

Stephen Holdich

**Edited transcript of an interview with Stephen Holdich, conducted by Jaap Verdenius, on the 8th February 1993. (Possibly at Stephens house- with background noises).**

**Transcribed by:** Mike Dixon, completing May 2020.

**BAS Archive ref:** AD6/24/3/25

Transcribers use of Symbols in text:

'-' denotes short pause, '~' unintelligible, '.....' speech trailing off.

**Notes:** The recording is truncated at start and end, appearing to fade-in already commenced, and simply going silent at the end.

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Stephen: ..... trouble is you're seeing it at its worst time really.

[00.00.00] Jaap: I suppose it's winter?

Stephen: Oh yes it's pretty grim isn't it really.

[00.00.10] Jaap : I don't know, it's not that bad I think. Sometimes it's quite fully .... but ....

Stephen: Some days alright but it's very overcast you know we get a lot of cloudy days specially today, it gets a bit grey and, a bit grey and dull. Should be off skiing somewhere in Switzerland, you know with the sun shining.

[00.00.50] Jaap: Mountaineering ?

Stephen: Yeah mountaineering that's right [laughs]. I've done a bit of that over the years.

[00.00.57] Jaap: Is that how you got involved with the Expedition?

Stephen: Actually why I joined the Antarctic Survey was, I knew the Survey existed but my parents went to - because I lived in Cambridge at the time, my parents went to an open-day at Cambridge headquarters. They looked - had a good look round the exhibits and then they asked the, one of the personnel managers I think there if they could forward an application form to me. I was interested in that and I filled out the application form, not particularly thinking that I would have the right qualifications for the job anyway.

Yes, about a month later I got an interview, and went through the basic procedures, medicals, etc, and I had a couple of interviews, a trade test, because I was going in as an engineer so you have to be able to do the job. They give you a written examination and then they give you a trade test. About I think about three weeks later I got a telegram, telling me I'd got the job. I was a bit shocked actually.

It's quite something to go down there I think, to be chosen to go down there, I think it's quite a privilege actually. Then I started work with them in about June, July 1979, and I worked at

the headquarters there for about three months. You receive your equipment, you go over that, you go on various climbing expeditions up in Derbyshire and the Lake District.

This is all to do with training and they have various conferences where you get to meet all the other base members, y'know who you are going to be with for the next two or three years.

So it's all very exciting, very interesting, you learn a lot, and then I joined the ship down here at Southampton. I think it was the 19th November it sailed, for ... well we sailed for North America for a start because we went over to Jacksonville in Florida because on the way down, the ship pays various sort of goodwill visits. It started off in Jacksonville Florida and then to Rio de Janeiro to take on supplies and bunker (ships fuel) and then we went down to Argentina and then from Argentina to Falkland Islands.

Then we started our various base reliefs in places like Faraday Island, Signy Island, South Shetland Islands, South Georgia, and then eventually I think about seven months later, you actually get to your base where you're actually going to go. It's quite a trip, it's sort of what ... 15,000 miles it's the other side of the world so, it's quite a voyage really.

It's great fun on the ship as you can imagine. There's about, I would say about sixty other people travelling with you apart from the crew, this is just base members because the Survey operates five bases in the Antarctic so there's a lot of personnel going down there for the summer, just for the summer, and the long term people like myself who were going down there for two years. Visiting these various places on the way down, it's quite an experience. Great fun.

Anyway, eventually you get to your base, it is quite a shock, because it's .... you are a bit out of things for quite a while because it's something that you're not used to. You're not used to the conditions, particularly on my job I'm getting used to working in the cold and things that happen in the cold - vehicles break down, etc. It takes you quite a long time to come to grips with the situation you've been put in. I would say it must have been possibly even a year before you really come to terms with it, and you begin to understand what to do at a certain time and what not to do at a certain time. By the end of the two years you've gained a great deal of experience about how things operate down there.

