

Derek Hill, 16/01/13

Derek Hill was film buyer at Channel 4, 1981-1994

Interviewers: Rachael Keene, Ieuan Franklin

DH: I do tend to be indiscreet, I must say... [IF and RK laugh]

RK: I mean obviously some things can be taken off the record...

DH: Some independent filmmaker said to me once I can't afford a publicity campaign so I'll tell you about my film in the strictest confidence!

RK: Ah that's brilliant...I'll get my bits of paper out...

[RK and DH talk about John Huntley and his archive]

[IF explains about the project]

DH: It's enormous [as a subject] actually. I started to rummage through some of my old files from those days, I've got 12 files you know, all this thick and um...

I mean the split between Leslie and myself was that Leslie was dealing with the majors, and I was dealing with all the independents and world cinema, which Leslie didn't really want to know about as you may have gathered...

RK: He had his own passions I suppose...

DH: Yeah. And initially Jeremy had us in together. But it then took one meeting to realise it was better to have us separately.

RK: I can see that wouldn't have worked very well. How did you get into the industry in the very first place, at the beginning of your career?

DH: I...worked for a little magazine called Amateur Cine-World, I don't know if you've come across it...and I was an office boy come assistant editor, then I became their film critic and then I broke away and become freelance

And this is in the fifties. I'd always been passionate about cinema; I went to the BFI Summer School in 1949, believe it or not.

IF: You wrote for Contrast, Tribune, a lot of magazines...

DH: I was quite prolific in the 50s, yeah. I did cover one film for Tribune, the Financial Times, Sight and Sound and Picturegoer! I can't remember what the film was, but I remember doing all those together, you know?

IF: And you got involved in filmmaking as well didn't you? Were you involved in The March for Aldermaston film?

DH: I was on it, I was on the march, and I was carrying cans [of film] around for Lindsay Anderson, you know, things like that, yeah.

RK: And how did the, The Other Cinema and the Short Film Service, I know that you were...involved with those....

DH: Yeah. I wasn't really involved with The Other Cinema.

RK: Oh were you not...

DH: They saw, they decided we were all competition. But [the] Short Film Service, when I finished as a critic um I started...uh

I was invited to the Short Film Festival in Tours, and um things really sprang from there, because when I came back I thought gosh there's some great work out there, you know.

And my original idea was to bring in foreign shorts for some sort of distribution here.

But then it sort of...developed in a way that I wasn't expecting, where I was handling British shorts and showing them abroad.

And uh having thought that would occupy a day a week, suddenly it was a 14 day a week operation. And at the same time I lost all my columns as a critic, I fell afoul of the Rank Organization. And here's something you won't print!

John Davies who was then the boss [chairman of Rank] [saw] a tiny magazine, I think it was called Dimensions [Definition] where I'd written something quite nasty about Rank as an organization.

He decided to sue everybody, and threatened every paper I was writing for with um...information to the effect that they should change their critic.

I remember one magazine I was writing for I opened it to look at my weekly piece and it was just a big advert for Rank instead you know!

RK: Oh my goodness.

DH: And I started to gradually put together what had happened. But again this would probably be libellous if you were to use it. So...

I mean it was a very tricky time...because we'd just had our third child, and suddenly I was found unacceptable anywhere as a writer, a journalist, so it was a very tough period.

So I concentrated on this Short Film Service, and out of that I was asked, I don't quite know how it came about, but the first film I had, the first feature I had was Allan King's Warrendale.

It's marvellous, absolutely marvellous. I met Allan and worked out how to handle it. And I kicked off something called the New Cinema Club, with Warrendale as our opening film.

And um that did extremely well, I sold it to HTV. And um they put it out the night that Granada were putting out Miss World. You know, so suddenly the reputations of these two companies were switched.

And it attracted an awful lot of attention. And Lord Harlech himself was involved in all of this; they made it the cover of their Annual General Report and so on. So things took off from there.

I was then involved in features that either didn't have a distributor, or had a distributor but didn't have an exhibitor, or that had fallen foul of censorship.

I was trying to sort of 'unblock' those things, just through showing them to the press and building up a membership. I had more members than the NFT at one point!

Especially when...the biggest single thing I did was to rent the Royal Festival Hall and persuade John Trevelyan to show everything he'd been cutting out of films that year.

And I sold 2,000 seats before I'd cleared my throat to announce it!

IF: The New Cinema Club changed venues quite a lot didn't it?

DH: Almost every month! We got kicked out of one or two places. When we showed *Quiet Days in Clichy*...I was actually, when that screening was due to take place for members I was on my way to the Cannes Film Festival.

When I got there, there was a telegraph waiting for me from my right-hand lady, saying we've been kicked out of the screening room, what do I do now?

She was just amazing, she just bussed the audience out somewhere else, which she'd found at half an hour's notice.

IF: How did you build audiences? Was it partly through the underground press?

DH: Uh to some extent. That's where a lot of stuff was reviewed very widely. I mean, *Warrendale* got terrific press, because it was so controversial and so on.

So it was a great opener and in fact I waited to open the club to get the right films, you know. *Warrendale* was the key to it all because it just sort of established our credentials.

And then I used to press show everything as if it was opening commercially. That was really the point, because with those reviews out there, distributors who'd turned things down could sometimes think again.

Television could be interested sometimes. Exhibitors who'd had great worries about how something would be received, they would change their mind. So it was a lot of fun actually.

