing it as far as I could because that's the name of the game we were in – we were exploring. It was an expedition. We were going to places that were totally uncharted. Ships had never been there before. Always pushing the limits, but I always tried to keep off the beach. Difficult for me to say, but I never actually to my knowledge touched the bottom once in twelve years of command. I certainly put a lot of dents in the ship, because I was always bashing and crashing the ice. So first and foremost it was safe navigation, safe handling of the ship, making people do things that kept things safe. I don't think I ever tried to be liked, but I did try to be a bit of a father figure to people. But I wasn't all that much older than a lot of them, in fact when Malcolm Phelps joined as Chief Officer he was older than me, just a bit but he was older.

[1:12:18] Tolson:

So it didn't particularly upset you or hurt your feelings that perhaps your crew and maybe some of the officers disliked you or – perhaps that's too strong a word where . . . recognised your leadership skills but perhaps couldn't get close to you?

Woodfield:

It sounds a bit off-hand, a bit brutish maybe, but I don't think I actually considered it. I had other things to consider really. I liked people to do a proper job, and if they didn't I bawled them out. It never worried me whether they liked me or disliked me for it, really. But that has to be put into the context of the vast majority did a very good job and . . . all right, they needed a bit of encouragement at times, especially when things were depressing – if there was a long period of bad weather or we were away for a lot and there hadn't been mail for a couple of months, and that sort of thing – people would need lifting and I was aware of that and I would try to do something about that, but being liked or disliked – I didn't really give it much thought, I don't think.

[1:13:45] Tolson:

As Master you probably try to work with your officers as members of a team . . .

Woodfield:

Yes.

[1:13:56] Tolson:

. . . rather than as individuals?

Woodfield:

Yes. No – definitely a member of the team – a team, but not as in the modern style having committee meetings. No. I was the boss. There was no committee, but it was nice to see everybody working as a team and me being team leader. Yes. And I very much enjoyed the work on the Bridge, where we worked as a team. Yeah.

[1:14:30] Tolson:

Can we move on now, perhaps, to the late sixties, and the FIDS (British Antarctic Survey now)? You were being lined up to supervise the building of a new and bigger ship, the *Bransfield*. Can you tell me at what stage you came into play in being involved in decision making?

Woodfield:

Yes. As usual with me, it's a long-winded story – one which I think's quite interesting. When B.A.S. became B.A.S. , under NERC as opposed to the Falkland Island Government, to our surprise – all our surprise – we were given more money rather than it becoming more bureaucratic (which it did later on), but at that time rather than that happening we were given a lot of money, and we were given money, suddenly, for a new ship. And I had always kept a book, my little black book, with notes about ship design – ship requirements: bridge, hull, the whole shooting match. I mean some of the early ships – they had wires going to the lifeboats that ran in blocks along the deck. Well, imagine what happens when snow falls and the snow turns into ice – what you can do with the lifeboats if they're all iced up. I mean that is just a fundamental flaw. All ships in the world have wires running along the deck at that level, but it's no good for the Antarctic, and that's the sort of thing I had in my book. So I had a book-full of do's and don'ts for a polar ship. What quite I expected I'd do with it . . . build my own ship one day, maybe. Fuchs knew this. He'd sailed with me several times and he'd been aware of my little black book, so he cabled to me that we'd got money for a new ship – 'When you get home, if you'd like to put your ideas together you can help design the new ship.' On the way home that voyage I sat in the chart room, and I can't draw a straight line, but I sat there writing more than sketching, but a little bit of sketching, of what my ideal polar cargo-carrying cum icebreaker would be. And a Fid Met Man who was doing the four-hourly Met leaned over my shoulder and said 'If I can ask, sir, what are you doing?', and I told him. And he said 'Well I did a six weeks course as a Met Man, but I'm actually a draughtsman

from the Clyde. Can I help you?’ And I said ‘Sit down, and don’t get off that stool for three weeks!’ When we arrived at Southampton I had a set of plans of my ideal ship, which we’d – I say ‘drawn’ together – I’d talked and he’d drawn and I’d written all my notes up, and I got to the London office and I rolled them out – I can remember it to this day – I rolled them out on the table and the *Bransfield* is that ship (I still have the drawings) except that the naval architects added one deck. They couldn’t get all the accommodation in, and that extra deck of course gave extra height to the bridge and the crow’s nest which was very beneficial. So the naval architects did the proper design but I did the concept and the philosophy if you like of the ship. So she was my baby.

