

Gibson_Ken_version_2

Edited transcript of a recording of Ken Gibson recorded at the BAS Club reunion in Cardiff by Chris Eldon Lee on 12 June 2010, Bas Archives AD6/24/1/77. Transcribed by David Price 10 November 2013. Version 2.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Ken Gibson – recorded by Chris Eldon Lee at the BAS Club reunion in Cardiff on 12 June 2010.

Ken Gibson.

Gibson: Kenneth Vernon Gibson date of birth 4th April 1932 in Gorleston-on-Sea, Norfolk.

[0:00:22] Lee: So you're now 78 years old?

Gibson: Yes.

[0:00:24] Lee: What was your first brush with the Antarctic, your first consciousness of it all?

Gibson: I think at school I was quite interested in...I always liked the outdoors and camping and exploration and that sort of thing and I read a few of the Scott books, I can't remember which. I had always taken a sort of moderate interest in the Antarctic.

[0:00:51] Lee: Did you ever have an ambition to go?

Gibson: I don't think I had initially no, no. In fact my ambitions were more centred on Africa, it was rather by accident that I ever became to go to the Antarctic, which I'll probably tell you about later on.

[0:01:07] Lee: Well, tell me now.

Gibson: Right [Both talking at once] When I came out of the Navy I was...I had a friend in the Hong Kong police who I knew as an inspector in the Hong Kong police and in our talks he said one of the best police forces was supposed to be the Northern Rhodesia police, which I got quite interested in, and I fancied Africa and so when I got...came out of the Navy I applied, and I was qualified to go and everything and I went up and had a few interviews and pretty well got accepted. But they had an intake every six months or something, so I had quite a long wait. And while I... at the same time as I applied on the Telegraph for this job there was an ad in there alongside it, the Crown Agents for met men for the Antarctic. Which I thought 'that was interesting, not much hope,' so I applied and went up and had a few interviews and much to my surprise I was selected. So I had a choice then, so I wrote to the police thing and said 'Can I defer three years?' and eventually went to met school and joined FIDS. And I never did actually get into the police because when I came home I discovered I was too old [laughs.]

[0:02:25] Lee: What do you remember about the selection process at FIDS, the interview and so on?

Gibson: It was at the Crown Agents at Millbank in those days can't remember a great deal about it and I can't really remember who was there. I have a feeling it was

Raymond Priestley¹. He was running FIDS at the time, I believe, while Fuchs was working on the run-up to TAE. I can't remember who else, I know they asked me a few questions about meteorology which I knew, I had done a little bit of meteorology in the Navy but not very much, but I had a basic sort of idea. I knew what pressure was and what it was measured in and temperatures and so on.

[0:03:10] Lee: Do you think your Navy background helped?

Gibson: I think it did because I'd been in mostly fairly small ships and you have to be able to get on with people in small ships and you tend to be able to do a lot of things. I think the Navy background certainly helped because it was of course originally a Navy operation.

[0:03:30] Lee: On reflection do you think they were sussing you out psychologically, in that interview?

Gibson: I don't think, I wasn't aware of it at the time but in retrospect they probably were, yes. Yes, much more so probably these days than they did then, I don't know.

[0:03:46] Lee: So what happened after you'd been...you'd been offered a job, there was a gap I guess before...

Gibson: There was a short gap because in actual fact between coming out of the Navy and doing this I was surveying, which I hadn't done before but I found that quite interesting. So I had a job as a trainee I suppose, surveyor. So I carried on with that for a short while until of course I had to go to the met school for a couple of months, I think it was, in Stanmore² once I got selected prior to my going to the Antarctic. Stanmore, and then on to a met station; I went to Birmingham airport actually.

[0:04:24] Lee: How did you take to meteorology?

Gibson: I quite enjoyed it actually, I found the course quite interesting and enlightening and some of the...the physics side of it was a little bit difficult at times because I was probably a little bit older than the majority of them. There were quite a lot older than I was but most of them were younger. I did well in the observation side of it, the cloud observation and so on which I believe I came top in on one occasion. We also had quite a few people who were degree, geology degrees and geography degrees and so on so they were much more with it than I was. But we all got on very well together and in fact there was three or four people I carried on with were on the same course.

[0:05:19] Lee: was there any sense of any other kind of training for going South like how to deal with the conditions?

Gibson: No, not at all. We had a letter which I've got a copy of here actually about what conditions were, what you did and what base life was like, but there was nothing about training or anything, nothing about mountain climbing or working with ropes or crevasse training, nothing about crevasse rescue or anything like that, no not at all, no.

[0:05:47] Lee: Did that worry you?

¹ Sir Raymond Priestley. Was locum tenens whilst Dr Vivian Fuchs was preparing for the Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Priestley was, as a young geologist, a member of both Shackleton's *Nimrod* Expedition in 1907-9 and Scott's *Terra Nova* Expedition 1910-13.

² Stanmore Meteorological Training School ran an 8 week basic training course in meteorology under the auspices of the UK Meteorological Office. Stanmore is in north London.

Gibson: It didn't, no. Not at the time, I dunno, when we got on base we did a bit of, you know, the people that were on base who knew about these things would take us out and show us what to do. But we absolutely no formal training in that sort of thing, which probably was not good, For a fact I know it wasn't good because we had two accidents. But then again one of the fellows who was killed was an ex RAF mountain rescue fellow, so maybe it certainly wouldn't have helped him.

[0:06:22] Lee: We'll come to those later on [difficult to understand, cross talk.]

Gibson: Yes, yes.

[0:06:23] Lee: Let's take you down to the Antarctic then, because your first year was at Deception Island.

Gibson: Yes, yes.

[0:06:30] Lee: Did you know that before you left? [cross talk]

Gibson: No,

[0:06:32] Lee: You didn't even know...?

Gibson: I think, I'm not sure if I knew. I think it was when I got to Stanley I'm not absolutely certain of that. I think I was a little bit disappointed because Deception had a bad reputation as far as not being particularly picturesque and being an island and so on. I was quite keen to get on to a sledging base but in retrospect I found Deception quite an interesting place. Unfortunately most people only see it for a few months in the summer, but in the winter it is quite an attractive place.

[0:07:08] Lee: Tell me a bit more about it, what was it like in '57 when you got there, '58?