With all the other base members that you work with, because you all work with a team, even though you are individuals and are skilled in your own right, you also need other people to give you a hand now and then.

[00.06.47] Jaap: Can you give me an example of what kind of things you had to come to terms with ?

Stephen: It's coming to terms with particularly my field with things like diesel engines and petrol engines that are operating at minus 30, minus 40 degrees. You get a lot of problems with fuel, fuel pollution, ice getting into the fuel and actually just electrical problems because you know at that temperature electrical components don't work properly at all. So you've always got to be on top of this sort of thing. You remove certain parts, because if you don't remove those sort of parts, you know they'll freeze up solid and when you come to start the vehicle next time if you haven't removed them there's gonna be a big job to get it to go again.

So what I always remember one of the particular Sno-cats, I always used to remove the carburettor and keep it in the base. Because I knew that if I wanted to start it up in an emergency, it would be quicker to fit the nice clean carburettor on to that vehicle maybe take me twenty minutes or so, I knew the vehicle would start rather than spending maybe two or

three hours removing that, cleaning it, getting it in good working order again, putting it back on and then hopefully it will start.

Things that may take you a while at the start you do save time in the long run.

It's just various things like that - batteries have to be removed, you can't leave a battery on a vehicle at those sort of temperatures, it will just disintegrate.

So every time you want to start a vehicle, you gotta take a new topped up battery out there. It's the little things that are the most important. What else can I say?

Of course starting a vehicle out there is quite a task in itself because at those temperatures even though we use special lubricants, if you take the sump plug out, at minus forty or so, you remove the sump plug and no oil will come out, because the oil is completely set solid. Now there's no way a starter will turn that engine over to get that engine to start. So what we have is a large Andrews which is a large Andrews heater which is a blow heater and this burns aviation fuel because all our vehicles run on aviation fuel because diesel solidifies so it's no use to us at all so we have to use kerosene and this heater burns kerosene as well.

We have the two pipes going underneath to the sump and we set this heater going for about two to three hours and it will heat the oil up enough so you can start and when you turn the key the starter will turn the engine over and hopefully if all the fuel system is clean the engine will start. To start a vehicle it's not just jump in the cab turn the key away you go, it can be two or three hours before you get the vehicle going.

Not so bad in the summer time when the temperature is sort of minus five or so, you can possibly start the vehicle quite easily then. Of course that's quite a luxury, you only get that maybe two months of the year. The rest of the year you have to go through this procedure. It can be quite a task and of course all our vehicles are kept outside, there's no way we can keep them in the base, because the base is eighty feet under the ground.

We do have a garage down in the base but we can only get one vehicle down there at time and it's quite a task to get it down there anyway. So if something major does go wrong with a vehicle, we do try to get the vehicle down there. Otherwise all the work's got to be done on the surface and that can be very uncomfortable, very uncomfortable indeed. You're working with big heavy gloves on all the time. If you take your gloves off, you can do the odd nut or bolt up but your hands start to stick to the metal and you just tear your fingers to pieces after a while. Your hands get very cold - off with the gloves, do one bolt up, back on with the gloves, let your hand warm up a bit and then do another one.

So everything down there takes time and everything down there is so much more difficult.

[00.12.20] Jaap: How do you start the engine when you are out on a field trip?

Stephen: If we go on a field trip, we take one of the bigger vehicles with us apart from the skidoos. Even the Alpine Skidoos can give you a lot of trouble. When I was down there I made a point of always carrying a spare carburettor, because that's one of the - the biggest problem is carburettors; Because they just ice over, you get ice between the plates so we always used to carry a clean carburettor in a tin kept underneath the seat so if you had a problem with the carburettor you knew you had a problem straight away, the engine would stop or start to misfire.

It's only two bolts, quickly change the carburettor and the two cables, put the new carburettor and away it goes. Then in the evening, when you're inside your tent, you can - you have got

plenty of time in the evenings it's nice and warm. Strip the carburettor down, we always used to send a repair kit with the carburettor, rebuild the carburettor and your ready for the - if you have a problem the next day.