[1:19:05] Tolson:

Do you remember that met man’s name?

Woodfield:

No, I don’t. No. That’s sad. I don’t.

[1:19:16] Tolson:

Did you, Tom, in some way feel perhaps like Captain Scott must have felt when his ship was being built and he was a seaman who was meddling around in scientific affairs? Here were you now off the lead, trying to put together your baby, and perhaps seen as an interfering person? – I don’t know. Or was there still a massive amount of input that you as a seafarer with a vast amount of experience could add?

Woodfield:

Oh yes! I . . . at the shipyard in Leith . . . of course the shipyard were building the ship, but I worked with them minute by minute, refining the design, tweaking things, adding things, taking away things. Never meddling – it was entirely my ship. And the naval architects were very good. They were the same firm that designed the *Biscoe* (but they designed it with different parameters and so on) – Graham and Woolnough was the name of the firm and Bob Cree, and Osbourne [*spelling not checked*] – they were the naval architects and they were extremely easy and good to work with, and . . . once again we’re back to the team – we worked as a team, and the shipyard, the Chief Draughtsman, and they’ve all remained friends. Unfortunately one of them’s died but we’re still the greatest of friends to this day. And we brought that ship up together. And of course last but not by any means least I met my wife, Ella, who came into the shipyard at weekends from her secretarial job and wrote letters and drew up store lists and things like that, and of course walked round the ship and she knows it better than anybody. She saw the keel laid. She helped design the bridge, she helped design the crow’s nest, she chose fittings for the curtains and things like that. In my study I have the lamp that she bought at Fenwicks in Prince’s Street for my cabin – it’s in my study now. So yeah, we were a good team – not to mention Chris Elliott, who was a young officer there.

[1:22:06] Tolson:

Was Stuart Lawrence there at this stage?

Woodfield:

No. He wasn’t. No, he was on the *Biscoe*, and he came to me later. Yup.

[1:22:18] Tolson:

Of course the *Bransfield* was still very much the cargo-stroke-icebreaking capacity. The scientific capacity was fairly limited, wasn’t it?

Woodfield:

Yes.

[1:22:36] Tolson:

You were building a very practical logistical ship.

Woodfield:

Yes, absolutely. She was as near an icebreaker as possible except that an icebreaker carries no cargo, and we had a very good cargo hold. So she was an ice-strengthened cargo-carrying vessel. Yes.

[1:22:58] Tolson:

If we jump ahead a few years, to the time that you gained experience of some of her shortcomings. [*Woodfield aghast*]. Do you feel that she had some, looking back on it?

Woodfield:

I had an enormous job to convince the senior member of the team – Sir Vivian Fuchs – that you can put as much power into a ship as you like. He and other non-seamen are always afraid that if you put a lot of power into an ice ship you're going to bash it, and put a hole in it. That's not the case. [*This seems to be a case of 'Of course we wouldn't do a thing like that, we're Professionals!' I side with the non-seamen. – Transcriber (a Chief Engineer). See also Page 13, 'I certainly put a lot of dents in the ship . . .'*] You work ice by getting against the ice and then shoving with as much might as possible. So you can really overload an ice ship with power as long as you use it properly. Her only shortcoming was that she could have had more power. She had a lot of power for her size – she was very good, but she actually could have been better. I went with the Chief Engineer, Tony Trotter, who came from the Navy, because he was in HMS *Amazon* and he was a gas turbine specialist – I went to Rolls-Royce with the idea of putting in a gas turbine Proteus engine, but they couldn't marinise it at the time so we never got that, but she could have had more power. Yes. . . . Other shortcomings? No, I don't think 'shortcomings'. She was a jolly good ship, but we had the most extraordinary catalogue of faults and . . . lost for words . . . things that went wrong with her on the maiden voyage, and subsequent voyage. An extraordinary catalogue which would make you laugh and cry if I went through them. Do you want to hear a few of them?