Gibson: On arrival it was sort of bleak and black, sort of ashy. The base hut was pretty well what I expected, but I think a little bit bigger because in fact it was quite large, quite an old base hut. The people I met there were all people I got on well with I think it was very interesting in that it's a big crater because the centre of it freezes six, seven, eight months of the year which made it much easier to get around. You could travel across the bay and it was a very interesting place to be in, I think in the long run.

[0:07:59] Lee: Were the other nations present?

Gibson: Yes, we had a Chilean base, we got on very well with the Chileans.

[0:08:05] Lee: That's unusual isn't it?

Gibson: No, I don't think so really, in my time in fact one of the first things that happened soon after I got there a ship came in from, I think it was an Argentine ship, more or less a passenger ship and it was the first ever cruise ship to the Antarctic and we were invited on board and we dressed up to go on board and met all these ambassadors and so on who were on this particular trip and that turned out to be I think the first ever tourist ship. Although it wasn't strictly a shrieky³ [unknown word] it was more of a diplomatic thing I think.

[0:08:44] Lee: Where was the Argentinian base at that point in time?

³ There does not seem to be a dictionary definition of this word, 'shrieky' must either be slang or colloquial.

Gibson: There was an Argentinian base, we had a little bit to do with them but not a great deal. The Chileans we got on very well with and the base leader and his deputy were RAF, not an RAF, an air force base, spoke very good English. One of them was of German extract, both pilots and I was always quite keen on flying and I got on extremely well with these two. They used to come and stay with us and we used to go over there and stay with them. I think one of them actually became the military attaché in London afterwards, I didn't ever know of him in England but we got on very well with them. And with the Argentinians as well, when we saw them.

[0:09:29] Lee: So détente was informal rather than formal?

Gibson: Yes, oh, very informal. I think we were just after the days when there were official protests but any ship that came in there, we went over, in fact the helicopters used to land occasionally and I've been for a trip around in one of the Argentinian helicopters – which actually crashed a couple of days later and I think that several were killed, unfortunately. But we did see a lot of the ships, both the Argentinian and the Chilean ships used to come in to Deception quite a lot, during summer of course.

[0:10:06] Lee: Tell me a bit about the met work you were doing there because Deception is renowned for its mank⁴ isn't it?

Gibson: Yes, yes I think in the summer it's probably renowned for its mank. I think in the winter it's much the same as the other bases, I think climate wise it is probably almost identical with Hope Bay and even Signy and Port Lockroy, it's very similar, They are not very far apart anyway and sea ice is always in...right across you could probably if you really tried sledge to Hope Bay or somewhere, across the sea ice. I think one of the things about the met side of it we tried to do a lot of pilot balloon ascents but we were very restricted on that due to weather. But then it was probably the same on all bases, I don't think we did any more, or less, at Deception than we did at Admiralty Bay later on.

[0:11:06] Lee: Was there a sense in '57, well '58 by the time you got there that you were simply going through repeat motions of what previous meteorologists had done or were you still making new discoveries or observing new trends?

Gibson: I think as far as the meteorology goes we were just carrying on the observations much in the same way. I did actually do other things there including some work for Don Hawkes a geologist, with the hot springs and so on, temperature recording. That was quite interesting.

[0:11:38] Lee: How did you go about doing that?

Gibson: Well, in just a couple of hundred yards from the base there was a barrel sunk into the beach, about 50-100 yards from the shore. It was obviously salt water but it was static salt water and I did a temperature thing correlating between the temperature of the water in the barrel with the rise and fall of the tides, which was actually published, Don published it as part of his study of Deception. He was there for a few months I think and he wrote up a paper on Deception.

[0:12:19] Lee: Can you remember the key findings?

⁴ Fids slang for low cloud, poor visibility and generally depressing conditions.

Gibson: I don't know actually, I don't think, I think it was just heated ground water, and of course we had a few tremors and so on in those days and nobody...it obviously had gone off from time to time because the glaciers were all striated, if that's the word, with lava. so it had obviously blown up on occasions, but other than a few rumbles we didn't have any worries about it other than we used to get lots of shrimps or krill washing up on the shore which had been probably killed and boiled by the sea water.

[0:13:01] Lee: You mean the sea water within the volcano, the crater?

Gibson: The shore line used to steam at times, quite often and there was nearly always a tide crack which was, I wouldn't say it was warm but it was well above the temperature of the rest of the bay. Even when the bay froze that strip of water along the tide line...

[0:13:24] Lee: When the krill was being killed off?

Gibson: I should imagine that they sort of swum into a hot bit of the sea. Anyway, I've got photographs somewhere of all the shore with dead shrimpy type krill, all pink as well, so I suppose they had been boiled on the shoreline.

[0:13:43] Lee: OK, the end of your year at Deception presumably gave you the option of requesting a move, did they?

Gibson: Yes, I think I was the first one to be chosen to go to Base Y, I've got it in my diary there somewhere which I was very happy about, Marguerite Bay is a good base to go to. Some of the books I had read were about Marguerite Bay, so I was very pleased with that, but unfortunately when I went there we didn't get in.

[0:14:17] Lee: Well tell me about that process, did you go back to Stanley in the meantime?

Gibson: No, no, [Cross talk] it was a straightforward transfer and I think I joined, went on the *Biscoe* and on the *Kista Dan* I can't remember which one was the first one to go South to relieve other bases and help with that and eventually get to Marguerite Bay. We eventually got to, well thirty miles out in Marguerite Bay. I think we had both the *Kista Dan* and the *Biscoe* there and neither of them could make any impression on the ice, it was really thick 10 ft. ice so we were about 30 miles out from base and it was obvious I think that it wasn't going to break up. It was getting late in the season so I spent two, maybe even three months on the ships moving around transferring people and supplying the bases and so on. In the end the *Northwind* or the *Edisto* I think it was both of them in the end, the American icebreakers came down to go in, they took one bash at the ice and didn't get any further either, so we all stopped on the ice edge and a lot of stuff was flown in by helicopter. They were actually flying coal in by helicopter, which is crazy, but I suppose they needed it and there was the tractors, we had Ferguson tractors with tracks and they were doing a run backwards and forwards, and two or three dog sledges were going backwards and forwards as well.

[0:16:04] Lee: were you doing the runs yourself?

