

## FRANK PRESTON

Edited transcript of interview with Frank Preston conducted by Chris Eldon Lee at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston on the 20th of October, 2009. BAS archives AD6/24/1/51. Transcribed by Allan Wearden on the 9th October, 2017.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Frank Preston recorded at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston by Chris Eldon Lee on the 20th of October 2009.

Preston: My name is Frank Preston, I was born in Leicester on the 1st of June 1938.

[0:00:17] Lee: What kind of schooling did you have Frank?

Preston: Just sort of normal state schools and because in my day there was the 11 Plus so I went Hinkley Grammar School and from there I went on to the University of Bristol.

[0:00:31] Lee: What was first brush with the Antarctic, when were you first aware of it would you say?

Preston: I suppose the film *Scott of the Antarctic* I would think.

[0:00:40] Lee: John Mills?

Preston: Yes, yes, yes!

[0:00:42] Lee: Was it captivating?

Preston: I think so yes, yes and of course the music particularly, particularly atmospheric, yes!

[0:00:50] Lee: So in what way were you impressed would you say with the Antarctic as you saw it through the, because that was the real Antarctic because they filmed the background shots down there!

Preston: Yes, yes that's right.

[0:01:02] Lee: Did you come out wanting to go?

Preston: No, no I don't think so particularly it was just an exciting adventure of course a terribly sad ending - can't remember how old I was then, my early teens I suppose, yes.

[0:01:17] Lee: So what in the end was it that drew you to go there?

Preston: The work I, my ambition I took a degree in geography at Bristol which included quite a content of land survey, so my ambition was to be a land surveyor and I probably shouldn't say this but FIDS was actually my second choice! I really wanted to join something called the Directorate of Overseas Surveys, which was a British government organisation doing mapping work overseas, and I didn't get past the interview! And a whole group of us, I think about four of us from Bristol, had gone for the Overseas Surveys interviews and then for the FIDS interview.

[0:01:57] Lee: So none of you got the job?

Preston: One person got into DOS and I was the lucky one that got into FIDS! So only two of us out of the four got in initially.

[0:02:08] Lee: Was that always your plan B?

Preston: Yes, that was plan B yeah, and this was really through the teaching staff at university.

[0:02:15] Lee: They recommended you?

Preston: Yes, one of the lecturers was a big wheel in the British Schools Exploring Society, so Murray Levick, a man called Frank Hammel and so he, because Murray Levick had been one of the founders of the British Schools Exploring Society, so there were Antarctic connections there, and so hence we were encouraged to apply for FIDS, yes.

[0:02:40] Lee: When you applied to DOS though, you weren't necessarily going to go to the Antarctic were you?

Preston: No, that was a permanent career in the civil service, where FIDS of course was a two or three years contract, so that was the attraction of DOS, it was you know a long term prospect! In fact when I came back from FIDS I was fortunate enough to be offered a place in DOS, possibly partly as a result of my FIDS experience.

[0:03:08] Lee: So your ambition was fulfilled!?

Preston: Yes it was, very much!

[0:03:10] Lee: Did the Antarctic become more than a means to an end when you got there?

Preston: Oh I think so yes! Because I think you have to remember in those days nobody did gap years, so I mean I was 21 when I graduated, I think we were all in, the graduate sort output was in some ways relatively inexperienced, a bit green! Then to be thrust into something like FIDS was a huge learning experience for me.

[0:03:37] Lee: How do you mean?

Preston: Well one did all sorts of jobs. I'd never cut meat up before this sort of thing and we had to butcher seals to feed the dogs, and so on and so forth. So you had to do jobs, because there was nobody else to do them, you couldn't duck out of them. Somebody said 'Oh get this done' you did it!

[0:03:54] Lee: Did you find cutting up the seals unpleasant work?

Preston: Initially yes, yes. I mean my mother had always done all the cooking in our house!

[0:04:05] Lee: Not many seals in Leicester!

Preston: No, but I mean cutting up meat and this sort of thing, I was a bit squeamish perhaps, and obviously one became accustomed to it!

[0:04:15] Lee: So what saw you through that initial revulsion?

Preston: Well just compulsion and necessity, it had to be done, you couldn't turn to somebody and say 'Well you do it', you had to do it!

[0:04:29] Lee: Let's go back to the two interviews then, I appreciate it was a long time ago, was there a significant difference in the interviews' process?

Preston: To be honest I can't really remember, I wouldn't like to say 'No'. No, I don't know, I don't know what the interviewers were looking for whether they were looking for different things. The DOS people obviously took the chap they thought would fit the bill well, in fact he did go on to quite high things, to being a Director in the Ordnance Survey, where I always stayed at a sort of modest level of a party leader in the field, which I was happy with!

[0:05:10] Lee: Would you say that FIDS selection was rigorous or a bit more relaxed than that?

Preston: My memory of it, it was relaxed, but I have to say one of the things that always impressed me was that people were picked as individuals but then we then were lumped together in a way it appeared where we were I mean I was part of a six man base you know! OK we needed two surveyors and a geologist and a radio operator and a couple of general assistants, and we weren't picked as a team but as individuals, yet we moulded together very well I think! There were stories of problems on some of the bases but I never experienced any!

[0:05:49] Lee: Looking back now with hindsight and with a bit more experience behind you, can you work out how they did that?

Preston: No not really, I'm sorry to be negative!

[0:05:58] Lee: That's fine.

Preston: No I can't really, no. They obviously went into peoples' background and presumably looked for people they saw as amiable and flexible, in their attitude and outlook to life!

