

COLIN KYNASTON

Edited transcript of interview with Colin Kynaston, interviewed by Jaap Verdenius in 1993.  
BAS Archives AD6/24/3/34. Transcribed by Allan Wearden, September 2020.

Kynaston: These old people had so little in their lives just sitting here all the time so, even though it was just for two years it was a major part of my life, it was a big adventure for me!

[0:00:14] Verdenius: Was it just two years?

Kynaston: two winters, two consecutive winters. The *Bransfield* was late in being commissioned so we set sail it was the 3rd or 4th of January and I got to base just before my 23rd birthday, and I stayed for a year at Argentine Islands, which is now Faraday, and then I went down to Adelaide, which is now closed, down there on the other side of Adelaide Island at Rothera now, and I spent a winter there and also two or three months down at Fossil Bluff.

[0:01:02] Verdenius: How did you get to go?

Kynaston: With the British Antarctic Survey. For as long as I can remember I always wanted to have to do something adventurous just like that, and one of the subjects I studied at university was geography and I went on an expedition to Greenland in 1968 which was studying physical geography. And the leader of that expedition, the professor, he had been in the Antarctic and he's still going down to the Antarctic now; he's professor in Edinburgh I forget his name...David Sugden David Sugden and Chappers Clapperton, and they're still going down to the Antarctic, and he suggested I go. He proposed my name and gave me the address to write to, and also the British Antarctic Survey recruiting men used to come round the university recruiting, so I just applied for a job. It seemed an adventurous thing to do after university so I applied for it and spent two winters down there.

[0:02:22] Verdenius: And also you had already been to Greenland?

Kynaston: I'd already been to Greenland yes, so it gave me a taste for expedition life and I enjoyed it. Obviously David Sugden must have given me a good reference because I was accepted for it.

[0:02:36] Verdenius: And you already had an idea of what it was like?

Kynaston: I already had. Well when they come round, it was Bill Sloman was the recruiting officer in those days and he gave you a lecture and told you what it was like down there, and of course I'd read some books about life in the Antarctic so I had a rough idea of what life was like, it didn't correspond to reality at all!

[0:03:01] Verdenius: No the first time?

Kynaston: The first time when I saw the first base Argentine Islands from the ship, I thought my goodness it was grey, it dreary, drab all these seemingly dirty men you know very ruggedly looking very hard looking men! And I thought 'My God!', but after a while it was

home. I was amazed at the squalor and how they were living cheeky by jowl with one or another at the time! You know cheek by jowl?

[0:03:43] Verdenius: Yeah, can you repeat?

Kynaston: Cheek by jowl, in such close proximity to each other. But after a while you just get used to it you never think anything of it, and I remember looking and thinking 'Jesus Christ! I've got to spend two years living there,' or a year there, you got used to it in no time flat and you settled in. My first year was very much, it was a lot different from my second year. The second year you felt more responsible, the first year there was a lot of settling into base and finding the correct things to do all the time to keep yourself busy. Besides amusing yourself there's a lot of base chores, a lot of base duties. And the second year I found myself far more attuned to the things that required doing around base and basically something like that the busier you keep yourself, the quicker time passes. But the first year at Argentine Islands it was an archipelago of islands and there's a lot to be done boating, skiing, we had dogs did a bit of sledging, plenty to occupy yourself, photography, whereas at Adelaide it was just a big place on the glacier. We couldn't go sailing or anything like that, skiing was just limited up to the airstrip and back down again; we did a certain amount of sledging but none of us were really experienced in it. I was in charge of the dogs in my second year and I reared some pups, I looked after them, the sledges, kept myself occupied that way. You've probably already heard at Midwinter we produced a Midwinter magazine and I involved myself in that. Just you're far more experienced in your second year to keep yourself occupied, and the work sort of would just roll along!

[0:05:57] Verdenius: Those men who looked so worn down and...?

Kynaston: Rugged!

[0:06:05] Verdenius: So what were they like, because your first impressions had changed?

Kynaston: When I first saw them I thought they looked very real hard men. They looked men whereas I think I was just a callow youth coming from, practically straight from university and all very slack jawed and taken in by it all! They seemed men and I felt just a youth, but gradually you just fitted into it yourself!

[0:06:52] Verdenius: Slack jawed?

Kynaston: Slack jawed, aye slack jawed, just astonished by it all! It's the same with any strangers you're always a bit in awe of any strangers coming from anywhere, they're far superior people to you far more adult or whatever because it was only my 23rd birthday just after I arrived at the first base Argentine Islands so I was still very young!

[0:07:25] Verdenius: What was the average age?

Kynaston: Pardon?

[0:07:28] Verdenius: What was the average age?