Gibson: I didn't actually do any of those runs, no, there was base people coming out with the dogs. At one stage I was due to go next morning in the helicopter but unfortunately somebody else, they rehashed all of the movements. A couple of people volunteered to stay on base for another year and in meteorology which was unfortunate I was a bit narked about that because I think a geologist said that he would stay and do meteorology. So I was told, no,

I can't go into that base, so they said 'Right, we will put you into J'⁵ I think it was and one or two of the other southern bases I think they were going to re-open, and this went on for some time. One of them I remember we were supposed to land at, I think it was J and do a big journey in the July or August but it would have meant that we wouldn't be able to get back to base at all, so we'd be trapped. Had to go back to the base and we couldn't get back so we would have to have gone to somewhere else and wait for the first relief ship in October and it would have been a very, very long field trip. Anyway, that didn't in the end happen.

[0:17:29] Lee: Is it... before you move on to where you did go, you did go to Admiralty Bay, a bit more about Horseshoe, the attempts to relieve Horseshoe. Was there any sense of desperation when the ships couldn't get through the ice, do you remember the feeling on board?

Gibson: Yes, I think everyone was upset about it. I mean they had to change all sorts of field programmes, but I think there was a feeling of 'Well there's nothing we can do about it.' Obviously they couldn't get all the supplies in, I suppose it would have been possible for the people to go in because there was always two years supply anyway on the base. But we could have survived quite happily for another year but presumably they couldn't do the field work because the supplies weren't in, I don't know. You know the powers that be decided that the whole thing would change and just keep it as a met base I think with very little sledging or field work.

[0:18:24] Lee: Did they reduce the number of people?

Gibson: I think they reduced the number of people slightly and they didn't do anything like the field work that they were anticipating.

[0:18:36] Lee: Do you feel that there was any kind...it was a long time ago perhaps you weren't always there at the right moment but do you feel the Captains of those ships were under any kind of pressure to start to take a few risks to get in or was it always their decision?

Gibson: I don't...No I wouldn't have thought there was. I think it was much, I think in those days certainly people looked after their own, you know they weren't sort of...they did their own thing in a lot of ways and I think the Captains were very much their own masters and if they didn't want to go in, didn't feel they could go in they didn't. But I don't think they took any unnecessary risks or anything. No I'd say not.

[0:19:19] Lee: Tell me about Admiralty Bay because that's where you ended up.

Gibson: Yes, In the end they decided to send me to Admiralty Bay as an extra person, which was fine, I think I was the only extra one there. We did have though, we had a glaciologist there, we had a surveyor and a geologist. I knew that there was going to be some field work, we had 50 dogs 50 odd dogs. It was really what I was looking forward to I was a bit disappointed, initially, but in retrospect it probably was the best option. I probably would have liked to have gone to Hope Bay or somewhere but Admiralty Bay was ok and I knew one or two people there anyway, from the met school.

[0:20:06] Lee: So tell me about what you were doing during the year. What sort of things were you up to?

⁵ Base J Prospect Point 66°00'S, 65°21'W. 50 miles south of Argentine islands. Base opened in 1956 and closed at the end of 1958 season.

Gibson: Well I was doing, with Russ Thompson and 'Tink' Bell and Alan Sharman, I think there were four of us who were met. and so we did all the usual, same observations that we had done before and we did a lot of the other things because we had 50 dogs to look after, we had ourselves to look after and we had the back-up of the geologist and more the geologist and surveyor rather than the glaciologist, because the glaciology tends to be from the base.

[0:20:41] Lee: Can you give me a little thumbnail sketch of Admiralty Bay at that time?

Gibson: Yes, it was a nice base hut, quite a picturesque setting, nice bay which froze up of course for eight, nine months of the year I suppose. Climate wise not dissimilar to Deception I suppose, always seemed to be blowing, very windy base I suppose probably one of the more windy ones. What else about it? Remote, because we didn't have any contact with anyone else of course, there was no other bases no Argentine or any other bases that we could reach.

[0:21:31] Lee: Radio contact?

Gibson: Yes we had the usual couple of radio sets, quite often we could get to Stanley on voice but most of the observations and everything went out on the key. Which was something that I was slightly fortunate in because I had done a little bit of radio work in the Navy and I could, I knew the Morse code and I could send that but I was pretty rusty. But we rapidly learnt. I mean everyone who'd never done it before rapidly learnt to send off the night observations, but every one, you took turn about doing the met obs so your turn for overnight ones came probably once every four days or something if there were four people on the base and part of it was that after you had done the observation which I think was every three hours sometimes more frequently because of the IGY⁶. You went and started up the generator or maybe used the battery set and sent out the observations on the key. Fortunately that was repeated again the next day by the radio operator because in Stanley they would say you had a sort of heatwave and there was Sahara type conditions at times because we got the wrong figures because it was all done in the 5 figure code of course.

[0:22:54] Lee: Who was getting it wrong, were you sending the wrong...?

Gibson: No, you only had to make a mistake on one number on the group that would mean that the temperature was sort of 80 instead of 30 or something like that.

[0:23:08] Lee: So the observations were still being coded even as late as '58.

Gibson: Yes, yes, it was all sent, all of the met observations were, you coded those into 5 figure groups and anyone who was in met could look at those groups and could decide exactly what they meant. I mean it's quite simple really.

[0:23:27] Lee: So it wasn't a secret code as such?

Gibson: No, no it was the commonly used thing in UK and everywhere, a meteorological code which had, sort of main groups, first group was your position and so on, your second group was the, I dunno, your wind speed and wind direction and rain and all the different types of groups. That was, I mean, you got to know that pretty well, but you could look up

⁶ International Geophysical Year 1957-58, a period of global studies, 12 nations undertook to maintain stations in the Antarctic where studies were made of aurorae, cosmic rays, geomagnetism, glaciology, ionospheric physics, meteorology, seismology and gravity. The IGY was extended for a further year to July 1959 called the Year of International Co-Operation (IGC). IGY was timed to take place at a time of maximum sunspot activity.

the groups in the book anyway if you had less well known ones, cloud types and so on all had different numbers.

[0:24:04] Lee: And was it reassuring to think that there was somebody at Stanley that was checking your work?

Gibson: I think while it was reassuring, I mean obviously the radio operator sent it out again, the whole lot for the day. That was checked presumably, we sent it to Stanley and Stanley then I suppose collected them all in from the bases and then made a main one for the world, I suppose. This was also collected throughout the world.

