

JIM FELLOWS

Edited transcript of interview with James (Jim) Fellows at his home in Shenstone in Staffordshire conducted by Chris Eldon Lee on 10th October, 2001, concerning the Marguerite Bay reunion trip of February, 2000. BAS archives AD6/24/3/9. Transcribed by Allan Wearden in October, 2019.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Jim Fellows interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at his home at Shenstone in Staffordshire on the 10th of October 2001. Jim Fellows:

Fellows: Well normally a base it's pre-constructed, I think it was Boulton Paul they used at the time. So if you can imagine sections of the garden shed all prefabricated up that's how the thing normally it comes down. And first of all they have to cast a number of cement fondu blocks which act as the base, then they put down the roof structure, and all this framing up is usually done by a carpenter that is employed by FIDS to do that jobbie, he gets off the ship. The rest of the people who are landed on the base and anybody who is on the ship become slave labour to put up the base! So their job is to put up enough of the base for people to live in and survive, they can then finish it out themselves.

[0:01:07] Lee: I'm going to cut my questions out so that's why the mike is just on you, so let me ask you something that you can answer starting afresh.

Fellows: OK!

[0:01:17] Lee: If you had to compare an Antarctic base with a garden shed how close are they? [Laughter]

Fellows: Oh no. there was an attempt to make these things insulated and warm, not by today's standards of comfort, but shall we say compared to what Scott would have had sort of thing? So you have a wooden skin outside some fibreglass insulation and then panelling inside, not exactly the idea thing to keep out extreme Antarctic temperatures but shall we say better than nothing! And compared to what they built now as accommodation, say at Rothera, pretty crude probably but certainly streets ahead of what Scott had in his day sort of thing.

[0:02:08] Lee: Tell me about how you made it homely if at all?

Fellows: Well I think that's like when anyone gets in they start making little bits and pieces for home comfort. You get people that are handy with a saw and that, they make bits of furniture and start putting up their own pictures and things. There wasn't that much room at Horseshoe and of course in the winter that was the work season for sledging, so for the bulk of the time there wouldn't be above two or a maximum three people left on the base! So they had to look after the dogs, hunt seal, do the Met schedules and maintain a radio schedule with Port Stanley to report the Met observations. So there wasn't, and then add sleeping to that, there wasn't too much time to get involved in prettying up the base!

[0:03:02] Lee: You said that to the assemble in the restaurant on the boat that Horseshoe was the best base.

Fellows: Oh it was!

[0:03:07] Lee: Tell me why you think that?

Fellows: Well I think it was the terrain and I think everyone wanted to go. Everyone who goes on the expedition has really got to go to some mundane base for the first year, so everyone wants a sledging and survey base their second year, and the prime areas then were in Marguerite Bay. Stonington had established a reputation for Marguerite Bay but there was no operational activity at Stonington then; it had closed when Sir Vivian Fuchs left Stonington and the old base and a new base hadn't been established at that time, so that the only British base in Marguerite Bay was the new one at Horseshoe, and because it was a base that was expected to have plenty of access for sledge travel and that, everyone wanted to go there, so it was a prime choice. The second choice people would have had was Hope Bay which was a long established sledging base.

[0:04:14] Lee: So describe to me the splendour of Horseshoe, what was it that was so special?

Fellows: Well Horseshoe is nestled against the Antarctic Peninsula, so if you can think of sort of Norwegian fjords terrain with, out of the window of the hut you looked straight across to Pourquoi Pas with a mountain rising to six odd thousand feet and this thing is just across a small stretch of frozen water dividing you from the island! And beyond that you've got Adelaide Island with its massive mountain range in the background, so it was mountain scenery that made it grand - if you're not a mountain man then probably it wouldn't mean much.

[0:04:59] Lee: Let's talk a bit more about the hut. Using your memory from the '50s now [Fellows: yeah] just tell me, walk me through the hut, walk me through the hut, how did you get in?