Before any of the people go out on a field trip, I teach them how to do this. During the winter months when there is no field trips going at all, to prepare for the summer season ahead.

We showed them how to strip carburettors, change the plugs, etc, so when they are out in the field they can do these jobs which obviously you have to be able to do.

The bigger vehicles we have to take, if we want to take one of those out in the field, we have to take an Andrews heater with us, we have to take large amounts of fuel to run the heater and the vehicle, and we also have to take a generator with us because we need produce electrical power to run the Andrews heater.

So you've already got a sledge full of fuel, heater and generator so it's quite involved so if you're out in the middle of the field, you start your generator up to drive the Andrews heater, to blow hot air onto the sump to get that vehicle going. If everything's right, not a problem.

It would be very dangerous to go out on a long field trip without taking any of this equipment with you, because the temperatures can drop from being a nice beautiful day, minus ten or so, it can drop to minus 40 within a few hours. It's a very unforgiving environment unless you are prepared for it. If you prepare well there's not a problem, but if you don't prepare well then you're going to run into trouble.

[00.15.29] Jaap: They call it the real Antarctic ?

Stephen: Yeah, it is the real Antarctic yes, I think Halley Bay is the farthest south base that the British Government operate and it's the only base that is operated in the situation where it's on a floating ice shelf, the actual base is eighty feet under the ice, it's on a floating ice shelf, and the nearest civilisation is possibly South America which is about two and a half thousand miles away.

So there you are with eighteen other people, and you're completely cut off from the rest of the world and the ship can only get there possibly two months out of the year and that's only if the ice would allow the ship to get in there to relieve the base, so it's the real Antarctic yes.

[00.16.26] Jaap: You said, after a time on a field trip you get sort of ... neglective toward dangerous situations ?

Stephen: Yes you do, I think when you are twenty, twenty one, twenty two like most of the age there, I suppose I was twenty two there. Most people are aged between that age and say thirty I think the oldest person, you're young, you're enthusiastic, you don't really register danger after a while and you become very oblivious to the dangers, you know they are there, you live with it all the time, and I think because you live with it all the time, even on base there's dangers, there's just as much danger on the base as there is being say a hundred miles away from the base on a field trip, because if you have a large blow and you can easily get lost in the base perimeter.

As I mentioned before, when you have a what's called a white-out or a blow, and it might blow constant sixty knots for two weeks solid, but we still have to do things outside. Fuel has got to be fetched in, if you get lost in that base perimeter you may be only a hundred yards from the shaft entrance which lets you into the base, but you might never be able to find it, because you just lose all sense of direction.

It's the same out in the field, if you have a blow we stop immediately and put up tents and wait until that blow is gone. Then we are being very careful because we know the dangers there but other times when you're in say crevasses or you're crossing a pressure ridge or scaling a small mountain cliff or ice cliff. The dangers are there but you tend to ignore the danger I suppose, you put it to the back of your mind, because you always want to find out what's over the other side of that hill or whatever.

I suppose you get used to it and you just - you become very oblivious to it really. It's a difficult thing to explain really because I think you're used to living with danger anyway because you're on the base floating in the South Atlantic, on an iceberg, basically that's what you're doing and you're living with that all the time so any extra other bit of danger or risk doesn't register too much because you're already in a precarious situation.

If you said to somebody 'Oh ok I want you to live for two years on a floating ice shelf, down in the Weddell Sea in the Antarctic two and a half thousand miles from civilisation with temperatures of minus sixty and winds up to a hundred and fifty knots, I mean most people just tell you to 'Don't be ridiculous'.

I think because you already accepted that so the rest of it is - you know you're oblivious to it really. You get used to it, simple as that, I think you get used to it.

You get used to being careful, you know you've got your mountaineering equipment on whenever you're out on the field, so you are pretty prepared for it. We train for this during the winter. We do a lot of rope work, we've got all our safety equipment up to speed, all in good shape.