[0:24:29] Lee: So how valuable was that information at that time. What use would it have been put to?

Gibson: We never really knew because we didn't have any flights or anything to worry about or to control and it was just statistics really. At the end of every month we did a, we had a sort of purge on averaging and summarising everything for the month and comparing with previous months and previous years and so on. So it was really just a statistical, and it was really only a very small part of the job. I mean, and even sometimes when people were off base somebody who wasn't a met man would do the observations. And probably do it quite competently.

[0:25:15] Lee: It may have seemed not particularly significant at the time, rather strangely 50 years later it's jolly significant.

Gibson: Of course, yes, yes.

[0:25:24] Lee: We all know I suppose the blow up about climate change and global warming. What was your reaction when you started reading about it in the early nineties?

Gibson: I don't know, I think that we knew that, I mean my opinion more than anything is that it's, you get these highs and lows and changes in climate but the period we have got records of are still so short that really it's not that significant. I feel that over a period of a thousand years or five hundred years it's just a normal cycle.

[0:26:01] Lee: Due to fluctuations?

Gibson: Fluctuations would normally happen; they probably are being affected by things that are happening now, pollution and so on. But I still think that the biggest part of it is to do with the normal cycles that weather goes through.

[0:26:20] Lee: But because of what you were doing 50 years ago it now comes back and chases you.

Gibson: Yes, at least you can look back on it and look at the records as they were. Unfortunately they don't go back that far really, certainly I mean, I suppose in Grahamland, what, the forties, maybe there were a few before⁷. Signy I think had some previous ones, but generally it was only since what, 60 years I suppose.

⁷ Following W.S Bruce's Scotia expedition 1903-04 to Laurie Island (South Orkneys) Bruce built a met station at his base Ormond House. It was afterwards gifted to the Argentinians in 1904 who continued met observations there and at their replacement base Orcadas, 100 years of continuous observations.

[0:26:47] Lee: Were you very conscious that it was in your first year of the International Geophysical Year that you really can't keep it, did you get reminders? Was it in your mind all the time?

Gibson: Yes, but not for any other reason other than we had extra special, you know they'd have a period of a month when there would be an extra observation, two observations instead of one in the period. And there would be on other things, like bird ringing and so on, there were special purges on things. We had a big skua⁸ ringing thing which I did on base.

[0:27:20] Lee: Before you come to that, why were you doing extra readings, what was the need for that?

Gibson: I don't know really, I suppose that, I mean that we never really knew why, we were just told that it was the IGY and that they needed to record more frequently.

[0:27:35] Lee: Now the ringing of birds was also at the behest of the IGY was it?

Gibson: Yes, well some of it, we did bird ringing as normal and it was again one of these things. Nobody told me that I should go and do bird ringing or I should go and do ice observations, you just decided that amongst yourselves that we really needed to do some bird ringing and it was almost a voluntary thing. Most people on base sort of looked after one thing and I did the bird ringing, I did some of the ice observations this thing for Don Hawkes. I said 'I'll have a go at that for you.' The things I think were decided quite a lot on base by the base leader. Not so much the base leader but he was particularly a person who would say really what you had to do. But between you, you decided that what we should do, we were all quite keen I think and...

[0:28:27] Lee: So you were ringing birds with no particular goal in mind?

Gibson: No, we knew there was not a great deal known about the movements of these birds. I mean skuas particularly, and we had a special IGY ring for the skuas and we knew if they returned the following year because they had different coloured thermoplastic rings and they had different colours and so on, so and other birds, some of the albatrosses, none that I ringed but, I never ringed albatrosses. But quite often they would turn up in museums or something or other the following year and so it's interesting to know where these birds went. We didn't do any penguins actually but we did counts sometimes on the rookeries, as best we could to get an idea, other bases did things. I mean there were other bases with biologists and so on. We did other things.

[0:29:28] Lee: Is there a technique to ringing a shag?

Gibson: There's a technique to catching skuas in that you build a hide out of an old packing case and sit in there for hours and hours with a bit of rope and a noose on the end and a bit of seal meat in the middle and hope that the skua is going to walk into it. You can pull it and catch the skua. But you probably only ring 5 or 6 a day, you might spend 3 or 4 hours down there and if you're lucky you might get 5 or 6. But again, most of this was only in the summer because there are very few birds over the winter, just one or two in the winter.

⁸ The Antarctic Skua, *Catharacta Antarctica*, otherwise the Brown Skua. They are powerful predatory birds and very territorial and will attack humans if they feel their nesting sites are being violated. Wing span 47-63 inches.

[0:30:02] Lee: and the ice observations, tell me a bit about how you went about that and how you actually defined the observation.

Gibson: It was purely a thing where you go up to an observation point which is usually a few hundred feet above the base somewhere, and sort of say 'We've got heavy ice' you estimate say 8/10 ice in this area. You know everywhere as far as the eye can see is fast ice or the ice in such and such is breaking up. I don't think there is any sort of formal way of doing it really. It was just really commenting on extent and condition of the ice, you know, pancake ice forming or 8/10 small floes or lots of icebergs or whatever.

[0:30:55] Lee: So it was a subjective observation really?

Gibson: Yes, yes and that all went to John Heap, whose son now does a lot of the broadcasts on the BBC. I don't know if you know John Heap⁹.

[0:31:06] Lee: So where was John, was he back at base?

Gibson: John, he was in the UK, I'm not sure what his ... He certainly wasn't a met man, I don't know what he was really but he was the one that we used to send all our ice obs to. I think he did other things obviously besides ice obs, but I don't know what.

[0:31:32] Lee: Apart from the occasional number error did you ever come across any surprises or unusual readings or unexpected data when you were doing your work, or exceptional or extreme conditions perhaps?

Gibson: No, we had some extreme conditions; we had some quite interesting things like solar halos and lunar halos which were quite spectacular at times. Nothing else really I don't think, we didn't have any particular extremes of anything. The thing is, quite a lot of the time in the winter it is just virtually blizzard conditions, if I remember rightly the average wind speed was about 20 knots over the whole year, so it wasn't very often that it was a nice clear day, we couldn't see anything so for half the observations we couldn't see any cloud anyway, even though it was there.