IF: So films could be picked up as a result...

RK: So how was it, how did you come to move on to Channel 4, how did that opportunity arise?

DH: A lot of luck. I was at a party at Cannes. And ran into Jeremy Isaacs and we got chatting in a corner of the room. I said um that I'd been writing something about film policy for television, and he said I'd be very interested in seeing that, because if there is ever a Fourth Channel, I'm going to apply, you know.

And at that time no-one in television, knew anything about it. But blow me, a couple of years went by, he was announced as the boss of Channel 4. So I dropped him a line, saying do you remember our conversation?

And that was it, I was incredibly lucky. And uh he said, you know, go out there and buy what you fancy, more or less. And I said what's the budget, and he said oh, details. And at the end of the month I rang him up and said I've spent a million pounds and he said well done, keep going! It's not like that now.

RK: That's incredible.

IF: Did he give you a particular brief?

DH: No, not really. People used to ask me what are you looking for, and I would say I don't know until I see it. I just want to respond to what's available. The difficult part was going round the festivals.

I mean I'd been going around festivals for quite a few years selling films. And when I went round saying how much do you want for something, people would say Oh God, drunk again! No-one would take me seriously, 'cos no-one had heard of Channel 4.

'Cos I started doing this in 1980, 18 months or 2 years before we actually went on air. At that lunch I was talking about on November 2nd Jeremy was introducing me to people as the man who'd bought 1500 films before we were on air.

But that was a total exaggeration. We did stockpile a lot.

RK: Did you have to slow down once you'd reached a certain point? Were you having to turn people away?

DH: I was slowed down...

RK: You were slowed down...

IF: You um, did you get into a bit of trouble for um wanting to support the independent film distributors by paying that much more?

DH: You've done your homework haven't you? Well at the beginning, because it was really a blank sheet of paper, we'll just go out there and shop, and I began to realise this could wipe out the independent distributors, if I wasn't careful.

If I went straight out and bought directly then, that would be it. Also it wouldn't [inaudible] because generally the pattern is, and to some extent now, is to get your film shown, released theatrically, and then it's built an audience by the time it gets to television, rather than going straight to television.

So I worked out the best plan was actually to work with the distributors. After all, I'd been one of them, you know. I wouldn't like this happening to me, unless someone started working through me.

So in fact what I would be doing is encouraging distributors to pick up things, and of course for them, knowing that it was going to go to television, or at least that I would be recommending it, made a big difference.

And that worked out alright, but I think what you're referring to, I gave an interview, or did something, was it for Variety?

IF: I think you wrote an open letter to Jeremy Isaacs and then it was reported, in Variety?

DH: Yes, in Variety and Screen [International] and one or two others? Actually quite soon after that I had a bit of a breakdown, and I think that was probably the beginning of it.

Jeremy certainly thought so, 'cos he was far from pleased that I'd copied this letter to other people, you know! But 'um then a number of people thought that this was actually a publicity stunt we'd cooked up between the pair of us.

When he heard that he was hysterical, he thought that it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard! Anyone else would have fired me. And I remember my elder daughter saying to me, you wouldn't have liked it if one of your staff had done it to you.

And I realised she was absolutely right, it was a crazy thing to have done. That was when I was on the brink of losing it completely. Which was actually, at least partly a result of the sudden change in my fortunes.

Because that first meeting I had with Jeremy, when he said uh, you know, you are a distributor, what have you got to sell? Before we go any further. Because you can't go buying for us, unless you've already made some arrangement about the stockpile you've got.

So we had a very uh fulsome discussion where I went through all the titles, and he bought about 95% of what I was handling, just verbally then and there, you know.

So I walked into the office deeply in debt and I walked out as far in the black as I'd been in my life. So my life changed completely in an hour. It was extraordinary.

So that's why I went round the twist afterwards. Unfortunately in Calcutta, which is not a good place to fall apart.

But the Channel looked after me and got me back in one piece, eventually. That was pretty nightmarish really, when it happened. I'd almost forgotten that...

RK: So in terms of um the exhibition of the films that you'd bought in the cinema, did you find that there was a sort of correlation between, you know, did some get picked up for cinema release after they'd been shown on the TV or...

DH: No I don't remember that happening. The pattern was always television first uh then video or whatever it was then, and then...sorry theatrical first, then video, and finally television. Um which worked for everybody, really.

I mean now I know that the window's are getting much shorter, aren't they?

And you see things actually getting a theatrical opening which are often a week and on screen, on video, or video release or television very quickly afterwards, and the theatrical opening has just been a ploy to getting a bit more coverage.

IF: You were involved in setting up the theatrical exhibition for Remembrance, do you remember?

DH: Remind me.

IF: No pun intended! Because Paul Bonner wrote about it in his history of independent television, I think it was through Romaine Hart's Mainline Films and it was shown at Screen on the Hill.

DH: I did do quite a bit for Romaine at one point, but I don't remember that title, can...

IF: Remembrance, it was a Colin Gregg film, I think it was through you that it came about.

DH: Yes, in fact, I might have sold it to her, it might have been that way round, yes I think so, when I was an agent.

IF: Was that quite an exception, you didn't have any other involvement in exhibition?

DH: Well I had quite a lot because I ran the ICA cinema for quite a while. That was a heady period, because, as you say, the New Cinema Club was moving around all the time. I thought once we'd got our own premise, but we never did have.