[1:25:24] Well, she had no bilge keels. That was a mistake of the *Biscoe*. They put bilge keels on the *John Biscoe* and she used to get the bilge keels stuck on the ice as she went through. She shouldn't have had bilge keels. The *Bransfield* we had no bilge keels, but to try to dampen the rolling we had passive stabilisation tanks. These were three tanks, one on top of the other, full of a certain amount of water – a very specific amount of water – and in the tank was just a triangular weir in the middle of the tank [*a straight weir running fore-and-aft for the length of the tank, with a triangular cross-section*], and as the ship rolled the water would come across, hit the weir, shoot up in the air, circulate round, go back the other way, and as the ship rolled to starboard so the water would be thrown to port and dampen the roll a bit. Brilliant idea – passive Flume stabilisation tanks, they're called. Well, on the voyage down, in the tropics the ship began to roll to 30, to 40, to 45 degrees. Unbelievable! So the engineers, with my encouragement, decided they'd have a look inside the tanks, and I stood, in the tropics, on the after deck – the Helicopter deck – using a walkie-talkie, talking to the Bridge, because for some reason I seemed to be able to see the swell quite well from there, and I tried to guide the ship so that she didn't roll about too much, and the engineers went into the tanks and they found that all the water from the top two tanks had run down and filled the bottom tank, and the middle tank had the wrong amount of water in and the top one was empty. This is why they weren't working and we were rolling so badly. And it was the Third Engineer who solved the problem. They had common air pipes, which now sounds a bit extraordinary, but the air pipes running up to vent the air as the water sloshed around

came into a common pipe, and the water was running up, and down the pipe again into the tank beneath it. Does that make sense to you? And that's what was happening, so the Third Engineer designed a . . . a little . . . not a gadget, it was just a method – he put three individual plastic tubes down, one to each tank, all within the common pipe but they were individual tubes, and that cured it, for the rest of the voyage. So that was one of the sky-larks, rolling to 45 degrees. We had water coming out of all the light fittings, because where there was water leaks it used to run along the plastic conduits taking the cabling, and every now and again you'd look along a corridor and you'd see every light fitting was dripping. Another, the most amusing I think was that every now and again all the magnetic fire doors would close on their own. The most alarming occasion, and also the most humorous, was when the Mess Boy was bringing a tray of tea [1.29.06] up onto the Bridge. He just got to the top of the ladder and the fire door closed on him and knocked him down the steps with all his tea and biscuits, and to cut a long story short we found that the fire door wiring was laid – initially, near the Bridge – very close to the cabling to one of the Radio Office aerials, and when there was a transmission on 16 Megs [MHz] there was induction across to the other wires and that's what closed the doors. And I could go on for another half hour.

[1:30:00] Tolson:

If we move on slightly to a period in about 1973 when Sir Vivian Fuchs was retiring and Doctor Laws was taking over as the head of the British Antarctic Survey: you, I think, were on your last voyage as Master – your last voyage with the British Antarctic Survey – and you had one challenge left to try and win over, and you knew that Sir Vivian Fuchs was going to be a hard one . . . Tell us about this!

Woodfield:

Well, that's in 1973 and I got married to Ella, whom I'd just met in Scotland in '70, and before we started a family I wanted to take her down so that she saw the place and saw the people and saw the work and knew what I'd be doing for the next ten or umpteen years – whatever it was going to be. So I decided I'd go along and ask Sir Vivian whether she could go down, and Sir Vivian was just retiring and Doctor Laws (whom we hadn't long met) was just taking over. And I went and asked the pair of them whether Ella could come down to me, and I'd rehearsed all sorts of arguments and was going to say 'No, not just to the Falklands, because that's not the place to leave a lady on her own' – there's too much drinking and too much socialising and rather a strange sort of life for an outsider, the Falklands – and I asked the pair of them and before I could hardly get the question out Sir Vivian (who I must say was somewhat anti ladies doing research or going to the Antarctic) just said 'Yes! What a super idea! Take her down!', and Doctor Laws also said yes, and of course this was Sir Vivian at his masterly best as a politician. He was retiring and he took all the credit for letting the first lady go South. So she sailed with me – and I think about an eight-month voyage.