[0:32:24] Lee: How was morale during the bad weather conditions?

Gibson: I thought it was pretty good actually I don't think any... I mean there's always a lot to do. Even in the middle of the winter there's always tents to sew up and sledging stuff to sew and repair. The dogs actually were one of the main sources of comment and interest, all the discussions, I mean after the first month I suppose all the talk about pubs and wives, or not wives, girlfriends and so on slowly died down and we all began to talk about dogs, you know, [cross talk] about dogs and bitches. Certainly a lot of the... the one good thing about a sledging base is that a lot of the sort of talk and discussion and everything is based around the dogs.

[0:33:14] Lee: You had your own team didn't you, the Welshers?

Gibson: Mainly I think it was Dick, who was the geologist, and I had one team, and we had another team. We had two main teams and then we had a lot of spare dogs that just used to come into the teams, and at us and so on. So we...

⁹ John Heap CMG. Joined FIDS in 1950's, published his PhD thesis 'Sea Ice in the Antarctic' (1962) which incorporated data collected at FIDS bases. He described it as a record "worst seller" he sold 11 copies! He had a distinguished career and later became head of the Polar Regions section of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1975-1992.

[0:33:35] Lee: tell me about the Welshers, who was the lead?

Gibson: We had a lead dog who was quite an intelligent dog, quite a small one called Pepe, and because he was born in Wales, his mother had been with somebody in Greenland and the, Pepe's mother had been flown by *Sunderland* I believe from Greenland to Pembroke Dock and at Pembroke Dock she gave birth to the pups and Pepe was one of those pups. So it was a Welsh dog. So we called the team the Welshers.

[0:34:07] Lee: How did you take to dog management, dog handling?

Gibson: I took to it pretty well I think, I'd never had a dog before actually, of my own. But I always liked dogs and again it's one of these things you go out and do things with somebody who has done it the year before. Almost everything you did on the base you learnt from the people who had been there the year before, cooking and everything. Dog management was just a matter of picking it up from somebody else.

[0:34:43] Lee: Were there any manuals?

Gibson: There were a few books I suppose, that you could read but...

[0:34:47] Lee: Were they a co-operative team?

Gibson: Yes, they were quite a good team I think. I suppose they were competent I suppose they weren't up to the standard of some of the ones that did very long journeys but they were quite a good team. They worked well, we changed one or two and so on but yes, they were pretty good.

[0:35:05] Lee: What was your range from Admiralty Bay?

Gibson: Well we were restricted to King George Island, I don't know where we were actually on our way when we had the accidents we were probably going to be about 30-40 miles something like that from base, not very far. We regularly used to go across the bay to the other side on training things and so on which was probably about 10 miles away something like that I suppose.

[0:35:32] Lee: The function of the dog sledging was to do geology or geography or, what were you doing?

Gibson: We were doing geology; well the main trip we were doing was geology and surveying. Unfortunately that came to a sticky end when we... [Cross talk.]

[0:35:50] Lee: Do you want to talk about that now, shall we? [Cross talk.]

Gibson: Yes. OK, yes.

[0:35:54] Lee: I appreciate it's not always easy when it was such a long time ago. You were actually remarkably unfortunate in your time in the Antarctic because there were two separate fatal accidents. [Cross talk]

Gibson: We had three actually the year before¹⁰, not on my base, we were involved with radios and so on with that.

¹⁰ This relates to the accident in May 1958 when Stan Black, Dave Statham and Geoff Stride disappeared whilst sledging on the sea ice in Marguerite Bay from Horseshoe island Base.

[0:36:12] Lee: This is with Deception you mean?

Gibson: No, yeah, from Deception, the three who went out on the sea ice and every one was listening out on the radio for calls and so on and of course we were kept up to date on that.

[0: 36:23] Lee: Was Deception actually involved in that part of the distress signals?

Gibson: Only on the radio, I mean we were obviously very interested in what was going on and...

[0:36:30] Lee: I suppose the whole of the Antarctic were listening out?

Gibson: Oh yes, yes anybody with special radio schedules were listening and so on but we had that the year before, but with our two, one was a very unfortunate one. The other one probably could have been avoided.

[0:36:47] Lee: Well let's talk about Alan Gill¹¹ first of all, he was, well you tell me about it. What was he like, Alan Gill?

Gibson: I'd been with Alan in met school, very nice chap, a bit younger than me, we got on well. I think he was ex RAF, he was a climber as well he had done his National Service, I believe in the RAF Mountain Rescue. I never really, I think I might have done one trip with him when I did some work with a geologist on I think it was Livingstone Island. I think he was there with me then but you forget names, but he was a met man the same as I was. In fact I met his parents before we left Southampton and I'd only been at Admiralty Bay for a month or two when he went off to do an ice observation with Russ Thompson, who you've talked to. Went up the hill with a dog, and if I remember rightly the dog sort of brushed past them or that they slipped on an icy bank, Russ was perfectly OK, but then Russ went down to see what had happened to Alan because he'd banged his head presumably. So we all went up with sledges and so on and brought him back but there was nothing that could be done.

[0:38:16] Lee: Instant tears?

Gibson: I think probably yes, yes, yes.

[0:38:21] Lee: The sort of thing, I mean there's nothing you could do about that is there?

Gibson: No, no because, I think it was late April so all the ships had gone and everything, there was nobody could get us or do anything. So we had the problem of burying him and that sort of thing. Tink the chap who was killed later on and I actually made a very nice coffin for him, and of course Tink was killed a couple of months later as well.

[0:38:46] Lee: So you made a wooden coffin?

Gibson: But the trouble was it was very hard ice of course and we just couldn't get down, so we got down as far as we could, took us about a week I think, and just built a cairn on the top. Later on, I don't know whether you know about it, but it was 50 years ago last summer and I was negotiating with all sorts of people trying to get a memorial at Admiralty Bay for the two of them, well and for the two others that were killed before, which I succeeded in doing, with the Brazilians.

[0:39:20] Lee: So it's there now is it? The memorial is it there?

¹¹ **Correction**, it was not Alan Gill but Alan Sharman. Gill died in a Scottish nursing home in 2010.