Kynaston: The average age well say the early 20's, 23/24, we had one man there who was 40 and he was on secondment from the Royal and Electrical and Mechanical Engineers down and he was - I mean young men could always let your hair down you know by getting drunk doing stupid things! - but he would, he was a bit too, he'd been down before he was a bit too rigid about things?

[0:08:01] Verdenius: Did he fit in?

Kynaston: [Big sigh] I mean he got on OK with other people, he didn't really fit in, not the same as everybody else. There was, I think one of the main criteria for choosing people down there was they choose people that would fit in with other people, who could gel or jive with other people! But they always seemed to choose people, I don't know if it was deliberate or just accident, I there was always somebody that didn't, one loner, and everyone else would sit and talk about him. Rather than all fighting among themselves you'd all sit and talk about this one particular person! And this one man, like I said he was an arch conservative, he'd been down there before he'd been down there before he was 40 years old, which was ancient in those days!

[Verdenius] Yep!

Because most people go down to the Antarctic for a few years or a couple of years before they settle down to married life or whatever, so this one man was out of kilter with the rest of us.

[0:09:07] Verdenius: Was also the 1970's so was also a time of don't trust anyone of over 30!?

Kynaston: [Laughing]. Well that's true of anyone that's in their early 20's!

[0:09:23] Verdenius: Did you go sledging at all?

Kynaston: I was mainly based, I was mainly on the base but we went on one or two sledging tours just for the fun of it, but we were very inexperienced, we'd no one really to help us and at Argentine Islands we were stuck on this archipelago of islands, we didn't really we didn't get any sea ice that year, so we couldn't go very far. But went on one or two short ones at Adelaide Island, but nobody had any experience of sledging and staying out in those conditions, so we didn't go very far.

[0:10:03] Verdenius: Did you camp?

Kynaston: We camped, yes we camped on the ice, and once just outside of base I found an overhanging wall of snow, and I excavated a cave there and I spent a night in the snow cave just for a laugh, for something different, it was quite an experience! And at Argentine Islands we had an old base dating from the 1930's, 1940's from Operation Tabarin I think it was, and it was about a couple of miles I think from the Argentine Islands base, and we used to go down there for holidays, maybe two of you together staying there for a while just for a change to get away from base, just a novelty!

[0:11:00] Verdenius: You said?

Kynaston: Just for the sake of it just a change of kitchen sink I suppose just different things. The secret was just to keep yourself occupied whether it was work or play or whatever, just keep yourselves occupied rather than sitting around getting morose. I had a very good time!

[0:11:26] Verdenius: How many days were you on the sledging trips?

Kynaston: As I said only about three or four days, very short periods at a time, or maybe five days something like that, just because we didn't have the experience and the dogs were, all the teams had different names. Stonington was the main sledging base, they had the Huns and Komats and the Picts, and at Adelaide Island where the dogs were mainly kept for breeding purposes and recreation we had the mighty Rabble! And oh they were absolutely terrible, we had no sledging experience and the mighty Rabble there were eight bitches and one dog and the bitches just once they started fighting that was that! They were terrible for fighting and the one dog would be fighting to get away from the bitches so that was more or less that.

[0:12:23] Verdenius: How did you know how to drive a dog team?

Kynaston: Just by seeing other men doing it and listening to other men and then experimenting yourself and making numerous mistakes!

[0:12:38] Verdenius: So trial and error?

Kynaston: When you're setting off away from base the dogs are particularly excited, they're really excited so they're really prone to fighting, then if anything goes wrong the dogs will start fighting right away; they won't attack human beings but will fight with each other. But once you've had them out for two or three days and they'll settle down and get more tired and more obedient then. But we were also held back at Adelaide Island because we hadn't a proper lead dog. Princess, the lead bitch that we had, and she was getting a bit old and she wasn't strong enough to lead the dogs, but we used to take the dogs ski joring, we'd get them to tow us, two dogs or maybe three dogs, but mainly two dogs, got them to tow you along on a pair of skis. Used to be good fun that way! And you could also take three or four dogs out in the creeks at Argentine Islands and just a light sledge and the dogs, and that was good fun.

[0:13:50] Verdenius: Did you ever get into situations you couldn't control?

Kynaston: Steve Vallance the doctor and I, (Steve Vallance was the doctor), he and I went out once sledging and I spanned out the dogs at night and tied down the sledge. It was these pyramid tents without a sewn in ground sheet, a pyramid tent and it was a glorious evening...and just before I went to bed I tied everything up, I thought 'I may as well be conscientious, that's why I'm doing this', and I tied everything, I lashed everything down. And during the night a blizzard blew up and we were lying there for three or four days in this, it was real terrible blizzard we had. We eventually dangled a rope from the apex of the tent down in between us and we had a ski under our mattresses, just a single ski under our mattresses, and we were lying on that just in case the tent blew away, because the ski would

act just to stop it being blown away! But it was really terrible conditions and we were lying there in our sleeping bags fully clothed and we didn't move outside the tent, and we were talking back and to, to base and of course they thought this was a big joke! And we were only about 12 miles away from base and in these conditions we just lay there for three days, conditions were really bad!