Fellows: Well normally there's an access door, normally for the winter you use a double access door in other words if that used to be back there by the back of the hut, so you'd go through one door, have a small vestibule so that you could close one door before you opened the other because the problem was with the high winds there, if you had a door open into the hut at the same time that you got an access door to the outside open, any high winds would rush through and create real havoc there! And in fact one night such a incident did occur; someone left open the outside door. Well what happened they left open the sledging workshop door and when they came in from the outside that meant there were two door open, and what happened was a high 100mph gust of wind came straight in and it actually had so much force that it took a window from the sledge workshop, which was driven in with six inch nails - you wouldn't imagine them being, it actually pulled every nail out of the window frame and carried the window frame eight or ten feet and laid it on the snow without even breaking a pane of glass! That was the force with which it thrust the window out and as that

was at the night, everyone then had to then dash out find some canvas and nail it over the hole otherwise the rest of the hut would have been torn apart by the wind!

[0:06:50] Lee: Are there other examples of drama of that nature?

Fellows: I can't recall any but normally the high winds worry you more when you're in the tent out sledging! And at that time we had bamboo tent poles and one of the problems with bamboo is it's very strong and flexible but if you get bamboo and it starts to split into thin slivers it just flattens and folds over and that's what used to happen to your tent poles on the odd occasion!

[0:07:23] Lee: Tell me about this rescue hut up on the peninsula again. Assume I know nothing and you're telling me the story.

Fellows: Well normally before any work really started you had to get to the head of the Bigourdan Fjord and up towards the Arrowsmith Peninsula, and so we had this small refuge hut they called, it was simply a single skin wooden hut, no insulation whatsoever, with two wire hawsers over the top of it to prevent it being blown away, and a depot of additional stores round it. And so what would happen is for the sledging survey teams they would go up the fjord, and then reorganize themselves for their work trips from the refuge so then spend several days each end of their trip in the refuge, using the refuge stores rather than their own sledging rations and that. The problem was when the temperatures were very low keeping warm inside the refuge, there was no heating or anything, you did cooking on your alcohol stoves that you'd got for the tent, and so often the easiest way of keeping warm, that I found anyway, was to put your tent up inside the hut and sleep inside the tent, and have the extra skin of the tent to keep you warm!

[0:08:56] Lee: I know that Christmas takes place in the summer in the Antarctic of course.

Fellows: That's right yeah.

[0:09:00] Lee: But isn't there something at the other end of the year a festival, celebration?

Fellows: Well the thing is the other end of the year you're preparing to leave usually or go on to another base.

[0:09:12] Lee: Did you not winter there?

Fellows: We did winter but what I'm saying when you arrive there you're getting settled in and everything really is being aimed towards midsummer because that's the peak of the work season, but you do celebrate it as the midwinter, the midwinter solstice sort of thing.

[0:09:32] Lee: Well then tell me about, I'll try on getting my terminology right. Tell me about June 21st then?

Fellows: OK. That's the midwinter and OK it's although you celebrate Christmas as well as normal, Mid-Winter was the big event. And so everything stopped and we all cooked a grand meal for the base, everyone contributed. We'd have everything and all the trimmings that we

could have, cake and things people had brought down, things they'd had sent down, so in effect we'd have near enough to a sort of Christmas party as you could get with the stores that we'd got.

[0:10:17] Lee: But the day would be?

Fellows: It was like it would be in Australia, in other words in effect we took the 21st the Mid-Winter's day in the southern hemisphere, in other words which is the 21st of June.

[0:10:34] Lee: Anything crazy, go on?

Fellows: Well the usual things after people have had a few drinks [laughter] antics, but nothing ridiculous; but people had too much to drink. And then we'd have messages from home via radio because the BBC ran a scheme whereby people could relay messages down to the bases. So there used to be a BBC programme that recorded messages from family and then broadcast them, and usually that day you had a bumper crop so that you'd maybe hear from family that way a couple of times a year or something.

[0:11:23] Lee: Did you, somebody was saying you used to receive BBC discs is that right, did that happen to you?

Fellows: No that's probably a more recent thing, yeah.