Gibson: No, I started out just wondering what the condition of the graves was. I thought it would be nice for the 50th year, the 50th anniversary to see if one of the cruise ships which seem to go around all the while could perhaps go ashore and hold a little service or something. I wrote to a number of the cruise companies and they just weren't interested and so I then found out that it's now a Brazilian base. Not in the base hut but in the same area, and I wrote to the Brazilian ambassador in London. Eventually after a lot of correspondence, his secretary was very helpful, contacted Rio and they contacted their Antarctic lot and so on and I did actually succeed in getting this Memorial Mass held at the grave site in, I think it was June; it was June of last year, so it was a year ago.

[0:40:29] Lee: An event rather than a plaque?

Gibson: No, it was an event. They had a Memorial Mass; they sent me photographs which I've got here actually, to show to Russ.

[0:40:39] Lee: Who went from BAS or FIDS Club?

Gibson: No, it was in the middle of the winter.

[0:40:43] Lee: Right.

Gibson: I don't know whether you know, there is an airstrip there, I believe now, but I don't think they have any winter flights.

[0:40:50] Lee: So it was Brazilian?

Gibson: It was just a Brazilian base and in fact they e-mailed me the photographs, which is amazing really, considering the way communications were in my day compared with what they are now. They actually e-mailed me the photographs of the people standing at the grave site holding this little Mass.

[0:41:08] Lee: It first strikes you that it's quite a remarkable thing to achieve to persuade a foreign country which had no vested interest in BAS... [Cross talk, unintelligible.]

Gibson: Yes, yes I was quite chuffed in the end, because not having had any luck with the cruise ships I would have thought the cruise ships would be very chuffed to be able to take a few people ashore to do something like that. If I was on a cruise like that I would be quite happy to do that. But they weren't particularly; I don't really have an answer from any of them.

[0:41:35] Lee: You mentioned that you met Alan Gill's [incorrect, should be Alan Sharman's] parents, did you meet them again.

Gibson: No, I only ever met them beforehand, sort of saying goodbye, because he was on the same ship as I was going South and but 'Tinks' parents, 'Tinks' relatives, the other chap who was killed, I had contact with them.

[0:41:55] Lee: What was his proper name?

Gibson: Denis, Denis Bell, yes. Everyone knew him as 'Tink'

[0:41:59] Lee: Tell me about his... [Cross talk]

Gibson: 'Tink' and I, well there were two sledge teams going out, one surveying and one geologising. 'Tink' was going with the surveyor, Jeff Stokes, and I was going with 'Dick' Barton the geologist. We were going off to be a four man two dog teams, surveying and geologising. The glacier on the other side of the island a few miles away, we had to go up this to get on to the plateau of the island, and the geologist and I, 'Dick' Barton, Dick was late doing something or other so we were actually about half an hour or an hour behind the other sledge. When we got to the base of the glacier with our team, Jeff Stokes was coming down the glacier and saying that 'Tink' had been leading the sledge over a crevassed area and had gone down. Well he didn't know it was a crevassed area at the time he was leading the dogs because it was very steep and he'd gone down a crevasse. He did try to pull him up apparently, he got a rope on him and the dogs pulled him up. But apparently 'Tink' had attached the rope to his belt presumably because he was, might have been half conscious or couldn't get it anywhere else and he put it to his belt and apparently the belt came up only. And there was no reply when he called down so he came back a little bit to us. And we met him and we all went up, but unfortunately by that time it was a half blizzard blowing and we had a job finding the site of it. Although he had marked it clearly and taken bearings and everything and it was about, probably 12 hours before we found the site and there was no way that he would have survived. So that was it really.

[0:44:04] Lee: What sort of feeling pervaded the base after these events, did they change the whole mood of Admiralty Bay?

Gibson: I think it did to quite an extent, yes. Two was quite a big thing.

[0:44:18] Lee: I suppose there was also a feeling that there, 'But for the grace of God...'

Gibson: Yes, exactly, yes, yes.

[0:44:23] Lee: Was there an inquest into the accidents, I don't mean a medical inquest I mean was there a discussion about it?

Gibson: Yes, we had lots of radio contact with Stanley and so on about it, and we had to write statements and everything and then when the first ship came in, I think, about November, no, it might have been December. We had to go aboard and the Skipper, we had an interview with this captain, a write up we had to sign and so on really.

[0:44:55] Lee: So that was the inquest?

Gibson: Yes, I suppose the captain actually was qualified to do that. I suppose there was an investigation into it but I never heard of any results, and again really, I mean Bell had been, had done a year on a dog sledging base and I think he was probably, he did a bit of climbing and so on and so he was probably at fault in a way because he wasn't roped. I mean in my inexperienced self I would have been roped under the conditions but then again he didn't know there was a crevasse there. In retrospect he probably wasn't really trained enough. In those days I think, certainly we were not really trained at all in any rescues or anything.

[0:45:51] Lee: Do you feel that incident could have been avoided had there been better training before departure from UK?

Gibson: I think it probably could have done, yes, but how much training you need I don't know. I mean it would have to be pretty dense. It would have to be a month or two in Norway or something like that to actually achieve anything. I think you know, it's one of these things in those days people just picked up things, pretty well everything you did, from cooking I

mean nobody or very few of us could cook. Fortunately I'd been in small ships and couldn't sort of, knew a little bit about it, but most people had no idea and of course you just pick it up.

[0:46:31] Lee: It was the era of the plucky amateurs?

Gibson: yes it was, I mean it was, the whole thing was very amateur in many ways. We had professionals we had a professional meteorologist just as we had a professional geologist and professional surveyor. While even surveyors weren't that professional I don't think because they had just done a bit of surveying on occasions, but I mean considering the, how we were doing it we did a remarkable amount of work I think and we produced a lot of results.

[0:47:05] Lee: Do you think anything changed in BAS as a result of those two losses? Was there any change of plan or heart, or procedures?

Gibson: I don't know really because I wasn't particularly attached to, you know, I didn't hear much about it after my, after I came back. I went abroad straight away and really I didn't hear much about it until, I mean I knew things; it was the end of my time. Aircraft were beginning to come in, helicopters were being used more. I think after the Trans Antarctic¹² as well, mechanical sledges and Skidoos and so on all came in, in the few years after that and we were very, on the base we had absolutely no mechanical, at Deception we had a little tiny Ransome type of garden tractor, that was it. Nothing else in the way of mechanical, even the base lighting and really the diesels were there to send the radio transmissions and that was it. They were probably on for about six hours a day or eight hours a day but most of the time they were off. They weren't produced for our climate.