[0:15:30] Verdenius: And when the base talked to you?

Kynaston: Oh they thought it was a fantastic joke, just laughing at other people's misfortunes, typical British thing!

[0:15:42] Verdenius: What did you do?

Kynaston: We just lay there. The first day was just so bad we just lay, then I was getting so bored I started looking through the food boxes to see if there was any books there to read, and I found this book by Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, and thought 'This is going to be a real boring book', I didn't think it'd be exciting at all, but I picked it up and started reading it and it was a really powerful novel, and I'd never have read it in any other situation, it was a really powerful novel. And the rest of the time we just lay there and slept and made cups of tea and whatever, nothing much at all.

[0:16:35] Verdenius: Did the light change much in the blizzard?

Kynaston: Oh there was very little light at all with the blizzard, it was just blowing all the time!

[0:16:47] Verdenius: I've always wondered what a blizzard looks like!?

Kynaston: Snow! [laughing] It doesn't look like much at all. Once, usually at base when there was a blizzard blowing like leave the dogs alone because they'd be cuddled up and get a cocoon of snow, but once for some stupid reason I went up to see them to make sure they were alright. I think the blizzard had been on for three or four days, and I got up to the dog span and it was a really foul day and I looked behind me and one dog had managed to get loose and she was following me along the span and all the other dogs were trying to get to her. And then she and another dog started fighting and I was trying to beat her, beat them to get them apart and I looked down towards base to try and hoping someone would come up and help me! But nobody saw me because the weather was just so bad nobody was bothering coming out; and the job I had I ended up with getting my hands bitten getting these two dogs apart in this howling blizzard, terrible weather. It was quite frightening at the time!

[0:18:10] Verdenius: Was it always so difficult being loose?

Kynaston: Possibly not, it's like any other creatures if you let them wander around loose they'd establish a pecking order, you know pecking order? Whoever's top dog and so on and so forth, but the thing is if we allow them to wander around loose they would kill all the local population of penguins and sea birds and so on and so forth, or chicks, and also there were cliffs they could fall over we wouldn't know where an earth they went to in the winter time.

You couldn't just let them wander around loose. It would be alright on a small island perhaps, you had to span them out to stop them from killing and because they hadn't established their natural pecking order they're always prone to fight each other.

[0:19:15] Verdenius: Was that a difficulty?

Kynaston: Yes but once they'd been out in the field for a while were exhausted or more tired so there wouldn't be any trouble from them then!

[0:19:30] Verdenius: When you were on base there earlier you said in your first year you'd a lot of spare time?

Kynaston: Oh I'd a lot of spare time in every year but Argentine Islands was such an attractive base to such an extent it was an archipelago of islands that it was possible to go out and just ski along the creeks and do a lot of things there. I did some ice climbing there, skiing along the creeks etc. I don't think they always tried to have half and half, half first year men and half second year men and I didn't feel nearly so responsible in my first year as I did I felt in my second, as in my second year you felt more responsible to keep the base going and keep everybody happy and so on and so forth, and in my second year I felt that a lot more!

[0:20:35] Verdenius: Tell me did the Argentineans visit?

Kynaston: When I first arrived on base...some Chileans came in on a plane to visit us and we made them very welcome we all had a drink together, and actually on the way south and on the way back north again we stopped off at various bases, Esperanza, Presidenti Frei and Hope Bay, I can't remember if they were Argentinian or Chileans' bases but they spoke Spanish. And we went in for a drink and we talked with them and came on the ship for a drink and we got on very well with each other, they always made us very welcome. We talked with them at Christmas and Midwinter, Midwinter was June the 21<sup>st</sup>, the shortest day of the year, and we'd send greetings to all the other bases.

[0:21:44] Verdenius: Which was officially permitted?

Kynaston: Oh nobody bothered about it, don't know if it was officially permitted or not we just did it! [Laughter] I mean this is '73, it was long before the Falkland Islands conflict, it was long before all that ballyhoo so there was nothing said about it.

[0:22:05] Verdenius: Yeah, there was always some irritations between the Argentinians and the Chileans and Britain about land claims?

Kynaston: I think that's why they've all got their bases down there they've all got this, they're all trying to claim these things, but that's politics; I mean politics you leave to the politicians and the common men, the working men, are just quite happy to go out for a drink with each other, that's all they worry about!

[0:22:30] Verdenius: What did Cambridge think about it?

Kynaston: I've no idea, no idea at all! They pronounce an official line and we accepted it and then went for a drink with them, the Argentinians, when we met them that was it!

[0:22:57] Verdenius: You were in the winter there, but during the summer?