[0:11:29] Lee: The *Goon Show* I remember people saying?

Fellows: Oh yeah?

[0:11:33] Lee: I'll make a note of that, because I'm seeing...

Fellows: Those sort of things came along, radio and that, even reception was sort of dicey at times down there so.

[0:11:47] Lee: They used to get sent the LPs they could play.

Fellows: That's right yeah, but there wasn't really the equipment for playing or anything down there. FIDS didn't (which was the forerunner to BAS) did not sort of supply those type of luxury items! So anything like that would have been brought down by one of the members of the team.

[0:12:11] Lee: So let's go to February 2000.

Fellows: Yes!

[0:12:16] Lee: Tell me about what was happening in here [in his mind I think he means]?

Fellows: Well to return something like 40 odd years back is, it's nostalgic for anyone, and the thing was it's like turning a corner and suddenly a familiar view comes in and it triggers memories and all that, and I can remember going off looking for or going round the island looking for a depot that had been left by a previous team in 1948 and finding that somebody had got there before me [laughter] and they'd raided it, and little things like that. And then

you remembered dogs, and there was a lot of talk people had said the three people that were lost in 1957?

[0:13:11] Lee: Can you tell me - I'll come back to that because I'll ask you that separate if I may - but just expand a little bit on the feelings you had. I mean we heard we were going to go to Horseshoe on the ship and you stood up in the canteen.

Fellows: Well the first thing it's a base I wanted to go to at that time, and everybody wanted to go. So having arrived there in '57 it was, you'd got there sort of thing, you'd tried to get there and now you were there, and it was a bit like that in 2000; people wanted to get down to Stonington who'd been at Stonington, which came later, but they never managed to get there on that trip whereas we had made Horseshoe! It was unfortunate that it was mainly in the dark and rather a rushed visit but really I would have liked to poke around and see what had been left behind, and I'm sure there were things left behind by us in the roof there somewhere, because really continued occupation ceased around '57, end of '57, so there's probably odds and ends that we had left in the roof and old survey reports and everything there.

[0:14:27] Lee: In fact did it not close down in '58 have I got that right?

Fellows: I think it was finally closed in 1960, but it wasn't really a fully operational base much after '58 with a full team there. It was used as an auxiliary base by the Stonington Island base which was established later on, for teams travelling up the fjord. It's much the sort of use that Blaiklock served for Horseshoe when it was still open.

[0:15:01] Lee: OK, so let's get you back. What I'm trying to get from you, Jim, is the sort of feelings you have when you step back on the shore or you saw the hut for the first time you're on a Zodiac heading towards the shore?

Fellows: Oh yeah!

[0:15:16] Lee: Tell me about that experience?

Fellows: Well it was so dark that I was looking for the familiar shape of the hut and it, if you remember, the paint and everything had disappeared totally from it and at first I wasn't sure which way round the hut was to re-orient myself. The hut when we were sledging was always the thing we saw as we came down the fjord, and that back view which the bay we went into and landed, we called 'Homing Bay' and that was our home stretch going down there, and to see the back of that hut and it was more thoughts of trips like that that sort of flashed to you! Now when you got back there, because we'd been in and out of the hut so much when working there, like if you took Deception Island where we spent a year in a hut and a lot of our life revolved around the hut, it didn't so much at Horseshoe because everything revolved around sledging. So you were preparing for sledging trips and so seeing there it was more the memory of those trips than the memory of the hut, than was the view of the hut, and the island triggered the memory of trips from the island!

[0:16:44] Lee: Sad, happy nostalgic?

Fellows: Oh yeah happy. I felt to be 70 odd years of age amazing to get back there to see the place. Yes it was quite an ego trip or a nostalgic sort of step back. You can't normally step back in time 40 odd years, but what you want to step back to has gone, but that had actually been maintained. It was a bit of a culture shock or an ego shock to suddenly read on the door of a hut you'd lived in and was part of your life that it was now an Antarctic heritage/history an Antarctic heritage site! So it had been placed in history sort of thing! [Laughter]

[0:17:38] Lee: So you're saying?