[1:32:48] Tolson:

What a wonderful trip for her. It must have just been absolutely mind-blowing for Ella, who had heard an awful lot about it.

Woodfield:

Yes. Well she's a Scot, and she'd led a very outdoor life, so she liked the idea of seeing the Antarctic in good and bad. She'd never been to sea so it was a terrific gamble that she might be sick. As I said we had no bilge keels and we did roll rather a lot. And we had a Plan B, that she'd have a look and then fly home from South America if she couldn't take the bad weather and the movements and so on, but she absolutely loved it. And I loved it, because I think it probably made me a bit more human. Others can judge how human I was, but maybe that voyage I was a bit more human. But seriously, one of the joys of being in command

down south, and having all the scientists on board, and a lot of them – well, most of them – had never seen it before, was the joy of taking them around and showing them things. I just delighted in showing people the scenery and the wildlife and introducing them to the weather and telling them what was going on, so to be able to do that to your wife, and then live with it – and I must say dine out on it for the next thirty years – was just wonderful. Yes. And she enjoyed chatting to all the people on board.

[1:34:32] Tolson:

You made a move, after the '73 voyage, to Trinity House, to take up a post as an Elder Brother.

Woodfield:

Yes.

[1:34:49] Tolson:

Is this something that you had been working on for some time?

Woodfield:

The Corporation of Trinity House, founded by Henry the Eighth, 1514, with the objectives of pilotage, looking after the lighthouses, and charitable work, was something I knew about from the days that I lived in Cornwall, when the Trinity House ship the *Satellite* would come into Penzance, so right from a very early age I knew all about Trinity House and what it did. It's a Fraternity, and as well as a Court of Elder Brethren, some of whom run the organisation, there are three hundred Younger Brethren, and they're all in command at sea, either Royal Navy or Merchant Service – about equal proportions. And in 1967 I became a Younger brother of Trinity House, which is virtually purely an honorary position. So I was a Younger Brother. So I knew about Trinity House – I'd been involved since 1968. Captain Turnbull was also a Younger Brother, and Captain Wyatt [*or White?*] who was captain of the Falkland Island Company *Darwin* – he became a Younger Brother. So I was well versed in the ways of Trinity House, and the possibility of becoming an Elder Brother – a working Elder Brother, which was a job that went to mariners in command, mainly merchant service in this case – nine out of ten board members are merchant service – but it was a job that came to people usually in their middle fifties, and yes I did have my sights on it in that context. But the rest of the story . . . you would like?

[1.37.04] I was actually travelling from Southampton to London Airport to join the *Bransfield*, when I'd let her sail from Southampton without me because I . . . we'd had a busy refit and I'd hardly had any leave so I took three weeks leave while she went down to Montevideo, and I was flying out from London Airport, and on the Southampton station I met one of the elder brethren who'd been down dealing with pilotage in Southampton, and I told him what I was doing and he said 'Oh, why don't you come along to lunch?' And I was only going shopping or something before the flight in the evening, so I said thanks very much. He said 'Actually there's a Board vacancy. Why don't you come and be interviewed?' To which I replied 'Well that's . . .' – you know – I was a bit silly really – 'I'm 40, not 55 . . . I've got a jolly good job which I thoroughly enjoy. I don't really see much point.' And he said 'Oh well, it always helps to keep your face in the picture.' And Trinity House in many ways was pretty archaic, and the system of becoming an elder brother was to be interviewed by every single board member, who then voted for who they wanted. There was no Committee of Interview or anything like that. So I went along to lunch and I did eight out of nine interviews (which were just five, ten minutes having a chat) and as I didn't really want the job they were pretty laid back, and off I went down South. The following year I sailed, with Ella – the 1973 voyage – and we'd hardly got to Montevideo than one of the younger Elder Brethren died (Alan Newport, who'd been an examiner in Southampton before he