Um apart from the office in Wardour Street, you know. As a cinema, we used all sorts of places, including the ICA. I didn't realise that they were using me for the first image on the screen when the cinema had been built.

When I went down there in the afternoon to see how things were, there were still guys with pneumatic drills making the portholes. We were showing Theatre of Mr and Mrs Kabal by Borowczyk, [as our] feature.

We'd discovered that the sightlines were pretty appalling, with heads in the way. So we had to heighten the screen, and the only way we could do it was sticking A4 sheets of paper to the top of the screen. Primitive days.

IF: Did you keep up the relationship with the ICA when you were at Channel 4?

DH: No, uh let me think. No I really had to cut off everything else when I started with Channel 4, that was so full time. But no the ICA thing had finished before...

I saw about 4 or 5 directors at the ICA come and go. And it was tricky because they all assumed the cinema was the most commercial part of their operation, which was not quite what I had in mind. We did do something with John and Yoko which caused a huge stir!

I think really one or two of the things I did with New Cinema Club convinced them that when they lost the people who were then running it, that they'd let me try. And indeed I did it for about 6 years. Very heady days!

IF: That was during the 70s?

DH: That was during the 70s, yes. And then I did Essential Cinema, which the BFI have stolen, and never paid for.

Essential Cinema was down in Wardour Street, a bit further down than the office. In the days when The Marquee Club was also operating in Wardour Street, so it was quite a swap-over of audiences sometimes!

IF: That's a very desirable location there.

DH: Yeah, it's just on the corner, I go past it quite often now, and it's no longer a cinema. In fact before I took it over it was run as a sex cinema. We opened with the slogan 'From Tart-House to Art-House'!

RK: I suppose there must have been a sense of, not necessarily cross-over, but people assumed that the kind of films you would be showing would have kind of sexual content and be risqué.

DH: That was more true of the New Cinema Club because of the whole anti-censorship thing, you know. And um Trevelyan and I saw a lot of each other, and had quite a few boozy lunches.

And although we were really at daggers drawn, we never really got angry with each other. I got angry about things he would be doing.

But uh he was extremely clever. I don't know how much you know about Trevelyan. Trevelyan was the Secretary of the British Board of Film Censorship at that time. We had very interesting times together, because he regarded me at first just as a nuisance.

And then he tried to take me on board the way he'd taken Gala Films on board, where he used them, he called them, in fact he called me his safety valve at one point, which I didn't want to be called.

IF: Did you um did you have any involvement with the Banned Season? I mean that was much later, for Channel 4. The Banned Season...

DH: Oh that was entirely mine.

IF: Was it?

DH: Yeah.

IF: Early 90s.

DH: That sounds right.

RK: This is the thing, with Channel 4 seasons there's no, it's very hard to tell which film...I mean you can guess which films are your films but there's no sort of, it doesn't...because as part of our project we've been looking at the Channel 4 Press Packs, and digitizing the Press Packs as well. Which will be available as an online resource for researchers.

Um but anyway we've been looking closely at them, and you don't tend to get credited, whereas Leslie Halliwell, he would introduce the films on air as you know, and there was a sense of this is a Leslie Halliwell season, whereas frustratingly there's not that with your content.

DH: Well you can take it really, anything subtitled would have been mine. In the American and British seasons anything that was independent. It was pre-Sundance days, but I went to the Independent Feature Project screenings in New York quite a few times, and got a lot from there.

Again those were very heady days because I'd tell them I was from Channel 4, and they couldn't believe that someone from London would ring them first thing in the morning and say I saw your film last night, how much do you want for it?

And as for the scheduling, just going through some of those notes this morning, I brought a few along with me, I'm not sure...that I should pass them to you. Sheldon has got a batch, they're all marked confidential, and they've got the prices on them and so forth.

But if you were, without my knowing it, to scrounge what I passed to Sheldon from him, then that would be fine. If you just want a glance at what things looked like...

I was originally thinking of handing you a wadge but if you see actually this is '81, a year before. You can see the sort of things I was recommending to Jeremy, you can see Halliwell's 40s [?] and then a lot of stuff to suggest seasons and ways of putting stuff together.

As I said there's a whole shelf of this stuff.

IF: Were you suggesting ways that films could be put together?

DH: Yes absolutely, I was trying to get away from simply by director or by country, but instead to mix by themes. I'd completely forgotten...one idea I'm still pushing actually, and I mentioned it at this thing because Jeremy never followed up on it.

I want to get the first film festival on television. It's never been done anywhere as far as I know. But the idea would be to have the prizes by the audience and also by a panel of critics or industry people and prizes would include commissions for their next work.

I can see this developing in a way, initially it would be every kind of film, and then a documentary festival, animation festival in turn [inaudible] I would really like to see that happen. I'm going to have another go. I spoke to the new Chief Executive at the [inaudible] and he sounded quite impressed, I'm going to follow up on that.

RK: That would be fantastic.

IF: Now that television is interactive, there's YouTube and Vimeo and everything...

RK: The scheduling side of thing is one thing that I'm very interested in, and I had no idea you know whether you'd been involved in that. I assume that there would have been a scheduling team that you would have...interacted with.

DH: No. Well, I was never involved in that team, but I was always pushing ideas for seasons. It might have been a gay season, women's, films by women filmmakers, or all sorts of different things [inaudible] political seasons, underground seasons and so on. There were masses of suggestions among the stuff I was looking [for]. How many of these actually materialised? I don't know, maybe half a dozen [inaudible].

