

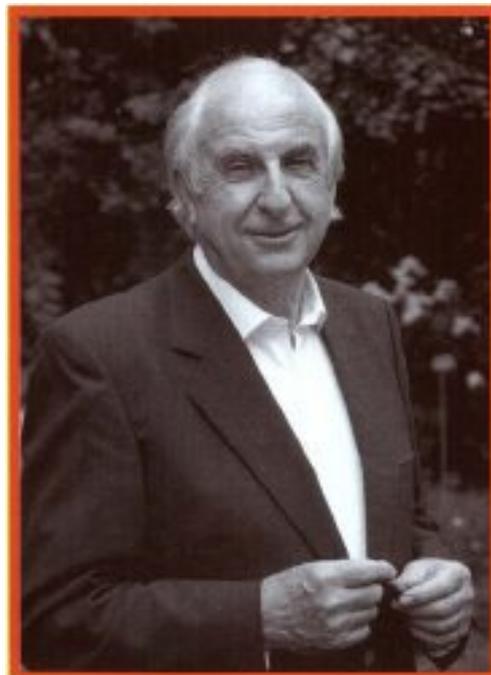
COPYRIGHT BBC

**NOT MANY PEOPLE REMEMBER THAT HUW WHELDON CUT HIS TEETH ON A CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME, "ALL YOUR OWN"  
BELOW: MICHAEL BOND**

## Coming To You Live

**Mention the name Michael Bond and images of a small bear in a duffel coat and floppy black hat immediately spring to mind. It's not well known, however, that Michael emerged, not from Darkest Peru, but from a career as a Television Cameraman. For over a decade, during the industry's formative era, he worked in London for the BBC at Lime Grove and The Television Theatre. It wasn't until reaching the grade of Senior Cameraman at the new Television Centre that he decided to move from White City to Paddington.**

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BARWELL



Alan Coren once remarked that television is more interesting than people. If it were not, we should have people standing in the corners of our rooms. He could have said that working in it was often much more fun than watching it.

I count myself as fortunate to enter the industry when I did. It was 1956 and ITV was about to start up. The new companies were offering all manner of inducements to anyone with even a smattering of experience: better pay, cars and interest-free mortgages to name but a few. Consequently there was a big exodus of staff from the BBC's Lime Grove studios and those aspiring cameramen left behind found themselves thrown in at the deep end of a rapidly emptying pool.

When I joined, seven crews were responsible for almost the entire studio output in the UK and, apart from films, almost everything went out live. In those days it was an elite job, not so very different from what it must have felt like being a pilot in the early days of flying, and I never lost the feeling of excitement that came over me whenever I entered a studio.

If only they could speak, I wondered, what tales the kapok-covered walls of Lime Grove could tell of *The Wicked Lady*, *Fanny by Gaslight*, *The 39 Steps* and all the other films that had been made there in its heyday. Crossing the invisible line drawn between the red plush seating of the Television Theatre just around the corner on Shepherd's Bush

Green, and being able to mingle backstage with the artistes waiting to go on never failed to give me a kick. It was in the Television Theatre that Eamonn Andrews uttered his immortal phrase 'This is Your Life' and Danny Blanchflower replied 'Oh, no it isn't!'. That I was actually being paid to do something I enjoyed so much seemed almost too good to be true.

Studio H at Lime Grove, the smallest of the four studios, was where most cameramen started off. It was where you could do the least harm whilst gaining the most experience in the shortest possible time. It was home to a multitude of programmes: from Barry Bucknell - the tame home handyman - who did it almost entirely by himself every other week, to Percy Thrower the indefatigable gardening expert - who regularly nailed his onions to batons of wood in case they fell over during transmission.

And from Studio H came All Your Own - a programme devoted to children who showed a particular talent in one way or another. Although in later years he chose to ignore the fact, it was here that Huw Wheldon first cut his teeth as a presenter. He had a brisk, no-nonsense manner which went down well with the viewers. Once, in an unguarded moment over coffee in the canteen, he let slip that if any of the participants showed signs of being difficult he threatened them with a quick Chinese burn. The recollection prompted one of his inimitable guffaws of laughter.

Whether his story was true or tongue in cheek, there were occasions when even he didn't have the last word. Having interviewed a small boy who had built a life-size harpsichord out of matchsticks, he turned all avuncular and posed the obvious question: 'And what do you plan to make next?'

While waiting for an answer, he placed one hand on the instrument - rather heavily it seemed to those of us watching through our viewfinders. Sure

enough, there was an ominous crunching noise from somewhere deep inside. 'Another harpsichord,' came the sad reply. Then there was the time when an interviewee brought along his two prize pets - a mouse and an eagle. Huw launched into a long dissertation about how interesting it was that in the wild the one was the mortal enemy of the other,



**PAT KIRKWOOD AS MARIE LLOYD IN  
"THE PASSING SHOW".**

**PHOTO COPYRIGHT BBC**

yet there they both were, getting on like a house on fire. At that moment, almost inevitably, the eagle gobbled up the mouse!