[0:06:13] Lee: So they were looking for people, as relaxed chaps?

Preston: Rather than go getters, I would say so yes, but whether it was a good for the Survey I'm not sure but certainly as a group we all got on well!

[0:06:26] Lee: Was there a chap called Bill Sloman involved in this process at all?

Preston: I can't remember, I mean I know Bill Sloman but I can't remember if he was at the interview or not, I mean this is 1959!

[0:06:40] Lee: Which is exactly 50 years ago! [Preston: Yeah!] So alright you were selected?

Preston: Yes.

[0:06:44] Lee: So was it a very nice relaxed period before you went south or were you off on your travels?

Preston: The land surveyors were given a training course of about three months, which funnily enough was at the Overseas Surveys headquarters which was in Tolworth in Surrey. And that was run by a man called Norman Leppard, who you may of heard of, I don't know. Norman unfortunately was killed in road accident five or six years ago. But he'd been down south already previously at Hope Bay, so he ran a training course for three of us, three of us and Duncan Carse joined us! Which is a name you must know because he was about to go to South Georgia on his last expedition! And we did surveying up on Epsom Downs - it was very pleasant, it was a very warm summer!

[0:07:32] Lee: So you met him did you?

Preston: Oh yes, yes!

[0:07:34] Lee: What did you make of him?

Preston: Quite a withdrawn individual, but didn't really get a very strong impression because we only saw him when we were out doing these exercises on the Downs. He was living in someone's garden shed in Hampstead at that stage and he cycled over to Epsom every day on a bicycle, so he was quite a character but I really couldn't give anymore!

[0:08:00] Lee: And Norman, what sort of character was Norman Leppard?

Preston: I think Norman was quite a father figure to us, he was the man with all the experience that we looked up to, and he was a very good surveyor, he had been trained by the Ordnance Survey, say no more! Then, yeah so Norman was very good to us and really did look after us and then we had I think it was two weeks at Virginia Water which was the Imperial College field station there, and a man called Alfred Stephenson taught us field astronomy for fixing position in the field. And he'd been on the British Graham Land expedition in the 1930's, so then again he was very much an almost god like figure!

[0:08:47] Lee: So a lot of this was new stuff was it, this training course it wasn't all ground recovered it was new material?

Preston: Some of it was new, but it was very much directed towards the conditions in the Antarctic. I mean we'd done a fair amount of work on the undergraduate course, but it was a refresher course in some ways, the field astronomy was new we'd done sun shots before but not star shots.

[0:09:12] Lee: And how if at all, could they prepare you for the Antarctic, were you given any training on to survive the conditions down there?

Preston: No, [laughter], no I mean we did the survey course and then we were virtually straight on to the ship! But of course FIDS at that time had this situation where we were all down for two winters, and so there was always a mixture of people that had already done a winter with the new people that had come in, so in both my years I was part of a six man team and we had at least two people out of the six that had already spent a winter down there. So they passed on their experience and taught us the survival skills and things that we needed!

[0:09:57] Lee: When you got your first glimpse of the Antarctic was it everything you'd hoped for?

Preston: I'm not sure, the first real glimpse I had was at a place called Deception Island, which is a volcanic crater and a bit like a coal mine! Everything is black, so it was covered in cloud. Most of the time we were sitting up in this cloud trying to get some observations! But there are, I mean we then went down the tourist route, down through the Lemaire Channel. I mean that was just very spectacular to put it mildly!

[0:10:29] Lee: So had they told you what you'd be doing when you got down there, what was your job brief Frank?

Preston: We were, the plan was we'd land to build a new base hut for the six man team on a place called Adelaide Island, which hadn't been visited before really! People had touched on the fringes of it, the centre of the island, was nobody had been to, and our brief was to put in ground control for mapping from aerial photographs, so we were to provide fixed points on the ground, identify them on photographs and then the mapping would be compiled from the aerial photography which we already had!

[0:11:12] Lee: That was the plan!

Preston: That was the plan, unfortunately we didn't get in, the sea ice was too bad and we didn't get in there that first year! So we were taken back and put in an old hut that hadn't been used for ten years or so, at a place called Argentine Islands where there was a big existing scientific base, British base about half a mile away. So we spent the first winter there and then they were to fly us in from the Argentine Islands, with the two aircraft that the survey had at that time. Unfortunately when the aircraft came down in the early spring to the Argentine Islands one them landed and went through the sea ice!! - and was a total loss and so that was the end of that plan! And I was luckily enough to get out on a summer survey working with Chris Brading and some of the other people, around Hope Bay, then the following year we did get into Adelaide Island and we built the base, and we started on the survey!

[0:12:17] Lee: We'll come back to that in a moment. Just about Wordie House where you spent this time, what was it like there?

Preston: Well it had an interesting history, because originally Alfred Stephenson and the British Graham Land expedition, that had been their base and they built a hut there and this hut mysteriously disappeared in the 1950's I think [note: actually 1947] just went! There were quite big ice cliffs nearby and one theory was the ice just collapsed and washed it away but that seemed a bit unlikely. The more likely explanation was that the Argentinians came, dismantled it and took it away for political reasons. So the new hut was actually built of

timber from Deception Island, from the old whalers' buildings, so it really was a sort of, I don't what you'd call it [Chris makes a comment ??? (inaudible)]. Yes probably a good word, sort of a traditional Antarctic wooden base hut made out of sort of odd bits timber!

[0:13:16] Lee: What was it like to live in as it hadn't been used for a long time had it?