RK: And did they ever get shown as part of other strands like The Eleventh Hour, or did that strictly contained the Independent Film and Video Department's...?

DH: That was Alan Fountain's. Have you met Alan?

RK: Yes we have met him.

DH: Wonderful guy.

RK: Really really great.

DH: I saw him at this do, first time we met for a long, long time.

IF: So was there a bit of a cross-over? I see here, for example, you recommended Ireland: Behind the Wire by the Berwick Street Film uh Collective. So that was, that would have been an Eleventh Hour type film?

DH: That's right. When I started with them there were only 4 people, including me. The other people came in later. So gradually, things like animation went to Paul Madden, and so it went on. But we did overlap for a while and then people sort of took over those areas completely. A lot of the documentaries which I began to...wound up in the specialised departments, music or whatever.

IF: So you kind of prepared the ground in a way by trying to raise interest in some of these things?

DH: Yeah. I was looking at the whole lot. Except Halliwell, who was sticking with the majors, and had long-term relationships with the majors. And so much of it went on personal relationships.

And of course my relationships were all with the independent distributors – Contemporary and Connoisseur, people like that.

IF: Do you remember a particular film season called In the Pink? Which was gay films. Do you remember that? There were some interesting films, and the season was repeated um and the second time round it had films like Parting Glances and Lianna, the John Sayles film?

DH: Yes - I got both of those and um...

IF: Because I was looking at some viewing figures the other day and I found that the John Sayles film did rather well, about 2.3 million or something. Very good for a film that showed, you know, at 11.35 at night, something like that. That [season] might well have been one that you were involved in...

DH: You're reminding me of things now...just coming back to me. Certainly right from the beginning I thought gay cinema had never really had an airing at all. And um people, I'm just trying to think. I bought things when I was in America that absolutely astounded them - that *anyone* could think of them for television. But we did, to a lot of enthusiasm too.

Something similar happened with Indian films. I was going to Indian festivals and buying a *lot* of Indian films. Not just art-house, but also some popular Indian films like Sholay, you know the great blockbuster. The Indian Gone with the Wind if you like.

And um, in fact it's coming back to me now. That very first session with uh Leslie Halliwell and me, together with Jeremy Isaacs, you know. Jeremy turned to me and said what have you got, and I said something called Sholay. And Leslie said hope you change the name...It was just the sort of tensions between us.

I mean I have had a lot of experience with selling to television, or trying to sell to television, and had been not well treated by either the BBC or ITV. And when I started the job I thought to myself I will never treat people the way I've been treated, because the arrogance of the film buyers when they thought they had it all their own way.

I mean, people were remarkably confident! And I had one of my friends down there, Alan Howden at the BBC I got on with pretty well, but some of the top brass, you'd think you'd come to clean their shoes or something! Really quite unpleasant.

So naturally I wasn't going to behave that way anyway, but I thought I'd remind myself what it was like.

RK: So had you previously managed to sell stuff to ITV, or was it primarily BBC.

DH: I tried ITV but very very seldom. That Warrendale HTV thing was the biggest success. I did sell quite a bit to BBC. Um...I keep wanting to say titles and they've swum away, you know?

IF: HTV, I was looking through some press cuttings, and saw that for HTV you supplied them with summer seasons for about 7 or 8 years?

DH: Yeah, and I did present those too. I used to go down there with changes of shirts in order to do a whole series.

RK: Oh I wonder if those are archived somewhere, that would be great.

IF: Yeah, those were films that were unlikely to have a cinema release, or a general cinema release.

DH: Yeah. Gosh, I'd forgotten about that!

IF: Yeah. Well I'll send you some of the titles, I can't remember the films but it listed some of them. I think The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant was one of them.

DH: Antonio Das Mortas, by Glauber Rocha, I think that was one of them, yeah.

RK: So was there an average sort of contract template that you were using at Channel 4, in terms of how many years you had the licence for the films?

DH: I'll just show you, those pink pages there – with Title, Director, Summary there...Running Time, Language, Gauge, Quota, Suggested Category (that would indicate what sort of time it would go out). Colour or black and white and then prices, you see.

RK: And was there a real variety in price?

DH: Oh enormously, yes. I mean sometimes people would be after ridiculous prices, and sometimes people would be very very modest. So you'd sort of try and make it what was sort of fair for everybody. I never went wild. But a lot of what I was buying they went straight to re-sell [?] you know so it's jam on the bread and butter.

RK: And were there some that were part of packages?

DH: Oh yeah. I never really enjoyed buying that way, but I mean Cinegate, for example, um wanted to sell me a lot of Fassbinder, and there were a few Fassbinder films I didn't want, including one which I really hated. And eventually they stood their ground so successfully that I had to take them to get what I wanted.

And blow me, when Michael Grade took over, I had...he was going to look at one or two things I'd bought and this particular Fassbinder was the first thing he saw! You know. When I heard that, I thought, my days are numbered!

RK: So how did you find that switch to Michael Grade taking over? 'Cos a lot of people have sort of generalised about that period as representing a real shift; did it for you?

DH: Oh do you know, when the person at the top changes, you'll find everybody does what they're expecting him to want. He doesn't have to lift a finger or say there's a change in policy here. I could sense that commissioning editors, all sorts of people, were changing tack. I only had one meeting with him, it was at the Cannes Festival; I think it was the Channel 4 party.