Fellows: You really feel archaic and old then! You know only 40 years and already part of history!

[0:17:49] Lee: You pushed the door open then on that day, that evening, in February was there much to see that you remembered?

Fellows: Well no because the future occupants had butchered the layout for their convenience. There were stock things there, the kitchen had to stay there, the sledge workshop but the living room and the bunkroom quarters they had moved all round. They had turned the bunkroom into a storeroom and then they had carved up the living room, because since they were only three or four people they had put bunks into the living room, whereas we'd had nine people needed more space to, particularly since we were at times living for a length of time, where they were just laying up from a sledge journey when they were there so.

[0:18:41] Lee: Was the something you remembered though?

Fellows: Oh yeah, there were items of...

[0:18:47] Lee: So pick one imagine that you thought 'Yes that hasn't changed much'.

Fellows: The kitchen I think! [Laughter] Since everyone has to take their turn as cook when they're on base, the kitchen is one that is hammered home and the layout there with the melt tank there, the big copper melt tank which we had to fill with snow and ice which was connected to an Aga, and which was a coal fired Aga, and you had to keep that full, well that was your water supply, cooking supply, and the kitchen layout was the same, it hadn't changed, that was a flashback in time because yes it was, and that was the social centre really, everybody sat in the kitchen.

[0:19:36] Lee: And there were supplies to be seen weren't there?

Fellows: That's right, there was still stores there. They'd gone to the trouble of putting a selection of tinned stuff on the selves, the stuff that the cook would have regularly used sort of thing, and normally the cook would have been issued by the base leader one week's rations, so he would have moved in to the kitchen his week's rations that he would work from.

[0:20:05] Lee: I think I remember there was a rusty old tin bath or something?

Fellows: Oh that was an addition since.

[0:20:10] Lee: As opposed to you.

Fellows: Yeah.

[0:20:13] Lee: And now, again I might be putting words into mouth, was it at Horseshoe there was a picture of the Queen and Prince Philip?

Fellows: That's right yeah.

[0:20:19] Lee: Tell me about them?

Fellows: The Duke of Edinburgh?

[0:20:21] Lee: Tell me about seeing those.

Fellows: Well that reminded me more of Prince Philip because when we were at Deception Island and the *Britannia* in 1956 on the way to the Olympic Games visited the Antarctic with the Duke of Edinburgh on board, and we entertained him at the base to a lunch of seal liver and penguin eggs etc, and he in return invited us onboard for dinner aboard the *Britannia*. So seeing the Duke of Edinburgh there with the Queen in the picture, was sort of... [Note: It was actually after the '56 Olympics Games in Australia. AW]

[0:20:58] Lee: What I'm going to try to get you to do now if I can manipulate it slightly is, [Fellows: Yes], what I want you to say in the 1950's there was a picture of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh on the wall and 41 years later, she hasn't changed a bit!

Fellows: Well that's right!

[0:21:15] Lee: Well something on those lines!

Fellows: I mean if you noticed the colours had faded and everything to this ageing.

[0:21:20] Lee: Well start from scratch and tell me that little story about the Queen and Prince Philip, why they were there in the first place and tell me about seeing them again.

Fellows: Well I actually don't remember that picture going up there, I think it was first put up when the base built, so it would be there when we arrived on the base so it's part of the fixtures that you got used to. But it was a government survey so there was always was the sort of the HRH type of memorabilia around the bases sort of thing, and doing it for King and Country and Queen and Country sort of thing!

[0:22:01] Lee: But what I need, because I can't answer that.

Fellows: Yeah.

[0:22:03] Lee: So I need you to tell the little story cleanly about the fact in the hut along the lines of, 'In the hut in the '50s we had a picture of the Queen and Prince Philip on the wall'. [Fellows: That's right]. I want you to tell me this because I can't say it!

Fellows: OK.

[0:22:16] Lee: Then when you went back 41 years later what was it like to see?