Preston: No we made it quite comfortable, we had all stores that were landed for the hut we were supposed to build, so we had a Rayburn cooker which we fitted and of course the bunks and things were already there. It was very comfortable, it was bigger than the hut we were supposed to be going to be living in and we made it very comfortable I think, we had a very good year there! And fortunately for me the base leader at Argentine Islands, the scientific base, a man called Bill Murray who was also a surveyor and part of his job he was doing a large scale survey, mapping survey of the Argentine Islands to produce a large scale map and we were able to help him with that, so he actually had three surveyors working on the job instead of just one which helped!

[0:14:06] Lee: So you weren't frustrated by the fact you didn't get to do plan A?

Preston: It was a bit frustrating, but we accepted it - what could you do? And we had this plan that we were going to be flown in, which was quite exciting, because that unfortunately failed! Then as I say I was lucky enough, I asked if I could come out and join on this summer survey and one of the ships sort of came down to the edge of ice specially for me, and I had another man come with me and we got out that way, so yeah again I had a reasonably productive summer.

[0:14:40] Lee: And that was worthwhile work, it wasn't a case of finding jobs for the boys?

Preston: Oh, no!

[0:14:45] Lee: It was worthwhile!

Preston: No the Joinville survey was an important thing and then in fact we did have, in some ways a holiday, because Christmas was coming up and work on the survey I think was suspended, I can't quite remember. I was able to stay on the ship, which then did a trip up to South Georgia and across to the South Sandwich Islands and eventually down to Hope Bay again, and the reason we were allowed to make this trip was the ship was towing a magnetometer behind it on about 300 metres of cable doing a continuous record of the magnetic field. And to go was that they needed a continuous echo sounder trace from the ship, so we were put on the ship's echo sounder and we were doing watches of four hours on and eight off, to keep a continuous trace marking it every quarter of an hour and so again we were doing something productive!

[0:15:40] Lee: What was the echo sounder technology like in those days?

Preston: It worked very effectively and we actually went over the South Sandwich Trench, which I think is about 4000 fathoms deep or something! And I can remember that clearly because we went over the edge of it and think the echo sounder was only calibrated up to about 1000 fathoms or something! But you could keep, it was one of these you had to turn the knob and you could keep moving it round and then writing on in wax pencil what the real

depth was and this trace just went down and down until it bottomed out, and we got it all the way down, and so we felt very pleased with ourselves!

[0:16:18] Lee: Bit of a surprise really?

Preston: Yes, yes you know it was great!

[0:16:23] Lee: OK, let's just go back a little, well we're leaping about a bit, but that's OK. I'm very interested in this Joinville survey which is a new word to me Joinville, so can you elaborate on just what that was?

Preston: Well Joinville was just the name of one of the islands in the group off the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula where Hope Bay is, so basically it was a survey being run by the Hope Bay surveyors, Chris Brading and Dick Harbour and the name comes from one of the early French explorers Charcot so hence there was quite a lot of French names, Lemaire Channel they all go back to Charcot's expedition in the early 1900's. And it was a, I'm trying to remember whether we had assistance from the Navy and the helicopters on it, perhaps we didn't perhaps it was all done by boat, can't remember, not sure now. But the sea ice at the northern end of the Peninsula isn't stable enough to travel on, so the only way of getting to these islands was by boat in the summer, so it was a summer survey to extend the mapping control out from the northern end of the mainland so to speak.

[0:17:35] Lee: That was the summer survey you were talking about a few minutes ago?

Preston: Yes, yes, yeah!

[0:17:39] Lee: So it?

Preston: So it was just called the Joinville survey because that was the major island in the group!

[0:17:43] Lee: Was it tough work or a piece of cake!?

Preston: It was, well some of the boat landing were tricky you know, but well you had to get all the kit out, we were using the ship's sort of surf boats and so had to unload the gear from the boats on to rocks or whatever! And survey equipment some of it is quite sensitive, doesn't like being dropped or getting wet for that matter, yeah so you had to be careful, but it wasn't too arduous no, no.

[0:18:17] Lee: You've done survey work a lot of your life what's so fascinating about it?

Preston: For me the travel going to new places, often places with mapping work often they are places there aren't any maps, so they're relatively remote and perhaps not so many people have been there, but it's, and I enjoy the challenge of the work as well getting to places, the physical challenge of getting there!

[0:18:40] Lee: So it's what goes with the work that's fascinating, rather than the work itself?

Preston: Yes but the work itself, I was only part of the whole process obviously. As I say we were providing like a skeleton fixed points, and then a lot of the actual mapping work the

compilation maps would be done back in probably in Britain, in an office somewhere, by other people, so we were just one link in the chain.

[0:19:03] Lee: Again looking back how accurate would say you were able to be?

Preston: In the Antarctic, well the conditions were against us, the photography that we were using was far from ideal! It was very, now of course a lot of the mapping is produced from satellite images which doesn't have the quality of aerial photography, but in some ways is more suitable for mapping. The, and the other thing I think our own probably lack of experience we were all straight out of university, and we didn't have, I'd no previous survey experience to speak of at all so in a lot of ways we were learning and we probably made mistakes, we did made mistakes I'm sure! I mean in some ways the Survey they might have been better to employ more experienced people, the policy at that time was to recruit people straight out of university, and we got the job done! I think the accuracy was adequate for the sort of work we were doing, and the scale of mapping that was going to be produced, I'm sure.

[0:20:11] Lee: So some of those errors did creep on to the paper on to the maps do you reckon, to be corrected later?