Someone said Michael wants to meet you and dragged me over. Introduced us and then he said right, first the good news. Constant co-operation, speedy responses, he went through a list of things. And then I waited, dreading it. And he said no bad news. And I thought wow. And I walked away on cloud nine. And I never heard from him again. Didn't reply to a single memo, anything. Didn't have another word from him.

But I still knew what to turn down [inaudible]. I was trying to uh recommend in just the same way that the...the set-up did change. People became more cautious. And they were being...of course with his background, people were thinking more commercially.

No doubt at all. Do you remember the quote from Jeremy at the time; apparently he was very unhappy that he'd got the job, as you probably know. And there was some quote from him, I'm handing you something very special, don't cock it up. It was a huge shame that he left. It was only because of this, you probably know, he went after the BBC, didn't get it, I think tragically, for television history.

You know that line that one of the interviewers was supposed to have said you strike me Mr Isaacs as a man who does not take discipline very kindly. And he knew at that moment he wasn't going to get it. And because, having anticipated...he promised the Opera House they could have him if he didn't get the BBC so in the end he went to the Covent Garden Opera House. Terrible loss.

RK: By then, by the early 90s, Halliwell died in 1989, didn't he?

DH: That sounds about right.

RK: So did you carry on on your own? Did they employ anyone else?

DH: Do you know I can't remember what happened, and beyond that with ITV at all.

RK: Oh I suppose yes because he was in a position where he was still working...

DH: With Granada...

RK: Of course, and then in the early 90s that was the period when the relationship with ITV changed anyway, didn't it, with the [1990] Broadcasting Act. So that would have changed. So did they? I know that there was someone called Mairi Macdonald, but I assumed she joined perhaps when you left.

DH: No, she became my boss.

RK: She became your boss? Really? I can't remember what year she joined.

DH: I had lunch with people like Colin Leventhal and one or two others there, wonderful, very nice lunch. And went back and then the next morning in the paper I saw this ad for what I thought was my job. And that hadn't been mentioned the whole time. And I rang up and said what's this, and [they said] maybe you should apply for it. And I said isn't that what I do? I couldn't understand.

Anyway I wasn't going to apply because I'd kept my own sort of independence, I'd kept my Wardour Office, from way back. And somebody was working for me...had stayed on, and I'd got my own set-up. When I first got the job I said to Jeremy I don't want to go into an organization, I had my time in the civil service when I first began. I want to be as close to being freelance as I have been all my life.

And I managed to get away with that, and kept it that way. Now when Mairi came in she came in from the BBC. I thought we were, how can I put it; I thought we were parallel, and working you know as close colleagues. And indeed I remember suggesting to her that she took over English language and I took over foreign language, or different parts of the world. And she said, it's not the way I want to work.

I found out fairly quickly that she was in charge, and I was assisting her.

RK: She was buying other programme content wasn't she? She was buying TV series as well.

DH: Yes, in fact she went off to the first Sundance...

RK: 'Cos actually it seemed like actually she was more interested in the more controversial end of the spectrum, from what I've seen in interviews.

DH: Oh yes. Have you met her?

RK: No I've spoken to someone at Channel 4, Rosie the archivist, but she wasn't able to find her contact details.

DH: I've got an address for her if you want to talk to her. She's somewhere around Chelsea...and uh yeah. You would find her very good to talk to. I always remember it was at the Independent Feature Project in New York, they had their screenings down in the basement, and they had their bar and general get-together place right up at the top of this building. And um I'd gone up in the lift and ran into Mairi at the bar and she said you're not staying there, what was it you saw? And I said, I left when they started biting the heads of live rats, and she said oh really and jumped in the lift to go down.

No it was OK, we got on fine, and our tastes were quite similar, overlapping, apart from that.

IF: I think when Reservoir Dogs came out she went after that.

DH: She chose that, I think she saw it at Sundance, that was the year of the first Sundance.

IF: I suppose there were...because you'd bought such a wealth of titles in that early period do you remember how long they tended to last, was it about 5 years? So then there was a sea change then later of the films, when the existing ones ran out?

DH: Most of them were 5 years, and there were some 7 years. But I went on stockpiling them but not at the same speed, you know. Because Jeremy had said early on, the one thing I wake up more or less screaming about is a blank screen. Both he and Paul Bonner said that, that was their biggest nightmare. He turned to me and said, it's not something you have to worry about! Because I had certainly got more than I needed.

IF: It was a whole film library there, really.

DH: Yeah. I was so astonished when, I don't know if its among this batch or...somewhere there there's lists of...titles I acquisitioned or negotiated, a lot of titles I'm sure you'll know...Oh look, you were asking about...

IF: The World Cinema, for example, African films, there would have been some cross-over between you and Alan [Fountain], 'cos he was very good at buying films from all sorts of countries?

DH: Yes. I've forgotten the name, the Chilean director who died quite recently.

RK: Oh was it Raul Ruiz?

DH: That's it. My favourite Alan Fountain story was that...Raul Ruiz was a director who I must say I've never warmed to, I don't care for his work at all. But I was at the Toronto Festival one year, and someone grabbed me and said you've got to meet Raul Ruiz. And I thought God what am I going to say. And they introduced us, and just desperate for something to say, I said, you must know Alan Fountain.

And he said 'The shoeshine boys in Mexico City, when they cross themselves, murmur the name of Alan Fountain...' [RK and IF laugh] And I thought gosh I've underestimated this guy, it was one of the funniest things I've ever heard. I told Alan the story when I got back, he just loved it.