became an elder brother), and I applied for the vacancy by telegram, realising that (I don't know which order to put it in, and whichever way I do it I'll put my foot in it.) – A. I was now married. B. I'd spent a long time with FIDS and BAS, and I'd done most things. I'd seen most things. I'd brought out the ship. I felt . . . (the new ship) . . . I felt there was probably a tendency from then on for me to take a step to the back of the Bridge and let other people get on with things, which isn't really the proper way to run things, so I thought it . . . I ought to have a crack at it. And lo and behold, without any more interviews I was offered the job, because I'd had the interviews before. And I found out by telegram that I'd been accepted when we were at South Georgia on the way home on that voyage (on the way home – that took all those months for it to materialise). And we popped a bottle of Argentinian five-shilling pink champagne on the wing of the bridge in the sunshine, and that voyage on which Ella came became my swan-song.

[1:41:00] Tolson:

But you didn't altogether lose your touch of Antarctica, because a few years later you were very involved in the acquisition of the Royal Navy's new HMS *Endurance*.

Woodfield:

Yes, yes . . .

[1:41:14] Tolson:

. . . [inaudible] the *Polar Circle*.

Woodfield:

Yes, I didn't lose touch at all – in fact sometimes I felt guilty that I was more Antarctic than I was Trinity House. There were times when Trinity House . . . job was very demanding, very difficult. There were times when it was quite slack and things rolled along easily. When it did that I got very involved in Antarctic affairs. I was very friendly with Lord Shackleton – very lucky to be counted as a friend, or count him as a friend, whichever way round. I met him when he was at the naming ceremony of the *Shackleton* in 1956 [actually 19 Dec 1955 – ref. *BAS Archives*], so it went back a long way. He invited me to become a member of the South-West Atlantic Group, which was a Lords' committee on the Falklands really. Peter Scott and one or two other Antarcti . . . Egg Irving (Admiral Irving) and . . . my memory's going a bit – the chap who ran ITV . . . no, I've lost his name, but a Peer [*Buxton?*]. That was a very good working advisory committee that then led on to other things. I helped Shackleton with his report on the economy and development of the Falkland Islands. I established a little ship-owning company with a German partner and we built a ship called the *Antarctic* . . . the *Icebird* – which was chartered out to the Australians very successfully [*built 1984, re-named Polar Bird in 1996*], and then lastly back to the one you mentioned I formed a ship-broking company specialising in polar ships, and specifically in mind to provide the Navy with their new HMS *Endurance* if that was to come about. And of course I had a very big inside track knowing and working with Lord Shackleton. And indeed we procured the *Polar Circle* from Rieber Shipping of Oslo to be the new *Endurance*. So that was a major success. Unfortunately the economy at the times made the provision of other ships – polar ships – more and more difficult and we had to close down in the end. It wasn't as successful as it could've been.

[1:44:40] Tolson:

Finally, Tom, I was just going to ask you, although you've perhaps answered it in a funny way, but what have you really missed about Antarctica? It seems to me that you actually haven't left it, almost to this day! Is there anything that you really miss about it? – perhaps simply the trouble of going there?

Woodfield:

I miss everything about it. I miss the people – although a lot of them are still around here, but they're not in their proper context. They're not down there. I miss the job – the seafaring side of it. I love being at sea. I love tackling the ice and the elements. I love the scenery. I love being ashore – as a youngster I did quite a bit of mountaineering with some of the mountaineer Fids, specially at Horseshoe Island. I loved everything about the Antarctic, and I would like to have stayed there for ever, but it's a young man's game. I can hardly get up and down the stairs now, let alone up and down the ladder to the Bridge, or to the boat. But the other side of the . . . the other half of my brain tells me you can't do that sort of thing for ever, and you have to come down to Earth a bit. So going to Trinity House was the correct move. At times it was extremely frustrating. They were rather a pompous lot. They hadn't had all that much sea time, although they were all . . . carried – legitimately carried – the title of 'Captain', but some of them had only been two years in command of a passenger ship and so on and they didn't really know what seafaring was about and it was terribly political – a lot of back-stabbing and manoeuvring for who's idea was this and that. One of them even tried to steal from me the credit for my idea of getting passengers onto the new Trinity House ship, the *Patricia*, which in fact came straight out of FIDS – was the way we lifted the dogs in the boats, up and down the side of the ship. I started to do it with passengers on the Trinity House flagship, *Patricia*, and one of them stood up at board meeting one day and said it's his wonderful idea of loading people by lifting the boat. So that's the sort of place it was. But it had its exciting moments, and it had some very nice moments indeed.