[0:48:20] Lee: So you mentioned that you knew 'Tink' Bell's parents, did you have contact with them?

Gibson: Yes, when I thought of this memorial thing, I asked somebody if they were in contact with any of the relatives and Alan Sharman's, I think he was an only son and nobody had heard anything about his people. But 'Tink' Bell's they had had contact with a brother he was I think a younger brother I'm not sure about that, and he also had a sister. His brother I found out was in Australia but the sister who was only about 10 or 12 when he was killed remembered him but not terribly well. She was very interested and her daughter and one of the, I think the other fellow's daughter as well was very interested and they always sort of wanted to know. I arranged to meet up with them about half-way a few months, about a year ago I suppose.

[0:49:26] Lee: Half-way around the world?

Gibson: No half-way between where they lived in, but the brother lives in Australia but daughter lives outside London somewhere and so we met actually in Chipping Norton or somewhere like that in the Cotswolds, half-way between her and us, for a pub lunch, Jean, the wife and I.

[0:49:52] Lee: What was the meeting like?

Gibson: it was very good actually, we got on extremely well and they were very interested because I took lots of photographs with me and various things like my diaries and things. They had been told so little about it, apparently 'Tink's mother had gone totally into her shell,

¹² The Commonwealth Trans Antarctic Expedition 1955-58.

she wouldn't even talk about it, I think the father as well. So they really knew nothing about the circumstances and I'm still in contact with her and the daughters as well. They were very interested in seeing things and one of the funny things was I had a photograph of us leaving Southampton and they said 'Oh look, that's my Mum' and there was this couple on the dockside there who I didn't know that was 'Tink's' parents and it was her mum. It was quite moving in a way and you know we still are in contact and hope that the brother might come over when we do this memorial in St Paul's. We are hoping he might come over.

[0:50:55] Lee: Tell me about the memorial in St Paul's.

Gibson: The Antarctic Trust the Antarctic Monument Trust which I am a Trustee of now.

[0:51:05] Lee: That's from Rod, that's the meeting this afternoon?

Gibson: Yes, that's the lecture this afternoon. They of course have been trying to contact as many of the relatives as they can and we have now, vide the plaque in St Paul's is going ahead. It's being made and it will be dedicated sometime in the spring, I think.

[0:51:29] Lee: To all those who....?

Gibson: To all those who, 28, who have died since the war and I hope the quite a few of the relatives will be there. Certainly I'm sure that 'Tinks' sister will be there with her daughter and niece, and obviously the people who were involved, Russ I expect will be there and various others who would have been involved. I mean that's only the first part of the Trust, the other part is a sort of memorial in Cambridge at Scott Polar¹³ and one in the South probably in Stanley both pointing through the earth at each other which you probably know about. But that's a year or two ahead hopefully; we are still trying to raise funds for those things.

[0:52:20] Lee: Do you receive as much support as you were hoping for, for all this?

Gibson: Sometimes I, I've only recently become a Trustee and I don't do anything like as much on it as the others do, Rod Rhys-Jones is the main instigator. There is quite a lot of interest at times but for instance, one of my things I've been doing is writing to all the shipping companies that have cruises and shipping companies that ship stuff out there, to all the suppliers to BAS, the people who make the tractors and so on. We are writing to anyone connected with supplying BAS, who supplied things in the old days, to see if they would donate something. I've had virtually no replies to any of them, shipping companies you just get nothing and I've written and I've got people to ask because I had names, you know 'Ask so and so' and we've had very little help from them. There's a lot of help from individuals, ex BAS people I think fairly supportive.

[0:53:30] Lee: Well, it's sad, even when it's expressed by the Fids, the degree of support for the Fids, because we are not talking about a large kind of family here.

Gibson: No, I really don't know, certain ones there is a lot of support for. The average run of Fids I don't know, FIDS Club I think, the BAS Club is I think very supportive. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the people responsible for the Antarctic Sector, They are very supportive. I don't know; I'm really; I'm not really sort of into it enough. I'm hoping to get some more knowledge of it but I really became a Trustee I think only because I was involved

¹³ Scott Polar Research Institute.

with the memorial thing for these on the base. I'd like to get, I am getting involved more. After this I'm going to the lecture to help set that up.

[0:54:41] Lee: Just taking, just for a moment, taking the personalities out of all this. I went to the Cambridge conference this last September and I was surprised to learn that there had only been 28 deaths since the war. It seems to me there was the potential for a lot more because there's so little training.

Gibson: Yes, I think the thing is, most of them were fairly old, you know a fairly long time ago.

[0:55:09] Lee: One in recent years, and that was the leopard seal one.

Gibson: That was the leopard seal one, yes, and of course the thing was there were very few people down then. I mean the base was sort of 7 or 8 people, some of the bases had 10 or 15 but not like bases these days where there can be some 50, 60 people at times I believe, more.

[0:55:32] Lee: Percentagewise it was quite...?

Gibson: Percentagewise I think it was probably quite high. I mean even 28 out of, they reckon 2,000 people that served on the bases since the 40's, well 28 out of 2000 is quite high, but if you take 28 out of the, probably very many less in the period say '48 to maybe '65,70 it would probably be a much higher percentage. I suppose the other thing is a lot of the deaths now tend to be linked to air crashes maybe or mechanical things and so on, and I suppose also there wasn't all that many people in the field. A lot of people on the bases were static, totally.

[0:56; 23] Lee: Ok, you were involved on the *Shackleton* in November '57 when it dived with death weren't you? Tell us about that story. There's some lovely headlines in the newspapers in your cuttings here. 'Radio Drama, boats slung out, dumping cargo, Antarctic SOS, ship sinking.'