All your food, etc, all your fuel supplies, we put all this together during the winter months so when we do go out in the field in the summer time, whatever we can do we've already done, because it's too late when you're out on the field if you've forgotten something, or something is broken, if you can't repair it then you have to forget about and do your best really.

So we prepare as much as we can but you are working in quite dangerous areas. There has been incidents over the years, people have got in trouble, some people have got in some serious trouble. It's not something that bothers you too much, we all train for rescues, pulling people out of holes, etc. It's something that you accept.

The year that I had on my first years, we lost a base member, unfortunately another one was seriously injured. It was unfortunate, and it was at the very beginning of my two years down there, I'd only been there about a month and a half. I won't go into the accident because it was such an unusual situation, but it happened and we all had to come to terms with that very quickly and the worst aspect about it was it was our base commander.

I'd got to know him quite well, because I had met him at Cambridge several months earlier and you are working with these people all the time very closely. One minute he is there, and next minute he's not. It was a terrible situation but it's a situation you have to come to terms with.

We continued that year as best we could and we were short-handed on the base for a start which made life very difficult, but you come out of it, you recover from it at the end of the year it was a successful year at the end of the year as far as the work, etc, was concerned and the base moral improved over the winter months.

We all took that risk - you all accept that risk. You're all doing something you enjoy doing ..... so what !! [laughs]

Because you can be run down in the street, can't you, just the same as you can be get into trouble down there.

We all take risks in our everyday lives, we ride on trains, we fly on planes, we drive cars, we play sports even. Everything carries risk, so I don't look at it in that respect really.

[00.24.30] Jaap: Was there a funeral ?

Stephen: We did have a funeral, it was .... and the person in question was.... because of the situation we were in, the ship had already left, as I say I think it was about a month or seven weeks or so. So the ship was well on its way back and would have been very difficult, even probably too dangerous to come back again.

We had .... the parents were requested to .... we buried the particular person at sea. That was the way they wanted it dealt with. A difficult thing to undertake but it was carried out, yes.

The other person who was seriously injured had damaged his neck. Because we have a Doctor on base and a full surgery, he was - made quite a quick recovery. I think he's still got a bit of a limp but I haven't seen him for many years so I don't really know but I think he made a quick recovery.

But, yeah, it was a difficult situation and I still think about it, you always do I think, because I think it was somebody, once you get to know them and you get used to them and all of a sudden they are not there, it's quite a shock.

[00.00.00] Jaap: How did you all get along, there were 16 persons on base ?

Stephen: On the normal base there is 18 people. That is the usual personnel on the base. That's a mixture of scientific staff, support staff like myself, which is made up obviously of chef, engineers, electricians, a doctor, there's always a doctor on each base. Then you have your various scientific disciplines, there's usually 18 people on this particular base. It varies from base to base.

We all get on reasonably well. Because you are living in close quarters, obviously from time to time when you get very uptight with people. There was often a scuffle or a disagreement, because whenever you're with a group of people, you're going to disagree and everybody's got their own point of view.

The worst time of course was at the weekends, we also used to work Saturday's and Sunday was a rest day and there was always the problems with the weekend because then people had more time to sit about. When you're during the week you've got your own job to get on with so you don't really have a great deal of contact with the base members apart from breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Saturday and Sunday was always - could be a problem. We always used to have a good drink in the evening. There was never any trouble, the two years I spent there, there was only one scuffle and that was a very minor, minor affair. There were a few arguments but then whenever you put people close together like that you're going have difficulties, because personalities clash don't they?

Some people liked to have their own way, [laughs], simple as that. But as I say the two years I spent down there I can only remember one sort of thing that could have got out of hand and that was dealt with pretty quickly. Other than that no, surprisingly not actually. I thought that would be a problem but no, it wasn't at all which is quite surprising really.