Fellows: Well we'd had that picture there and of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and OK, that was when they were young and in the '50s, and now we got back in the year 2000 and it's the same picture there, slightly faded from the light, but that picture was still there. It had been there all that time as many other things that were in and around the base had stayed there, and the object of the heritage trust has been to try and keep as much as possible the same on those bases as when they were occupied, without the people being there!

[0:23:03] Lee: Great, lovely, thank you. Tell me about this tragedy, what's the story?

Fellows: Well this - each team each year a percentage of the team is normally replaced. In this case the whole team was being replaced because part of our team had been left on Stonington Island, the part that would have overlapped with an existing team. They were down on Stonington Island to try and reopen things there. And so the people that went into the Horseshoe Island base were all new to Marguerite Bay, not necessarily new to the Survey they'd some them would have been on bases further north. And, OK, in Marguerite Bay the target for every sledge team is to go out to the Dion Islands which are out near the end of Adelaide Island, and it's a big penguin rookery so there is usually an attempt to take a trip to the penguin rookery there, and it's often viewed as a sort of test trip for the sledges. And in actual fact our team, we...yes I think three of our people actually made a 40 day trip over to the Dion Islands, but they were actually doing geology across the bottom end of Porquois Pas and then they went on to the Dion Islands to check if the penguins were still there from wintering. And I think they found 150 pairs of Emperor penguins and some chicks and, OK, this new team was to continue the tradition, they were going to make a trip to the Dion Islands, but the ice conditions - you've got to go across sea ice and Marguerite Bay tends to be ice made up of large blocks of ice that have frozen there, and then it's compacted by the wind. So what could often happen a change in wind could mean these slabs would open up and be floating free then; normally that change of wind once the winter's really set in it doesn't occur so much but it can. And these people set out on this trip to the Dions, three men with two sledges and as far as we know, that they would have to, probably would have gone round the edge of Porquois Pas on the sea ice, no one knows exactly the path that they took, however they were lost! And the dogs, most of the dogs returned.

[0:26:11] Lee: And they were lost because of what?

Fellows: They disappeared they have never been found or any residue found of them, the assumption is that the ice opened up underneath them and their tents and they went with it, exactly where no one knows. There's been nothing found to really give any clues to that, and the dogs - most of the dogs - returned to the base within a few weeks. However, one dog, Chloe, which was a pup that we had actual bred, she appeared a year later and it's felt she probably came down from the Dions on slabs of sea ice, and ended up at the Debenham Islands which is a base operated by the Argentine people and she was in perfect health! So one assumes she lived off penguins while she was on the Dion Islands and then when the next

season's ice was firm enough she came down to them, but that's the only thing that's been found. There's all sorts of theories about what may have happened; bits of dog trace looks as though it had been cut therefore there was the thought that the BAS people had actually cut the dogs free to allow the dogs to save themselves. But whether that was that they were trapped on an ice floe or what or whether one could hazard that they were in their tents when this thing happened, or they were just trying to make their way across ice slabs and no one can really tell and no one to this day knows exactly what happened to them, but three men perished on a trip to the Dion Islands! That actually is not the only in '58, 1958. When we were due to be withdrawn from Marguerite Bay normally we would expect the BAS ship to be coming in somewhere around January to pick us up, and we had a radio message from them saying that they were some way north and the pack was getting thicker, and they didn't think that would be able to get through that year, so we were told that we would have to be prepared to winter for another year! And at that time the Argentines had a big ice breaker, the *General San Martin*, and that came into Marguerite Bay, and as a courtesy to us they picked up our mail by helicopter to transfer it to a British ship when they moved north. And in actual fact that helicopter crashed into Marguerite Bay with the people onboard and our mail, so that!

[0:29:21] Lee: No chance of survival?

Fellows: Yes, I had thought at the time that most of the people did perish, but I gather something like only two of the people on board actually perished, two Argentine civilian and technical people who were working with their expedition!

[0:29:44] Lee: You mentioned Deception Island, are you familiar with the story of evacuation of Deception Island?