Preston: Possibly, possibly! [laughter]

[0:20:24] Lee: Do you know why they were so keen on new recruits, could you ever work out why it was they were taking new boys?

Preston: Probably people hadn't married, they didn't have family responsibilities they were eager for sort of experience to travel I suppose, and possibly this business we, of getting on well as a small group, possibly young people are more flexible and I don't know!

[0:20:49] Lee: What kind of technology were you using for doing the surveying work, just technology or...?

Preston: That was part of the problem we had on my second year, we didn't have the latest technology, it had been used in the Antarctic and we'd been using it! But at that stage the Survey didn't have enough equipment to provide us with what we needed, and in fact my second year when we actually got on to Adelaide Island, certainly my part of it to some extent was a bit frustrating and wasted because we were trying to do survey with methods which really didn't really fit the terrain! And having to work it and had we had the new technology, I'm thinking things like, by the stage in the late 50's electromagnetic distance measurement equipment, it was a system called a tellurometer had been developed, and this was basically would be two receivers which sent a signal to the other one, sent it back and told you the distance between the two and this would measure up to a hundred miles! Line of sight, if you could see it you could measure it and that was just coming in, and had been used for a couple of years previously in the Antarctic and in fact the following year after I left, they did get that equipment and things progressed a little more quickly!

[0:22:07] Lee: Did you ever hear why you couldn't have it?

Preston: I think it was partly cost, may have been difficultly getting the equipment itself, there weren't a lot available at that time not many in product it was very new, very new machines.

[0:22:21] Lee: They were being made in South Africa?

Preston: That's right yes, yeah they were, a man called Wadley invented it!

[0:22:31] Lee: Again this is perhaps something you wouldn't have thought about at the time but looking back on it now, were you mapping just for sake of mapping or was there plan, British government inspired?

Preston: Well we always assumed there was this plan of the political background, and the contested claims with Argentina and Chile.

[0:22:48] Lee: Could you elaborate?

Preston: Well, there'd been quite a few incidents that we knew of, I mean I don't think, we always found the Argentinians and Chileans on the ground very friendly on a personal basis, but there had been incidents which had been reported in the press and everything! So obviously we were aware of the political situation and the Base Leader was a magistrate, and had a formal document to say that he was a magistrate and he had a post office and this constituted an administration, which supported a political claim! And mapping the area obviously was important too, from the point of view of supporting claims to ownership of the territory.

[0:23:32] Lee: If you want to claim a piece of land, first you must map it?

Preston: Well not necessarily, but you have to administrate it and mapping is an important part of administration, so you can show where it is that you're claiming and how much of it and so on!

[0:23:46] Lee: Was that something you came to that conclusion at the time did you?

Preston: Oh yes, we were all aware of the situation yes.

[0:23:56] Lee: You had a couple of interesting adventures I would say, one was that you were on the *Kista Dan* when it got ice bound?

Preston: Yes that's right.

[0:24:00] Lee: Can you tell me the story please, Frank?

Preston: This was my sort of first summer down there, and I said earlier we were trying to get into Adelaide Island to establish this base.

[0:24:10] Lee: This was 1960?

Preston: Early 1960 yes, 59/60 summer, the southern summer yes, a lot of the, well they weren't new techniques, we had a float plane on the ship the idea was that they, I think they'd

already had reports that it was not a good ice year! And Sir Vivian Fuchs was on the ship, he'd come down to sort of take charge I think, and so we had a float plane on the ship and the idea was that, the problem on the ship is you've only got about a 10 mile radius from the crow's nest that you can see, so of course with a float plane you can get up much higher and get a much bigger picture of the extent of the ice, and what have you but even with that sort of thing we eventually got stuck!! Quite close to Adelaide Island not far off, and the ship just didn't have the power to move through the ice and we really were sort of icebound! I don't know what would have happened, but fortunately there was an Argentinian ice breaker which was also having trouble, though she was an icebreaker and we were a Danish cargo ship! And the Americans came down to assist her and then they came on and they actually got us out!

[0:25:31] Lee: This is the *Glacier*?

Preston: The *Glacier* yes, yes which to give you an idea I think actually our ship was about 1700 horsepower, and the *Glacier* was something like 44000 horsepower, quite a lot. I mean she was just steaming through ice that was holding us fast! So she just came up and a sort of steamed round us in a circle and just broke us out, and then we had quite a job following her as the wash was so enormous that if we got too close the ship was just pushed off to one side by the *Glacier's* wash, from her propellers!

[0:26:07] Lee: When you were fast in the ice, beset I think is the correct phrasing?

Preston: Yes that's right.

[0:26:11] Lee: What did you do with yourselves?

Preston: Well that was a bit of a problem, because there was nothing to do! And in fact we had a bit of an incident I don't think Sir Vivian was too pleased with the amount of beer that was being drunk onboard! Of course it was a Danish ship and so there was lots of Carlsberg, and one stage he sort of closed the bar and some of us got into a bit of trouble drinking too late in the night! But this was simply boredom, I mean there was nothing to do and at that stage and we weren't sure what was going to happen, so it was a frustrating time, yes!

[0:26:46] Lee: Was there an air of concern on the ship that it might end in tragedy?

Preston: Oh no, no I mean the ship was actually an extremely strong vessel, she was built for the Greenland trade so she, and of course was designed as a round bottomed ship, and as the pressure came on, in fact we were sort of listing quite a bit at one stage because of the force of the ice, but she was being lifted by the ice, so no I don't think we ever felt we were in the middle of a potential disaster! But presumably we could have been stuck there for the winter, if the Americans hadn't come down and got us out!