IF: It's interesting what you were saying earlier, in the kind of early days when you were at the film festivals people didn't know about Channel 4, they hadn't heard about it. But I suppose through Film on Four, the name, Channel 4's name began to be known around the world.

DH: I can remember pretty soon after the channel was started, there was a screening at Cannes, you know, in the main cinema, packed audience of uh I've forgotten what the film was, but there was a couple of guys talking, and one of them is looking at something on a television screen that appears to be pornographic. And someone else walks in and says 'Channel 4?' And the whole place erupted in hysteria...

IF: That was in the Bob Hoskins film...

DH: Isn't that the woman's name, the title?

RK: Mona Lisa.

DH: The woman's name! That's exactly right!

RK: I mean, did you find that some of your films were, got into clashes with the IBA, were there sort of issues around...

DH: I was never party to that...but um I, I remember there were odd rumours of problems. Um but I don't remember anything coming to a sticky end or being banned. Um I dimly remember that I used to go about boasting that nothing on Channel 4 was ever cut. And then I found out that there had been cuts that I knew nothing about.

Not uh in many things that I'd bought, but um generally cuts had happened, and they made I believe, I believe there was a documentary about Greece and there was rumoured to have been interference from the Palace. They had to pull it, and it never got shown. That was a rumour, I couldn't possibly guarantee that was correct, but a lot of people believed it.

IF: I suppose there must have been films that you were bought which sat around on the shelves so to speak because television wasn't ready for them...

DH: I think...waiting until there were appropriate moments, I don't remember being delayed by censorship. But that season we spoke of, which was the censorship season if you like, they waited for each other in a sense. I think it was Jeremy's idea to put them out in that way, with the Red Triangle, yes?

IF: The Red Triangle films, a lot of those were European art-house films, so they would have been yours.

DH: The whole lot. I remember Mary Whitehouse having a fit about that season. They were such wonderful days, I must say! The best days I've ever had professionally...I miss the festivals, you know. And I miss the people, you know. There would be people who you'd search out on day 1, you know a film from Australia, and you'd swap information immediately, these are the 4 you mustn't miss, or don't waste your time on this one. Within half an hour of meeting someone whose taste you trusted, you could save yourself 4 days of viewing.

RK: When did you stay at the Channel until? When did you leave?

DH: '93, 94. I did 14 years I know, which was a record at that time. It must have been 1980 to 1994.

RK: And what made you want to leave at that point?

DH: Ask Mairi Macdonald. I was 64 when I left. I was expecting to stay a bit longer, but she was gradually sort of building her own empire there.

I think she was, I know she was always a little envious of my sort of freelance situation there. And uh yeah I was quite chuffed because apparently she took on 2 people to replace me. That was flattering!

IF: When you travelled round and talked to people at festivals and so on, did you get a sense of what they thought about the Channel, whether it was known to be the channel for film buffs?

DH: Oh absolutely. People realized. And even before we were on air I think people realized because of what was being acquired, that this was going to be a bit different.

IF: It showed that there was an audience for subtitled films...

DH: Oh yeah, one season I did of Canadian cinema, when I mixed in the subtitled films from Quebec with the English language films from Toronto, and got the same audience, the same viewing figures for subtitled and non-subtitled. I always remember waving that banner and saying it can be done. And the Canadians were over the moon, they'd never had a national season on television before, and maybe since!

RK: Yes I was going to say, I haven't seen any seasons...

IF: I suppose creating a season can give it much more of a push in publicity terms and identity, instead of an individual film which might not get as much recognition.

RK: Were you ever involved in writing any of the copy of the Press Packs, or was that something you didn't get involved with?

DH: I seem to remember getting occasional questions from Chris Griffin-Beale. Wonderful guy. I'm sure everybody's told you – enormously popular at the channel. But generally speaking I would be handing over as much material as I'd gathered, you know?

RK: Certainly we've felt that the Press Packs are an amazing resource, and in the early days there would be pages on each film, with synopses and reviews that had been picked out from the press, from when they'd been released. I think it was a guy called Alan Frank who wrote some of the movie stuff.

DH: Don't recognize his name.

IF: There were one or two people from TV Times who provided copy.

RK: And I guess Chris probably wrote quite a bit himself, as well.

DH: Oh I think so, yes. I'm glad you met David Rose. I met him at this do, too, I hadn't seen him for a long long time. But we would sometimes find ourselves at the same festivals. And he would be asking me about any filmmakers I'd discovered who were worth exploring for their future work.

Atom Egoyan, I remember turning David onto Atom, saying, you know, watch this guy he's really...actually it's a while since we've heard of him, isn't it? I thought he was doing some remarkable work, waiting for the big one. It's not happened yet, not on the scale I thought it was going to.

IF: David Rose worked with some amazing directors apart from the British ones, you know, like Tarkovsky and Wim Wenders.

DH: There were one or two people I tried to encourage him to get together with, like Jim Jarmusch, but he didn't want to know...No he, there was an early Jim Jarmusch, I said you really mustn't miss this. When he came back from the screen he said, have you gone raving mad? But this happens.

I mean I don't need to tell you, but you often think you're running on complete parallel lines with someone, and then you suddenly look at someone in wonder and say you just cannot be serious!

IF: Did you have a sense...what did you think of Film on Four, for example? Did you think that it had a house style through the choices that David made?