[00.29.14] Jaap: What kind of contacts did you have with the outside world ?

Stephen: When I was down there, this was before - today I believe they have satellite communications, where you just pick up a telephone and they've got a satellite dish down there you can speak to anybody in the world. In 1979 when I was down there, the only communication was by radio to, either we used to speak to other bases like the South African base or the German base which is not far away, or one of our other bases which is Rothera station or Faraday, but their main communication was with Port Stanley, Falkland Islands.

Every - I think it's three times a day the radio operator was in communication with radio with Port Stanley because they receive all our technical information on the weather. It all goes out in code.

So three times a day they would be in communication. If they can make voice communication it was passed by voice, if they couldn't do that it went out on the teleprinter, and if the communications were really poor, it went out on Morse, because it's all on code.

Obviously they used to like to do it either on voice or on the teleprinter, because that just made life a lot easier.

But other than that pretty limited actually, because the only people you can speak to really are other bases in the Antarctic. We used to have regular communication with people, I don't think really they had any contact with anybody in South America as such maybe ~~ there would have been people you could have called upon but we would have had to, if there had have been a problem you'd have just had to pass it on to another base and obviously down the chain, it would have eventually got to somebody to give us a hand.

So communications are very limited actually. If the weather was bad sometimes we couldn't make any communication, it just depended really on the conditions.

They had a very extensive communications radio room down there. The latest technology at the time and I say now, I think they have satellite telephones so all you do now is just pick up the telephone and call Cambridge HQ.

[00.32.14] Jaap: Did you get any news somehow ?

Stephen: Yes I used to - you were allowed two hundred words a month, either way, I could send two hundred words to my parents,

{(third persons voice, female) 'usually it was telling me how much washing you had to bring home .... '} [laughs]. Background household noises.

You were allowed this allotment, they were allowed two hundred in and you were allowed two hundred out. That was every month and that used to go out on the teleprinter through Port Stanley and then they would send that on to Cambridge. So that was something.

Interesting.

You always looked forward to getting your two hundred words because you didn't have any mail of course. You can't receive any mail, the only time we used to get mail was if there was a ship, sorry if there was a plane coming in, in the summer before the ship, they may carry some mail for you.

Other than that it was just the ship and the whole years mail used to come on the ship. So when the ship came you had quite a bit of mail to catch up with.

It didn't really bother you too much ... you enjoyed the bits of information you got because there's no television no radio. All you do is you have music and we used to receive the BBC world service quite a lot, when the conditions are good enough we could pick that up quite well actually, so we used to listen to that so you could pick up on the news, what was happening in the world, but it didn't bother you too much really, you were down there and you weren't really interested in it. It seemed light years away [laughs].

[00.34.23] Jaap: How did you feel about the continent constantly demolishing your instruments, your vehicles ?

Stephen: Yes. What you did, you had a job to do and that was to keep everything going because at the end of the day, the most important thing is, you are a support staff to support the scientific staff who are down there, that is your job, that is your function. You kept things going the best you could and that is your job. At the end of the two years you leave the base, you've done your job so that's all that matters.

The vehicles were every six or seven years a vehicle was taken away anyway, they were either scrapped if they were no good, or they may have been brought back later overhauled. But your function is to keep things going to support the scientific studies that were going on down there.

What sort of condition the vehicles were in is irrelevant really because along as you've done your job and got things going to the best of your ability, and everything functions properly that is your job done. You don't get any extra marks for having a nice shiny vehicle. As long as the vehicle worked and did its job, because that's all your down there for is to - the main reason for the base being there is for scientific study. As you are on the support staff your job is to do all your best to make life a little bit easier for everybody else.

[00.36.34] Jaap: What makes you go back there ?

Stephen: What makes me go back there ?