[0:27:23] Lee: What did you make of Fuchs?

Preston: I think he was rather a distant man, I think as I say most of the FIDS people were fairly young, there was a sprinkling of older people but most of us were fairly young. It was very much of a sort of, I suppose you might almost call it a democratic society, if there were decisions to be made people tended to all have their say! Whereas I think was Fuchs was much more authoritarian, much more used to giving orders and expecting them to be obeyed,

and that didn't always go down terribly well with the rank and file! So hence on this, when we all were getting a bit bored and frustrated I don't think he quite sympathised with our feelings at that stage, and felt we were being a bit unruly and uncouth, I suppose!

[0:28:18] Lee: Did your generation of FIDS have respect for him?

Preston: I think we did for his achievements yes. My feeling, one of my major feelings on FIDS always was that people were judged very much on their abilities and their job whatever they were recruited for and how sort of unpleasant their personal habits might be, and if they did their job well that excused almost anything! Because you depended on other people to do their jobs, if they weren't competent then everybody had a problem! But as I say I think Fuchs was probably a bit too distant and remote from the majority and so none of us ever really got to know him I don't think, although we were on a ship, quite a small ship for a month or more.

[0:29:10] Lee: I heard he would lean to and help unload when you were relieving a base or he would muck in to do the work with the rest of you, is that something you remember or not?

Preston: I don't remember that because we didn't actually, no I don't remember that, I have to say. Yeah I think he was sort of busy with higher things.

[0:29:33] Lee: There was another problem at sea when the *Biscoe* and the *Kista Dan* came rather too close to each other?

Preston: Yes, yes!

[0:29:40] Lee: Did you witness that?

Preston: Yes, I was, yes I must have been on the *Kista Dan* then and yes, this is when we got back up to the Argentine Islands after the *Glacier* had sort of rescued us, and we were unloading all our stuff to go ashore into the old Wordie hut, but I was still on the ship at that stage. And yes they somehow they got their anchor chains intertwined I think, and the two ships were just blown together and of course the float plane was on the *Kista Dan*'s deck, and the wings stuck out over the sides and as they came together one of the wings was torn off!

[0:30:19] Lee: This was the Beaver was it?

Preston: The Beaver float plane, the one that had been used for the ice reconnaissance and so that was a problem. But again the organisation was most efficient and they actually got a wing I think flown out to Montevideo! One of the ships went up to Montevideo and collected it, brought it back down to Deception Island and they had an RAF flight which was operating the aircraft, of two pilots and two mechanics and the flight were able to fit this wing during the winter at Deception Island, and they had to make quite a lot of bits and pieces I think, but anyway that was actually the plane that came down to Argentine Islands and then went through the sea ice!! So that was an absolute tragedy because they'd spent all winter working on it and just did this one flight and so again was a total loss!

[0:31:13] Lee: You saw the impact did you, did you see the impact, of the wing being torn off?

Preston: No I didn't, I didn't actually view it no I was just on the ship at the time.

[0:31:24] Lee: What was the feeling on the ship when that happened?

Preston: A bit depressed yes, yes and sorry for the RAF people, because obviously a lot of work for them in prospect and very frustrating for them, yes!

[0:31:38] Lee: And when the plane went through the ice that must have been even worse!?

Preston: [Laughter] Yes, yes because that was obviously the end of our sort of proposed spring survey and yes.

[0:31:52] Lee: Was there language used! [Laughter!] How did that frustration express itself between you and your colleagues?

Preston: [Big sigh!] I don't know not a lot was said, I remember I think the two mechanics got through quite a lot of whisky that night! They were obviously more than a bit upset and I think we obviously all sympathised with them. No it's hard to say, I'm sorry, it's a long time ago!

[0:32:33] Lee: OK, what would say is the difference, when was the last time you went south Frank?

Preston: I had another summer survey in, I think it was 1966/67 which not so long after, I came back in '62 and then three of us were, I was actually seconded from Overseas Survey and three of us, myself, Dick Harbour, who you've met here and another guy called Howard Chapman who's in New Zealand now, and we funnily enough the three all been together being taught by Norman Leppard. So we had a reunion and went down for again a summer survey working off a naval warship which at that time was *Protector*, using her helicopters, and so that was the last time I'd been down yes.

[0:33:15] Lee: How would say that the job that you were doing in the Antarctic 50 to 55 years ago differs now from the work being done today, how do experiences differ?

Preston: Well obviously the whole range of technology has moved on. As I say the tellurometer system of distance measuring was the initial electronic digital, it was the beginning of the revolution and has gone right through to GPS! So obviously the whole technology has changed, the whole speed of work has changed, with GPS you can work 24 hours a day if you are capable, you don't have to stop! I mean, and we were using dogs, we had 40 dogs for a six man base so the whole sort of ethos I think has changed, I suppose we were the end of the historic phase as you might call it!

[0:34:19] Lee: The heroic era!

Preston: The heroic era yes, sort of! [laughter] Yes so I, people must be more driven now, driven by the technology as much as anything. I mean I've had no experience of what it's like working down there now, I can only imagine and clips and things I've seen on TV. But my feeling, the feeling I get is probably not so much an enjoyable experience now as it was when we were down there. And of course people can, apart from the base maintenance people tend to go down for much more shorter periods too. See, we had a month's journey out from

Southampton by sea, which probably not a lot of people do now, [loud cough], excuse me! And that was, although I'm not sure I was with anybody that I ended up on base with but we, I went out on the *Biscoe* and there must have been 30 of us at least, can't remember now, 30 or 40 that sort of level. With a sprinkling of older people who were coming down for a second or a third time, so that month was a chance to again to find your feet in a way and sort of to talk to other people, and just sort of mix in.