Gibson: We had actually on board; I think he was a Daily Telegraph reporter who was on board, it happened on a Saturday night and he was so frustrated because he didn't get anything out to daily papers or something because of the weekend. Of course they were limited to the radio, the airtime I suppose. That was a peculiar thing really how it happened and I don't know; nobody really knows I don't think but we had been stuck in the ice for a few days after coming from Signy¹⁴ and eventually got out on a Saturday evening and were belting alongside the pack ice. There must have been a big lump sticking out and it scraped down the side of the ship and cut a quite big hole in the side¹⁵. I think it was about midnight on a Saturday night and half of them were playing bridge and so on, half of them were in bed. I don't think anyone realised for the first half hour or so until we started getting quite a big list. Then it appeared to be a lot more serious and so distress signals were sent out and so on which I think were picked up. I don't know who by but the *Protector* was in South Georgia. Of course the *Protector* was the oldest ship in the Navy and I think they had to get up steam, which took about 15 hours or something to get up steam; it was then flat out at 12 knots or something. She set off; she was 3 or 4 days away. Fortunately the weather wasn't too bad, bit of a swell but not too bad, a couple of days later a whale catcher came down, the *Southern Lily*, there's a picture of the *Southern Lily* there [shows photograph] she stood by in case we had to abandon ship. But I think the main thing was, we, everyone, the crew and all the Fids

¹⁴ Signy Island, South Orkneys, FIDS Base H. 64°43'S, 45°36'W.

¹⁵ Position of *Shackleton* at time of the accident 60° 23'S 45°26'W .

spent a very wet and cold night in the hold trying to put a patch on this thing one way or another and getting, dumping cargo so we could get rid of the list if possible to get to the hole. Which we did, really succeeding in the end but I think we weren't far off, just about 4 or 5 degrees off possible capsizing I think at the time. But I mean, it all turned out OK in the end.

[0:59:19] Lee: So you did patch the hole did you?

Gibson: No, what happened was we did actually get some canvas and stuff on it and stopped the flow.

[0:59:26] Lee: On the inside or outside?

Gibson: I think we tried to get it on the outside if I remember rightly; we sort of pulled it round from the other side of the ship. Can't remember exactly what they did but then we did try to get boxes and things on the inside, normal ship, trying to save the ship thing. Then the *Protector* arrived and they had divers on board and they came over and put a better, some sort of temporary patch but a better one. All of the Fids and I think some of the crew were taken off on to the *Protector* where we lived in the wardroom for about a week and the ship, in company with the *Protector* made their way back to South Georgia. There was a floating dock in South Georgia which took catchers but we were a bit too big. They had to off-load pretty well everything to get into the dock which they managed to do, here's a picture of the plate they were putting on, in there. There was a bit of a, in retrospect it sounded worse than it was. I think at the time we didn't realise it was as serious as it was but nobody was particularly sort of worried, I don't think at the time. We had the boats out and people were dashing down below to get their cameras to put in the boat, that sort of thing which we do, but nobody was sort of panicking or anything. The Fids all behaved perfectly well.

[1:00:56] Lee: The Evening Standard headline was rather worse than the reality?

Gibson: I think it probably was actually, I mean it wasn't you know it was quite dramatic thing I suppose in the UK at the time. But it was radio and everything, quite big headlines I believe.

[1:01:12] Lee: Because you were in the Fids of the 50's you've had a huge career since which we haven't got time to go into here. You left in 1960 and you ended up being a diamond prospector particularly I notice in the Amazon somewhere?

Gibson: It's a rather amusing thing in that when I came back and as I said earlier I was going to go into the Rhodesian Police. They said I was too old and at the same time they were advertising for West Africa for people in security, so I thought you get seconded you actually, in the security side you actually become an Inspector in the Sierra Leone police as well as a sort of part time one and worked in the company. So I thought, well, I'll try that and I got turned down for that and then about a month later they wrote to me and said would I be interested in prospecting, so I said 'Oh yes, I'll give it a go.' So I went out there and moved around a bit and did various jobs, went on to Ghana an associate, or the same company, different area. Worked my way up, a few years later became chief prospector for Ghana. When I went to the confidential file drawer, I needed to look up my past record, I looked at my recruitment record and it appeared to me pretty obvious that they thought I was a metallurgist rather than meteorologist [Both laugh.] Anyway as it happened I turned out to be the first non-geologist to become Chief Prospector. So it just shows you how fate, sort of, or mistakes are made.

[1:02:49] Lee: I usually wind up by asking people how they rate their Antarctic experiences in terms of their life experiences. Usually it comes out on top, in your case you've done so much else since all over the world but I wonder....

Gibson: I think it would have been amongst the sort of two things really I suppose that would be the Antarctic experience and possibly, I think when I got made Chief Prospector I was quite chuffed with that and that was quite a good experience although it didn't last that long, not in Ghana anyway.

[1:03:25] Lee: So, here we are 50 years later you've come to a Fids reunion, do you go to reunions for any of the other bodies?

Gibson: No, we still, in fact I've only just come back from visiting a wife from Ghana. We keep in contact with a few people that we were abroad with, but this is only the reunion sort of thing I think. We used to have Ghana reunions, Ghana and Sierra Leone company reunions but they fizzled out several years ago. And now a few of us just keep in contact but nothing like a reunion.

[1:04:00] Lee: It's been lovely, thank you very much indeed Ken.

Gibson: Thank you very much.

Possible Extracts:

- FIDS selection process. [0:02:25]
- At meteorological school, Stanmore. [0:03:46]
- Lack of survival training by FIDS. [0:05:19]
- Deception Island, living on an active volcano. [0:06:32]
- Getting on with the neighbours. [0:07:59]
- Geological observations in a flooded caldera. [0:11:06]
- Change of base, failed relief in a bad ice year. [0:13:43]
- On spot decisions, FIDS or ship's captain. [0:18:36]
- Moving to Admiralty Bay. [0:19:19]
- The meteorological 5 figure code. [0:20:31]
- Met obs, usefulness and relevance to climate change. [0:24:29]
- Bird ringing for IGY. [0:27:20]
- Sea ice observations and their relevance. [0:30:02]
- Dogs and sledge dog teams. [0:33:14]
- Antarctic accidents, Alan Sharman. [0:36:47]
- The frustrations of organising a memorial service. [0:38:46]
- Antarctic accidents, Denis 'Tink' Bell. [0:41:35]
- The amateur approach to accident training. [0:46:31]
- Meeting the family of the deceased. [0:48:20]
- The Antarctic Monument Trust, becoming a trustee. [0:50:55]
- Frustrations of a fund raiser. [0:52:20]
- The *Shackleton* accident 1957. [0:56:23]
- Post FIDS, becoming a diamond prospector in Africa. [1:01:12]

[ENDS]