[1:47:40] Tolson:

To touch on a subject . . . just very finally . . . the new style of officer that's come through the Merchant Navy (and obviously a very few go into work in the British Antarctic Survey) and new equipment, does this make a new level of superiority? Are people necessarily that much better, or any better because they have more qualifications – more tools to work with, or . . . ?

Woodfield:

I don't think they're better or worse, but they're certainly very different, and I recognise that in my last few years with the Survey the young officers were far more technical – knew far more how all the gadgets worked, and what you could get out of the gadgets. I call 'em gadgets . . . you know, the equipment, like the radar and so on. They were far more competent than I was. I could keep the ship safe and sound, but to track something properly on the radar, or plot it and track it and deal with it and so on, I would do it in a good old-fashioned way. They would do it absolutely clinically and properly and professionally – an ability that I just hadn't got. I would have had to have gone back to school to learn it – to do it. So in a way they were a lot more competent. And now, to stop talking about the BAS officers, but officers in general – yes they're more technically competent but they are very different creatures because they're not really seafarers in the sense that we were seafarers. They're not at all. They don't do the time at sea. The sort of ships they have, and they have to handle. For a start they almost never handle them – they go from pilot to pilot. They just go from A to B in deep water and that's it. I talked to them a lot at Trinity House because that's what Trinity House is about, and they're just a different breed. They're nice guys, they're clever guys, but they're not sailors in the terms that I would call someone a seaman.

[1:50:32] Tolson:

Thank you very much, Tom. But before we do close is there anything that you want to go back to, and any moments that you can be taken back in your great flash-back to, that you want to talk about now?

Woodfield:

Well I'm always one for the stories, because I think the stories and the yarns of events somehow get you going and it shows the whole style and nature of the operation and what we did. There's a couple of things firstly to do with the *Bransfield* that are good examples. I talked about the troubles on the maiden voyage. One of the troubles which I didn't mention, on the first voyage, when we were south of Halley Bay actually – we were pushing down to see how far we'd get. We actually got Farthest South on the *Bransfield*, 78-04, and Chris Elliott I think must have been Navigating Officer because he and I took the sights of the sun, and we took the sun – getting a bit technical for the non-seamen – but we took the sun 'below the Pole'. In other words at midnight the sun is above the horizon, it's on your prime meridian, it's where you take it for a noon-day sight, but it's actually below the Pole. I don't know if that makes sense to you, but sort of. It's instead of taking it high in the sky you take it low down in the sky. Well he and I took sights of the sun below the Pole and established the 78-04 [78° 04' S]. At that time we were fairly firmly wedged in the ice. I'm not sure whether it was on purpose or just by currents, but the Chief Engineer was the first one to go over the side to stretch his legs. This was Tony Trotter, and he got half-way down the ladder when he said 'Stop!' to all the others waiting on deck. 'I just want to pop up to the Bridge and have a word with the Captain.' And everybody thought that the ice wasn't thick enough or something – which seemed a bit daft when it was about fourteen feet thick. Any rate, he came up to the Bridge and he took me aside and he said 'We've got a six-foot-long crack in the sheer strake' (and the sheer strake was only about eight feet deep anyway). Now the sheer strake is one of three strakes of plating which are the thickest in the ship. The keel and the two uppermost strakes of plating, beside the main deck, are the three strongest ribs of plating in the ship. And he said it was cracked. And I went and had a look, and another Engineer, and sure enough there was a crack – a very visible crack, I would say at least a sixteenth of an inch if not a quarter of an inch [1.6mm if not 6.3mm approx.]. If the sheer strake, or any other such strake, cracks like that, vertically, there is a distinct chance of the whole ship unzipping around that crack and splitting in two. And I've known ships to do it. One of the roles of the Trinity House Elder Brethren is to sit in the Admiralty Court as an Assessor, and I've sat on a case where a ship ran into ice and split in half and it did exactly that – it split round like that, off Newfoundland. So there we were. We were about 77 South. It was about minus thirty, still and cold with that beautiful glazing of ice over the hull which you get when the moisture dries . . . any moisture dries onto the hull – gives you a shiny look to the hull, and we had a crack which could zip round, and we had probably a thousand miles of ice to work, north of us, to get out. What the Engineers did was simple straightforward text-book stuff. They drilled a round hole at each end of the crack, and that stopped it running any further, and we did the rest of the voyage like that, and every time I worked ice I nearly bit my tongue off hoping! That was a remarkable episode. And the reason for it was that the ship was built in modules. It wasn't built in the old-fashioned style of laying a keel . . . well, we did lay a keel but after the keel there were 20-ton modules – the outer skin, the inner skin, the web frames in between – it was like putting boxes in place, and all those boxes have to be pulled together, and when they're put on the stocks they don't always meet. Sometimes there were enormous gaps – sort of half an inch – and they'd virtually wind them together, so you got a built-in stress in the hull, and in the cold, getting bashed about by the ice those stresses unlocked themselves, and as often happens instead of splitting on the welded seams or on a repair or something like that the repairs are stronger than the original, and the original plate split, and that's why the happened [*sic*] . . . that was the original locked-up . . . the locked-up stresses exploded and split. Huh!