[0:35:47] Lee: In your day how seriously did you take health and safety?

Preston: It wasn't an issue. I mean we were obviously aware, there were basic rules that we followed, we didn't go into crevassed areas with only two men we'd always go in with three men on the argument it takes two men to get one man out of a hole! So there were a few basic rules like that, but that probably was it - just a few basic rules. We were all expected to be reasonably competent in using skis and things like this, we could at least get around and turn this sort of thing, yeah!

[0:36:23] Lee: Any safety issues arise when you were Base Leader at all?

Preston: Not really no, no I don't think there were.

[0:36:35] Lee: I got the impression you felt being a Base Leader was fairly straight forward and simple job?

Preston: As I say it was only a six man base, obviously on a larger base they maybe be other problems, and everybody's down there I think everybody among the six of us was committed to what they were doing, so you didn't have discipline problems, you didn't have, I mean people might occasionally, I don't know what the word is - we, of course we read Charcot book so we often called it the ??? [incomprehensible] people go very quiet for a day of two so, well you'd just leave them, they'd come round and come out of it again!

[0:37:16] Lee: You're not talking about some kind of depression or what?

Preston: Well I suppose in a way yeah, but it was no good trying to jolly them out of it or anything, people would just go through and come of out it again and that was fine. So you didn't have to get people out of bed in the morning and things like this, people got up because there was work to do, so from the discipline point of view I don't think there was any problems. The main burden was just an administrative one of reports and the bulk of that was at the end of the year, the reports that went out by radio were necessarily quite brief, because we weren't in communication with Port Stanley we had to go to one of the bigger bases and our reports were sent out from there. So nobody wanted great long reams of paper to transmit by Morse code!

[0:38:08] Lee: The fact that you were almost incommunicado, was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Preston: It didn't worry us. I think it was probably something you didn't worry about, we were all fit and healthy and as I say most of us were fairly young, so our health was something you didn't worry about really! The dentist had given us a good sort of going over before we got down there, and the feeling was the bigger bases obviously had doctors but all I

seemed to have deal with was perhaps an occasional broken bone, or something like this or if someone had fallen, I don't think anybody ever worried about serious health issues!

[0:38:56] Lee: So you weren't, because of the poor communications you weren't receiving regular orders from HQ in London?

Preston: No, no I mean we had a programme of work for the year and that was it and we got on and did! And then at the end of the year we would write a report to say what you'd done, and how much you'd done and perhaps why you hadn't succeeded in doing what you were asked to do, no it was I suppose you could almost call it a string and wire organisation, but it worked and we achieved what we could achieve I think.

[0:39:26] Lee: Did you wireless, did you have wireless of any kind?

Preston: How do you mean, the...?

[0:39:33] Lee: The radios of any kind?

Preston: Oh yes, yes as I say we actually had a radio operator, I mean all the bases had a radio operator, but the sets we had weren't big enough to communicate reliably with Port Stanley this was on our 6 man base, so we spoke to another base which was about a hundred miles away so everything was routed through the radio operator there. And then of course our field parties all had small, there were actually ex-army sort of walkie-talkie type of sets, so they would always be in voice communication but they wouldn't be very far away.

[0:40:08] Lee: Reliable?

Preston: Yes, yes it all worked it was all valve technology of course in those days, no!?  
[laughter]

[0:40:14] Lee: Valves in freezing conditions!

Preston: Yes, but it all worked yeah, yeah it was good!

[0:40:21] Lee: What about the sense of impact on the environment, I mean did you consider the environment, you talked about killing seals to feed dogs?

Preston: Yes.

[0:40:30] Lee: Did you worry about what you were doing to the environment with a big 'E'?

Preston: No, because again I don't think any of us were conscious of it - this is all 50 years ago. I think we were aware of the pristine environment, but I think we felt our impact on it was fairly minimal! Even the seals, I mean we had 40 dogs and to get them through the winter we needed about 120 seal, but the ship would often collect these for us so they would be taken over quite a wide area, so the feeling was that the impact on the seal population was fairly small you know.

[0:41:07] Lee: So a decision had been made to cull seals across a wide area to protect the colonies?

Preston: No, the ship was simply the most convenient way of collecting them I think to be honest!

[0:41:21] Lee: Right yeah.

Preston: As I say people weren't really aware of this sort of thing.

[0:41:27] Lee: What about your gash, your rubbish?

Preston: That went out on the sea ice yeah, and in the spring it disappeared, we knew not where! So again the feeling was there was there wasn't an alternative and nobody was really conscious at that time of the impact that it might have on the environment! Again with six of us I suppose there wasn't a huge impact.

[0:41:56] Lee: And the dogs, did you enjoy the dog work?

Preston: Oh yes they were, I think they fulfilled quite a need for companionship and this sort of thing. I mean although obviously you had the other five guys, but I was fortunately enough my second year to have my own dog team!

[0:42:16] Lee: What were they called?

Preston: I had a team called the Counties, which actually originally came from Hope Bay so it was an old experienced team so I didn't have too much trouble sort of having to train them. Yeah. No, you obviously got very fond of them they were all individuals. There were records kept of all the breeding and this sort of thing, so you know who their parents were and their grandparents and so on, and they were individuals and part of the team!