Kynaston: I spent two winters there I was down there summer and winter for two years.

[0:23:09] Verdenius: How did you feel about the darkness?

Kynaston: Obviously it wasn't something just like that it gradually crept up on you. Argentine Islands we had the sun all winter we were far enough north of it. At Adelaide we had, we didn't see the sun for three months or so something like that, but it was always a twilight in the middle of the day for a very short period, maybe two or three hours in the middle of the day and you just got by you just orienteer your, life you mainly did things indoors.

[0:23:55] Verdenius: Now some people tell me during those winters they take a sort of sleep....

Kynaston: Morose?

No, disorders, because of the darkness just obviously when it's summer did you find?

Kynaston: [Big sigh] I didn't find sometimes I couldn't get to sleep because it was so cold in the huts that you had to put on extra socks and things like that! But really I found no problem with it at all.

[0:24:32] Verdenius: You managed to keep your rhythm?

Kynaston: I managed to keep my rhythm yes, if you couldn't get to sleep you just got drunk and that got to sleep!

[0:24:41] Verdenius: Did you make a week of it?

Kynaston: A what?

[0:24:44] Verdenius: A week of it, Saturday, Sunday?

Kynaston: Of yes. Well Saturday was the one day a week when you cleared up, everyone took their turn and you cleared up, cleaned base a good cleaning out once a week. I mean we cleaned it every day but Saturday was extra special once a weekly clean. Also Saturday night was the night we had beer put out, beer and spirits put out, and you had fresh meat on a Saturday as well, it just made a highlight of the week! And then once a month you got letters from home, faxes, telex and that was always something to look forward to at the beginning of the month or whatever.

[0:25:34] Verdenius: And Sundays?

Kynaston: Sundays? Sundays you usually had a hangover from Saturday!

[0:25:43] Verdenius: Was there any church?

Kynaston: No.

[0:25:54] Verdenius: Without any Christian feelings?

Kynaston: There was Christian feeling's with a small 'c', you got on well with other men, but I...there was no one really strongly religious that they wouldn't sit down and eat with an unbeliever or something like that. I think they tended to choose people who had moderate opinions, that got on well with other people, nobody rabidly anti smoking or of course there wasn't the same fuss in those days about smoking as there is now. Nobody who was rabidly tea-total or communist or anything like that, just middle of the road moderate men, young men, because young men are more resilient than old men, less set in their ways.

[0:26:51] Verdenius: You mean like mellow people?

Kynaston: Mellow people yes, easy going people.

[0:27:02] Verdenius: Did you ever consider going to the South Pole?

Kynaston: The actual Pole?

[0:27:11] Verdenius: Yeah the actual Pole did that appeal to you?

Kynaston: Not the actual Pole itself no, I was just happy to be down there and working down there. I'd have liked to have gone down, if somebody had offered me a jolly to the South Pole I'd take it I wasn't particularly worried.

[0:27:28] Verdenius: Did they tell you people weren't allowed to go to the Pole

Kynaston: No not particularly I think well, there's a big American base there now and everything and doesn't particularly appeal to me. I would have liked to have gone on longer sledging trips with the dogs, things like that, but I enjoyed myself down there, had a good time so why worry?

[0:27:55] Verdenius: Why did you go?

Kynaston: The adventure, doing something that was out of the ordinary and just the adventure that's what really appealed to me, something different.

[0:28:24] Verdenius: The Antarctic days?

Kynaston: Well just something that was different, as I say the adventure, skiing a bit of exploring just seeing another part of the world I'd never seen before, because I'd hardly travelled; I'd been to Greenland that's all I'd really been to before. Just to see a different country and a part of the world very few people had seen.

[0:28:51] Verdenius: Would you rather go to Greenland rather than the Antarctica?



Kynaston: No. Well Greenland we were on the coast of Greenland, it's a far softer climate. I mean there were dwarf juniper bushes there and there was land based mammals, rather than just sea based mammals such as seal in the Antarctic. In Greenland there was Arctic foxes or musk ox things like that and reindeer.

[0:29:25] Verdenius: There was one have more appeal to you?

Kynaston: Well I saw more of the Antarctic so of course there are no native people such as the Eskimos and Inuit down in the Antarctic, the Antarctic's a bigger place so I saw more of it - obviously it would be more attractive to me!

[0:29:45] Verdenius: Because there's more?

Kynaston: There's more of it and I saw more of it.

[0:29:51] Verdenius: Well thank you Colin.

Kynaston: Is that it? OK!

Note: Very difficult to pick up some of the questions and very brief interview.

- Points of interest:
- On arriving at his first base and his thoughts on the men! [0:03:01]
- Stuck in a tent for several days in a blizzard! [0:13:50]
- When a dog got loose on the span during a blizzard at base. [0:16:47]