It's been a long time since I've been there, I left there in 1983, after - I did do my two year contract, and then I came back, worked at Cambridge headquarters for about six months. Went back there again for the summer season, to rebuild the base. It's 1983 since I was there last and ever since then I have always, it's always on my mind quite honestly, I've always thought about it, because you always look at the good times never look at the bad times, and you always remember the good times. I don't know it's just a fascination with the place. I would hope to think that I will go down there again one day. Now that I've had time to think about it - I have had time to take it all in.

I think I would enjoy a visit to there, maybe if it's only for a summer or maybe for a winter again, I don't know. I enjoyed the solitude of the place, I enjoyed the - there's a certain beauty about the place as well, it's unpolluted, you feel alive there it's a very difficult thing to describe. The air is so clear, it's cold yes but on a sunny day it can be invigorating. It's like a frosty morning when you get the very hard frost and the very sunny day, it makes you feel invigorated. I don't know, it's just an interesting place, what else can I say, it is the most unusual place I've ever been to.

I always said when I left there I'd like to go back there one day. Hopefully that will happen. I hope so.

[00.39.05] Jaap: What did you like best about the place ?

Stephen: What did I like best about the place? That's a difficult question.

A difficult question. I think you could answer that in several ways. I enjoyed working with some very interesting people, the characters that were down there with me, the other base members, they were fascinating some of them to be with, we all had a great time. We all got on very well indeed. I learned a great deal.

I learned a lot about my job and a great deal about other people's jobs and some of the jobs such as meteorology and talking to the various people down there. The scientists was fascinating and I perhaps would never have learned this if I hadn't gone down there quite honestly. It's a difficult one again to answer really.

What else can I say?

[00.40.29] Jaap: Ok?

Stephen: Is this any good? Is this any use to you, is it? As I was saying, it's a difficult place to describe because as I say I've shown various pictures and I've shown my cine-film to people, and a lot of people have never heard of the Antarctic, never heard of the Falkland Islands before the Falkland Islands war. You say to people you've lived on a base for two years, with eighteen other people, two and a half thousand miles from the nearest civilisation, people just can't take that in.

[00.41.27] Jaap: Is it difficult to describe the scale ?

Stephen: It is very difficult to describe the scale of the place as well. It's a huge place. It's a lost continent. There's a whole continent down there locked, well it used to be many millions of years ago connected to South America and South Africa and it split away over many millions of years. It used to be a tropical landscape because obviously it must have been for coal to be down there. There's vast amounts of coal and minerals.

It's a huge continent locked in ice. In some places the ice is up to a depth of sort of six miles deep. So there's obviously - the place is absolutely enormous, and you feel such a speck there, such a small person in all this enormity. In the winter of course, the continent literally doubles in size because the sea freezes over and all the sea round the continent freezes over and the continent is twice the size as it was before.

If you could imagine 98% of the worlds fresh water if you take all the lakes and all the rivers and all the streams in the rest of the world, 98% of the worlds fresh water, and those streams include the Arctic as well, because that's fresh water. Some of that would be fresh water, 98% of the worlds fresh water is in Antarctica. The ice is water, fresh water. That gives you some idea of the scale of the place and again it's difficult to explain the size of it to anybody.

I mean it's difficult to explain the environment to anybody, to mention you worked in minus fifty degrees centigrade, and stripped down vehicles in that sort of temperature outside, most people would find that very difficult to believe, but that's what you have to do.

You are out in the field, I can remember once being out in the field, on a field trip we started off at quite a reasonable temperature, it was about minus ten or so, and that evening it dropped down to minus forty and I can always remember just shivering all night long, because it was so cold, even though we had the thermos on full blast, it was still cold.

Again it's just those little things, the idea of being in a tent at minus forty degrees is a difficult thing for people to accept. Yes it is a difficult thing, a very difficult thing to describe unless you've been there [laughs].

This is why you'd like to go to these reunions, the BAS Club, etc, because you know you meet people, pals you worked with or they worked on other bases and you can have a good old chat when you go over the good old times and things you did and it all comes flooding back again, you know the memories and it's very interesting. That's why I keep in touch with all these people.

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