[0:42:48] Lee: You had an incident at Adelaide Island with one of the dog teams I believe?

Preston: Yes, that probably was my scariest moment down there! We'd broken one or two of the safety rules, because we set off with two of us and with two fully loaded sledges and the idea was to travel about 50,60 miles up on to the centre of the island and leave a depot of food for working in the spring, so the sledges we were trying to carry as much as we could on the sledges. So one of the mistakes we made was we left skis behind, didn't take skis, because we didn't think we'd need them. It was a straightforward run and there was no crevasses or anything on the way. But it was quite a long steep climb up from the base to get up on to the sort of more level ice shelf, and the other team was quite a young team and there was quite sort of a nasty wind blowing and we were going straight into it! And eventually the dogs got fed up of this and decided they'd had enough, and they actually turned round and just went off back downhill with the wind behind them, and the driver, because the sledges were heavily loaded he couldn't control it, he couldn't turn it over and he just sort of disappeared down the hill somewhere!

[0:44:00] So I was left wondering what to do. So I decided, well I had an older more steady team in that I thought I could control or if need be I could turn my team to get them to turn back into the slope if I needed to stop. So I decided the only thing that I could do was to follow him and see what had happened to him! So I set off very gingerly down this slope and of course eventually I lost control of my team and sledge too, and I eventually I found the

other chap, it was a guy called Gordon McCallum, Gordon was sort of in a crevasse, [laughter], sort of up to his waist sort of thing with his arms out! And I went by too saying 'Hang on I'll be back'. I couldn't, I was trying to turn the team, turn the sledge over or get the team to turn round and nothing! And we were sort of going faster and faster down this slope, and eventually the sledge did go over, the sledge actually capsized because I'd hit a crevasse and the back of the sledge went into it! Luckily the sledge or me didn't go down the crevasse and of course we all stopped! And one of my dogs came loose, came out of his harness, and he started running around in circles and suddenly disappeared, and I thought he'd gone into a crevasse! So the only thing I had was a long aluminium pole which we carried on the sledge, so I then went back up, I thought 'If I follow my sledge tracks I'll see if there's any holes', and sort of prodding with the pole, and eventually I got up and Gordon had managed to wriggle out of this hole, fortunately he'd got out instead of going down it! And then we had actually to dump, a lot of it was dog food that we were carrying and we actually had to just dump that and get the sledges organised again.

[0:45:59] Then I went back to look for this dog that had disappeared, and so again I was going in our sledge tracks, this time going forward plodding very gingerly and suddenly I was prodding in space! I realised I was standing right on the edge of the ice cliff on a big snow cornice, and the dog had gone over the cliff, it was about a 100 foot drop, so I sort of leapt upwards and backwards in one leap! And I think Gordon must have had a rope on me, we obviously had a rope and so that was it, we sort of sorted ourselves out and went back to base. We weren't that far away from base climbing up away from it, the dog that disappeared reappeared the next day! I think luckily it had landed on a big pile of soft snow at the bottom of the cliff and had enough sense to find his way home! So we survived the incident just with the loss of some dog food, but it was a nasty, because we broke some of the safety rules!

[0:46:53] Lee: And the story started with the words, 'We didn't think we'd need them so we left them behind'!

Preston: Yes, yeah!

[0:46:55] Lee: Well in these interviews, quite a few of the incidents that lead to near catastrophe seem to start with the phrase very similar to that!

Preston: Yes, yeah we thought we'd get away with it, take a chance and we nearly didn't get away with it, we were very fortunate!

[0:47:08] Lee: What was your attitude towards chances in the future after?

Preston: [Laughter] I think we were all a bit more careful yes, yes! It's not so willing to take chances, yes.

[0:47:19] Lee: It would seem so, yeah, so what would you regard as to your greatest achievement of your time in the Antarctic, was it the Joinville survey?

Preston: It's hard to put a finger on anything really I think, I find that quite difficult, because even as I say the year at Adelaide as Base Leader it was very much a sort of cooperative effort between the six of us, and I don't think my efforts particularly stood out or that's probably the part I feel most gratified to, but I think yes, yeah!

[0:48:03] Lee: Being Base Leader?

Preston: Yeah, I mean unfortunately from a personnel point of view, the survey work I was on that second year was a bit of a disaster because what we were trying to do wasn't really possible. But as I say it probably comes down to, I think we had a successful year on the base, it went well.

[0:48:23] Lee: These little details I haven't asked anybody else, these photographs that were taken, aerial photographs did you actually have the prints?

Preston: Oh yeah, yes!

[0:48:33] Lee: When you went out to do the survey?

Preston: Yes, it's a bit technical. A couple of problems, some of the photography was flown by an American expedition, there was a guy called Finn Ronnie [Note: Finn Ronne] who you may have heard of. He's quite famous because he had two ladies who were the first ladies to winter in!

[0:48:50] Lee: Darlington and...?

Preston: And his own wife yeah, and he had, I can't remember what sort of aircraft it was now! But they flew a lot of photography, but a lot of it was oblique photography where the camera is inverted and it points obliquely to the ground. Which isn't very good for mapping it, there are all sorts of problems and also a lot of the flight lines were sort of quite random, where the pilot happened to feel like flying and the camera was switched on, sort of thing! The other photography that we worked on, which we didn't actually have any at Adelaide Island was flown by a British firm called, Huntings who were quite a well known survey firm, they did ground survey and aerial photography. But they operated from Deception Island, this flooded volcano which is a very good harbour, and they were using an amphibious aircraft which unfortunately could only get up to about 20,000 feet I think, no not as much, maybe 11,000 feet. And of course the Peninsula, the plateau goes up to 5,000 feet, so you got all sorts of scale problems, I mean normally aerial photography for that sort of mapping would be flown at something over 20,000 feet, but they just didn't have an aircraft suitable that they could operate in the Antarctic. So there were a lot of problems with the actual aerial photography, so hence the satellite imagery now really has filled the bill!