DH: I think that he was generally wide open. One of the things I came across when I was thumbing through [paperwork] before I came here was that I recommended Bleak Moments for acquisition, Mike Leigh. And it got turned down. I was amazed, absolutely amazed!

And then I discovered that David was actually commissioning work from Mike Leigh, and didn't want Bleak Moments, which he didn't regard as highly as I did, for one thing. I was fascinated to see a thing [?] just in the last week or two by Mike Leigh about Bleak Moments, that he'd seen it again, and how proud of it he was, which I thought was great. Worst title in the world, I think. Worse title than Reservoir Dogs! Could have called it Stay Away or Don't Come! ...What else can I possibly tell you?

IF: Well we've covered quite a lot...One of the things that, another thing that's in Paul Bonner's book, he mentioned that the Chief Engineer Ellis Griffiths set up this telecine, really top of the range, telecine operation to get the best quality out of your purchases. Did you have any feelings that, were you kind of satisfied with the way that they came across on the screen?

DH: I was...early on I found that there were ITV people who were absolutely appalled at the thought that some early cinema was being transmitted. But I didn't get involved in that. But I was shocked at the purely technical thinking. Ellis, yeah, I met him once...it was at the, have you ever seen the, there's a photo of the whole bunch of us before the channel went on air...we went to some country house somewhere...

RK: Yes I've seen that, it may have been in Broadcast or somewhere like that.

DH: Yeah. It's like a group of footballers or something. I seem to remember wearing a pinstripe suit for that, it can't be true.

RK: Was that a team-building, as it would be called now, a team-building weekend.

DH: Yeah, it was to meet each other. I remember Sue Woodford coming with a baby under her arm, saying sorry I've been late but I've been having him! ...That's when I met Alan Fountain, and all of them really.

RK: And continuing with the technology side of things, did you ever get into discussions about sort of whether things should be panned and scanned, or shown in the letterbox-framed format?

DH: Not really. I was always suggesting things should be shown as they [originally] were, you know the way the director intended them [to be seen]. But um no I never did get involved in that, nor did I want to particularly. Can remember early on arguing that everything should be shown without commercial breaks! That didn't go down particularly well!

IF: Did you um did you come across uh any viewer correspondence about films, did you ever ask to see the duty log?

DH: Yes, I used to get them all from [?], the duty logs, and uh very enjoyable they were too.

RK: Were they quite a mixed bag for your, your purchases?

DH: Oh yeah. Actually I thought at one point of writing a radio play called Duty Calls. And it was a whole new, to get that feedback, you know, was something quite new. And the press feedback too, was very interesting. Some of them were very dismissive, you know. But um luckily I did have quite a few best friends and um, David Robinson particularly, in fact David came on screen to introduce quite a bit too...

RK: Yes I've seen reference to that...

IF: That's right, that was a series that he introduced, uh Sebastiane and uh...

DH: That's right, yeah I encouraged that. David and I...I took over his job when I did my National Service. He was the Education Officer's Clerk. And I took over from him. And I made him join seat in the town [?], on first release, at Bournemouth. And that is what turned him onto cinema.

Then he went up to Cambridge and started the Film Society there and so on.

IF: He wrote for Contrast as well, didn't he?

DH: Oh yes. And he was demobbed well before I was, and one day after I'd been demobbed I met him in the strand. And I said what are you doing? And he said I' secretary to Basil Wright. And he said what are you doing? And I said I'm working for the National Assistance Board...

I still think he's as good a critic as we've ever had, a wonderful critic, so knowledgeable, great taste. Now he runs this Silent Film Festival, doesn't he. Do you know that, Pordenone? He has a place down in Bath, I haven't seen him for a long time.

IF: A real expert on Chaplin in particular I think.

DH: I discovered Kevin Brownlow at the same time, when he was 13, and on his second film! Have you come across, do you know Kevin at all?

IF: Yeah, yeah I've met him once. He started as an amateur filmmaker, on short gauge film, didn't he?

DH: Yes, that's when I was working for Amateur Cine-World, and I was writing about him then. I just couldn't believe the talent and enthusiasm. He was already putting Napoleon together, under his bed, you know.

IF: Precocious, yeah.

DH: It's so sad that now, the work that he's done, the whole Hollywood series, all of this. Jeremy, again, supported him through thick and thin. But now he's struggling. And if anyone should be backed for whatever he wants to do...I think his work is so phenomenal.

IF: He uh Channel 4 showing some of those films, did you have any involvement...or was that Leslie Halliwell's?

DH: Did you mean Kevin's work?

IF: Kevin's restorations.

DH: Kevin and Jeremy already had a connection. Because Jeremy when he was at Thames had already backed the whole series.

IF: Is there anything we haven't asked?

RK: I'll just have a quick check.

DH: If you think of anything afterwards, you've got my e-mail address.

RK: So when you stopped working at Channel 4 did you stop working in the industry completely?

DH: No no I still dabble, to this day! I still have the rights to L'Age d'Or, and I sold that to the BFI recently, and I've sold it to America, and I've just done a deal in Poland for it. And um no there are one or two, L'Age d'Or and I are the same age as it happens! There were one or two other things I still...There's a film called Best Boy by Ira Wohl, which I still handle. And there's some animation [inaudible] I've still got fingers in a few pies, I can't imagine how it must be to stop dead, when you're as involved as I've always been, in something like this. It must be an absolute nightmare to be cut off. I did some consultancy with the BFI; I've always had a kind of love/hate relationship with the BFI...