Fellows: Well only after, when we spent there, there'd been an eruption at Deception Island in 1910 which had destroyed the whale fleet which was in the harbour and evidently several of the ships are somewhere down on, the whale catchers are on the bottom of the bay. And there used to be a graveyard on Deception Island which is where the people that had perished in that first eruption, and most of the beach is volcanic ash under the snow. And I was rather amazed to sort of look at the hut and that hut is a fantastic structure in so much as it's built from 2½ inch thick tongue and groove planking, and is a really solidly built hut, it was built by the Norwegian whalers. And I sort of stood in the bunkroom and said to someone 'That's where my bunk was', and I'm standing in the hole where the moraine that had come down from the mountain and had simply gone through the side of the hut! Now, one would have thought that a landslide like that, this was the hot ash from the volcano that dropped on to the ice and snow melting it causing an avalanche to just rush down the side of the mountain at the back of the hut, and hit the hut and one would have thought it would have just swept it from its foundation and pushed it down into the bay. But the hut was firstly that solid and the velocity must have been so great it simply smashed, a hole straight through the side of the hut, even leaving an upper floor intact, just as though you punched a fist through the side of the hut, and as I say just where it went through my bunk would have been there! [Laughter] And two of us said [laughter] 'We would have been out in the middle of the bay', but in

actual fact the people had already left the hut and were actually had moved to another part of the island, using pieces of corrugated steel from the whaling factory to protect their heads from the stuff that was falling down! It's changed the look of Deception slightly that there's another little island sticking up out of the bay at the far end that wasn't there before, and the Chilean base that was there has disappeared; and there's all that ash that's dropped on top of the ice so you've got 100's of feet of ice and snow which used to provide nesting sites for all the chinstrap penguins, and now that's covered with a layer of ash so that any new snow that comes down because it would be fairly thin it doesn't get chance to build up because the solar radiation goes through that snow, heats up that black ash underneath which melts all this top so you've almost got a permanently black island now, instead of an ice covered island!

[0:33:14] Lee: What year was the evacuation, what year was that eruption?

Fellows: It was about '68/'69, 1968 I think.

[0:33:21] Lee: That was the end of Deception Island as a base, yes?

Fellows: Only for the British base. The British base has been closed, cleaned up and closed. There's still part of one of the survey aircraft there and there's still part of the hut, however there is a Spanish and an Argentine base there, the original Argentine base is still there and Spain has opened second base nearby.

[0:33:51] Lee: This is all very good stuff, Jim. That probably comes to the end of I think of my questions - I'll make sure if there was anything I wanted to ask which hasn't? Oh yeah this bit about the icy floor!?

Fellows: [Laughing] Oh yes, the bunkroom at Horseshoe there was no real heating in the bunkroom, and one day being overzealous we decided to scrub the floor, and OK jealously wiped it up, however if you wipe a floor and there's always a layer of moisture you can't wipe it totally dry, that ended up as a layer of ice which stayed there till we left the hut. In other words, although the bunkroom was warm enough the floor was actually at freezing so that it maintained that film of ice for quite some time!

Interesting clips:

- Living at Horseshoe Island in 1957? [0:04:59]
- Celebrating midwinter at Horseshoe Island in 1957. [0:09:32]
- Revisiting Horseshoe Island after a gap of 40 years! [0:12:11]
- Going inside the hut after all that time and seeing it's now an Antarctic heritage site! [0:17:49]
- Remembering meeting and cooking for the Duke of Edinburgh on Deception Island in 1956! [0:20:03]
- Remembering the loss of a 3 man sledging party from Horseshoe Island in 1958. [0:23:03]
- The return of one of their dogs Chloe to the base after almost a year! [0:26:11]

- And the crash of an Argentinean helicopter into Marguerite Bay after it had picked up the bases mail! [0:29:21]
- Talking about the 1910 volcanic eruption on Deception Island and then the later ones, which destroyed the base! [0:29:44]
- Too good a scrub out and leaving an icy bunkroom floor for months! [0:33:51]