[0:50:18] Lee: But you had these prints, I mean the prints would overlap each other quite significantly?

Preston: Yes, yeah.

[0:50:26] Lee: So there would be lots of them, so how did you use the prints when you were in the field while doing your survey?

Preston: Well you, there wouldn't be that many you know, [laughter], they were 9x9, nine inch square prints. Yeah you just had to carry the full set, because you need the overlap to get a stereoscopic image, with a little hand stereo. Yeah, so it was part of the surveyor's gear!

[0:50:54] Lee: Were you spreading out these photographs in your tent?

Preston: Well you know which pair you wanted, they're all serial numbered, obviously you just flicked through till you got the two or three you want. Yeah, we might have to spread them out in the base hut that would be more of a problem to spread them all out there! No you just used to using them in the field.

[0:51:15] Lee: Let's face it most photographs would be white wouldn't they, so [Preston Yes.] how difficult was it to pick out landmarks?

Preston: Well if you have just got snow it's very difficult, yes, unless there are shadows on the snow from something or crevasses. But then, no we'd try and put the survey mark on. One of the objects of doing a survey like this is to leave permanent marks behind, then the next guy who comes along has got something to work on. So we'd obviously try and put those on an outcrop of rock, which would be stable - I mean if you have to put stations on snow then, really they are only temporary because they'll move anyway, as the ice moves!

[0:51:58] Lee: So building cairns were you?

Preston: Yes, you'd normally try and build rock cairns, well this was part of the problem I had. As I said the second year we were working up the side of a mountain chain, and we were trying to create triangles in this, the old days of triangulation, to progress. And of course some of the stations had to be out on the ice and it really wasn't feasible or practical, you need to get yourself on to solid foundation if you can.

[0:52:31] Lee: You made at least one flight yourself didn't you? [Preston: Sorry?] You made at least one flight yourself, you flew in the Beaver?

Preston: Yeah, I think as I said to Amanda the point I was making how really green and inexperienced we were, and when I went out there I'd never flown ever! I mean I'd been to Denmark, but we went on the train so the first flight I ever had was actually on the Falklands Islands Aerial Service in the Falklands. We were doing some work there because the mapping of the Falklands was being done at that time by Overseas Survey, so it was arranged that they would give us some experience in the Falklands and my first flight was on one of the float planes from Port Stanley harbour, yes!

[0:53:19] Lee: How was it?

Preston: Oh exciting yeah, seeing all the water going up, yes!

[0:53:25] Lee: You've travelled a great deal to some quite strange places, so how does the Antarctic rate in your life now, thinking back over your lifetime?

Preston: It's still, as I say in some ways it was part of a growing up experience, as I said earlier to you. Yes it's still very important, hence I'm here this weekend and the people we still keep in contact with quite a lot of the people I was with. I do look - as I say I haven't been back - but I look at the adverts for the Antarctic cruises and I've talked to other people here, who have done the cruises. I have the feeling I wouldn't like to go back on a cruise, because of all the environmental restrictions and what have you that are now in force. When we were down there it was free and easy and relaxed!

[0:54:29] Lee: Did it change you, did you grow up?

Preston: Oh I think so, yes I think I must have done yes, yes. When I came back I think I mentioned earlier I was fortunate enough to be offered a place in Overseas Surveys in the U.K. Civil Service, and that involved a 12 month training course at School of Military Survey, just outside Newbury - as a civilian student I hasten to add! And I found that quite fascinating, because I went there with three other British graduates as part of the course who were straight out of university, and having had a couple of years break, and I had probably matured in that two years, I got much more out of that course than I think the other three guys did! Because I was a bit more mature and also I'd worked, I think when you leave university you are very cocky and you really think you know it all, and of course after a couple of years away I realised how much I didn't know, and much more ready to learn.

[0:55:36] Lee: Why did you all get together again four or five decades later!?

Preston: [Laughter] Something I hadn't really thought about, habit I suppose! No, it's a chance to catch up with people because most of the people here, I have perhaps seen one or two of them otherwise at other BAS Club organisations and things, but yes I think there's an element of nostalgia without a doubt, and some of us also come for the walking, I mean I live in the middle of England so we don't have any mountains there! It's a chance to get away, but basically it's to see people, yes to meet people.

[0:56:12] Lee: Do you share a special time together?

Preston: I think so yes, yes it's, yes, there is a bonding yes, without a doubt!

[0:56:24] Frank, thank you very much.

Preston: My pleasure!

Interesting clips:

- Training at the same time as Duncan Carse. [0:06:44]
- Being trained by Alfred Stephenson. [0:08:00]
- The Joinville Survey and going over the South Sandwich Trench! [0:14:45]
- The *Kista Dan* being rescued by the *USS Glacier* and then Sir Vivian Fuchs closing the bar! [0:25:31]
- The *Biscoe* and *Kista Dan* coming together and the aircraft wing being torn off! [0:29:40]
- Scary experiences in the field with the dogs on Adelaide Island. [0:42:48]