RK: Lots of people do. That's the other thing – I found that there's a collection of your documents at the BFI. [DH: Really?] Were you not aware of that?

DH: What's all the stuff?

RK: Some papers relating to your early career, and to some of the period at Channel 4 as well.

DH: That's interesting. I have, from time to time, had a bit of a clear-out, and it's quite possible, I mean, I know they have a lot of prints there in their archive, physical prints. I'd forgotten that they'd got documents from me...and oddly enough, when I despair looking at, I live surrounded by piles of paper, which I always tell myself I'm going to sort out when I'm older. The time has come really. I had the same

conversation with Sheldon, who made me promise that anything I'm going to chuck out I need to turf his way.

RK: Have you ever thought of writing a biography?

DH: You know it's funny I quite a few people have been pushing me to do memoirs, and now that I've got grandchildren I feel more that way. I was writing for so long, and writing against deadlines and so on, I was quite pleased to stop. I felt a bit written out when I stopped writing. So I'm not in a hurry to do that.

And also I look back at some things I have got like all these files, like all the old New Cinema programmes and I think, it's all there really.

RK: And it's such an interesting story, and I think, just the history...just film buying as a profession, people don't tend to write about it very much, and it takes a lot to understand how it actually works, piecing it together. But I think it is an area that deserves to have more attention.

It's great that Sheldon is looking at that in more detail as well. There's definitely more work to be done in that area.

DH: He and I got on like a house on fire, you know, such a nice guy. That was the first time anyone has asked me about the past, you know.

RK: Really? Had you not been approached at all?

DH: Not really.

IF: I'm reading a book on distribution of independent film and video, but it tends to deal with The Other Cinema and the London Filmmaker's Co-operative, and so on. All that side of it is very interesting, but there was all your work as well, which is another kind of distribution...not so well documented.

DH: Yeah, I was more of an agent than a distributor. The Other Cinema, and Nick Hart-Williams in particular saw themselves in competition with me. And the last thing I wanted to be was in a competitive situation. If I see something is going to happen then great. I always tended to want to unblock obstacles that are in the way of good work being shown and seen.

IF: 'Cos it's always been such an underdeveloped network anyway, hasn't it, independent cinema, and the art-house network...

DH: In many ways now, though, there seem to be far more outlets than there ever have been before. In those days it was restricted to things like The Academy Cinema [inaudible] just a handful of distributors, and very few cinemas, and um television generally turning its nose up at anything that was too offbeat.

I mean it's so much healthier now, in many ways my job [inaudible] I wouldn't be doing any of it now, with today's technology, I would not be in demand.

I watch my grandchildren totally at home with all this stuff [inaudible]. My grandson, who is 12 years old, is absolutely hooked on the idea of film festivals, and is determined to become a director.

RK: That's amazing, had you spoken to him about it?

DH: He knew what I did. But somehow he's got, if anything, more enthusiasm than me.

RK: And at that age, it's quite rare really. What do you think about the stuff that Channel 4 exhibits now on the Film4 channel? Do you think it makes some interesting purchases still?

DH: I think so, um, I think...there's not so much foreign language stuff being bought now, and whether that's, that's the same as BBC of course, and there's a sort of conviction that anything subtitled is for a minority audience, which I don't think is true.

Clearly, what's happening now, with Scandinavian series' going mainstream, subtitles are not an obstacle. People haven't quite twigged that that applies to film as well.

IF: Yes I mean you do get the occasional film, but they tend to be quite late at night. And Film4 doesn't feel like it's an outlet for Channel 4's own films really, I've quite rarely seen them. But uh film is now recognized as part of the remit.

DH: Yes.

IF: Which is good.

DH: And now of course BBC have copied Channel 4, in terms of production, almost determined to copy anything they can see anybody else doing that worked.

IF: It's interesting to see how uh Channel, when, the innovation that Channel 4 did then other people copied, especially BBC2, so then they were the victims of their own success in a way.

DH: Yes. Interesting, a trip down memory lane.

RK: It's been so good to finally talk to you, it's been great.

DH: Anytime.

RK: We might have more questions when we're looking through it later...

IF: Thanks so much. Maybe another time you could talk more about the earlier period, because that's of great interest as well, the New Cinema Club.

DH: I do have a lot of anecdotes, I haven't told you about the night I shared a bed with Scorsese!

...It was at the Oberhausen festival, and Scorsese had come to his first festival, with a short called The Big Shave.

RK: Oh yeah I've seen it.

DH: Now the general audience thought this was a comedy, they laughed themselves sick. You know, a man goes to the bathroom and shaves himself to death. Anyway I went back to my modest little lodgings in Oberhausen, and I went to the bar and the

man behind the bar said I'm sorry the whole town is so full of people we've had to put somebody else to share your bed.

I said really? I raced up the stairs two at a time, and there was this figure in purple pyjamas saying my name's Martin Scorsese, and we looked at each other. And I said I've just seen your film The Big Shave, and he said is it OK if I share your bed, and I said it's OK but in the morning I use the bathroom first!

And I never saw him again.

IF: Do you remember how he felt about the reaction to his film? Did he mind?

DH: I'm not even sure he was in the audience, I've a funny feeling he missed the screening, he certainly never commented on it.

OK, how are we doing?

RK: When we've done a transcript we'll send it to you, along with the document...