END.

Points of general interest:

- [0:00:50] Father was a mountaineer
- [0:03:30] FIDS office
- [0:05:39] Royal Society. 30-year scientific program.
- [0:06:12] Crown Agents. Captain Johnston. Bill Sloman. Adam Kerr. Refit in Frederikshavn. Tom Flack.
- [0:08:31] *Shackleton* unstable. Delay for extra ballast. Three officers met their future wives.
- [0:16:36] Too few watertight compartments.
- [0:17:30] Carrying a complete base each year, just in case it was required. Sovereignty. Captain Johnston. Use of scows in the Falklands and in New Zealand.
- [0:23:16] The wooden *John Biscoe*. Collecting melt water or melting ice to supply the ship. Losing radio contact with the Falklands for three weeks at a time.
- [0:26:56] Bunks three high in the hold, with water swilling about.
- [0:29:22] Every voyage an expedition.
- [0:29:44] Surveying. Hydrographic School. Egg Irving. Charge Surveyors. South Georgia harbours surveyed to justify taxing the whalers.
- [0:37:57] Sir Vivian Fuchs's sailing orders.
- [0:39:02] Fuchs. Priestley. Style of management. Learning directly from the pioneers.
- [0:44:36] Sealing. Dogs.
- [0:46:03] Surveying ashore.
- [0:47:28] *Shackleton* near-disaster.
- [0:53:40] Misleading articles in BAS Club Magazine.
- [0:55:26] Stuck in ice off Adelaide Island for 55 days.
Base relieved by dog-sledge.
When the ice broke up it moved at fourteen knots.
- [0:58:56] The new *John Biscoe*.
- [1:00:28] Taking command. Stress. Dr Slessor in Stanley.
Escape from Signy. 'I thank Somebody for helping me get out of there'.
- [1:07:55] Captain Johnston, aground at Hope Bay.
- [1:12:18] Woodfield's relationship with others on the ship.
- [1:14:30] Involvement in the building of the *Bransfield*.
- [1:25:24] Problems on the maiden voyage of the *Bransfield*. Stability tanks.
- [1:30:00] Ella Woodfield sailed on *Bransfield*.
- [1:34:32] Trinity House.
- [1:41:00] HMS *Endurance* (ex-*Polar Circle*).
- [1:44:40] Missing Antarctica.
- [1:47:40] Modern ship's officers.
- [1:50:32] *Bransfield's* furthest south. The crack in the sheer strake.

A note on the transcription.

Additions in square brackets are either from my own knowledge or from an internet search, which usually resulted in a quote from Wikipedia. Jo Rae at BAS Archives helped by checking the spelling of some names and the date of the *Shackleton's* naming ceremony.

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