It was in Studio H one evening, after tracking in over a trestle table in order to show a close-up of a piece of equipment being demonstrated by Baron, the Society photographer, that the producer called for me to crane down. The camera was mounted on one of the early Vinten dollies and it was part of the tracker's job to raise or lower the arm by means of a wheel. My tracker, who'd already shown a remarkable lack of aptitude for the job when he managed to get the dolly jammed into a corner of the studio and couldn't extricate it, panicked and began blindly turning the wheel as

fast as he could. There was a crash as we landed on one end of the table. Making a grab for the opposite end in a vain attempt to hold it down, Baron, who had cultivated an upper class accent for television, reverted to his humble beginnings rather quicker than it normally took him to recommend 1/50th at fl 1.

His cry of 'Gorblimey!' made next the morning's headlines.

Towards the end of 1956 the government ended the so-called Toddler's Truce - a blissful period between six and seven every evening when screens went blank so that parents could put their children to bed - and in February 1957, sandwiched between all the other programmes, Studio H became an important arena in the battle of the ratings when the formidable Grace Wyndham Goldie launched Tonight. The early evening news was still only ten minutes long and Tonight was the equivalent of a daily newspaper's middle pages.

Hosted by Cliff Michelmore, who had graduated from producing All Your Own, it went on the air at ten to seven every weekday evening and quickly established itself a regular audience of eight million. It brought together a formidable array of talent and in retrospect the credits read like a Who's Who? of television.

Donald Baverstock was the producer and studio interviewers included Derek Hart, Geoffrey Johnson Smith, Kenneth Allsop, Christopher Brasher; Julian Pettifer; Brian Redhead and Polly Elwes. Fyfe Robertson, Alan Whicker, MacDonald Hastings, Trevor Philpott and John Morgan provided outside reports; film cameraman Slim Hewitt contributed dead-pan cockney pieces written by Tony Jay, and the film editor was Tony Essex.

For a time it was directed by the urbane and supremely unflappable Ned Sherrin. He needed to remain calm, for more often than not the programme was literally put together on the air while film reports were being biked across London, or the sound was being dubbed elsewhere in the building.

Chaos wasn't confined to the

gallery. The old Marconi cameras had seen better days and breakdowns were frequent. Almost unbelievably insensitive by present day standards, they required so much light it wasn't unknown for the heat from the lamps to set the sprinkler system off. Another hazard was that if they weren't kept moving, pictures had a nasty habit of sticking to the tube and had to be burnt off by pointing the lens at the nearest bright light. Conversely, catching a bright reflection in shot would cause the picture to peel.

Camera cables were many times thicker than they are today and weighed a ton. They were attached by string to the base of the old Eclair pedestals and since cable guards hadn't been invented it was easy to run over your own umbilical cord. It was then a case of waiting for a suitable moment between shots to get back over it again. No self-respecting cameraman was ever without a supply of string, a reel of adhesive tape and a supply of yellow chalk for marking the floor.

Despite the many problems, old diaries I kept at the time show the enormous variety of programmes being put out in the fifties. Studio G was reserved for bigger things; epics such as *The Passing Show* - a series of 90 minute extravaganzas covering popular entertainment during the first half of the century. They were the brain child of Michael Mills, the then doyen of BBC Light Entertainment, who had a reputation for pushing things to their absolute limit.

The most successful episode was *The Story of Marie Lloyd*. It was scheduled to last for two hours and during that time Pat Kirkwood, who played the lead, had to age from 12 years to 52 years old. She had so many costume changes they

completely filled three six-foot rails and she spent half the time dashing wildly about the studio, stripping off as she went in order to be made-up and ready for her entrance in the following scene.

There were over 100 different sets stored in the adjoining scene dock and the huge sound-proof doors leading to it were permanently manned, opening and closing like Harrods during the Spring sales. At one stage things became so frantic a group of scene hands suddenly found themselves part of the action, but since the setting was a working class parlour where there was a party taking place, no one noticed a few extra guests with their sleeves rolled up.

At the end of it all Pat Kirkwood received that rare accolade, a totally spontaneous ovation from everybody in the studio; cameramen, sound crew, scene hands, electricians, make-up girls, dressers and the rest of the cast.

Playing the part of Marie Lloyd's manager was the actor, Peter Bull. Because he was a well-known collector of bears, our paths were to cross many times over the years, but one occasion which sticks in my mind was when, for some reason which totally escapes me now, he had to toss a very small baby into the air and then catch it on the way down.

Peter was a lovely man, but I doubt if he had ever been near a baby in his life and he was clearly terrified of dropping it; a fear which rapidly communicated itself to the infant which not surprisingly began roaring its head off. Two or three inches of free fall was not enough for the director: He kept calling for more, and the baby's mother, alarmed at the thought of

losing the performance fee, started hissing 'Higher! Higher!' Despite Peter Bull's protestations, the combination of Mammon and Mama was a force not to be denied and the baby must have grown up with a nervous tic.

On Sunday, February 2 1958, another Grace Wyndham Goldie programme went on the air. It was called *Monitor* and it marked a further step up the ladder of fame for Huw Wheldon. A film school in its own right, it gave many directors such as John Schlesinger and Ken Russell a chance to hone their talents.

An edition devoted to Kurt Weill found me tracking through the bead curtains of a Berlin night-club set in order to isolate Lotte Lenya singing *Surabaya Johnny*. As she began her move towards camera I gave the signal to start the track back. Nothing happened - it later transpired the dolly had lost its power - but at the time all I was aware of was Lotte Lenya's face registering alarm as it grew larger and larger in my viewfinder. Fortunately, teutonic discipline triumphed - she carried on singing to the bitter end and afterwards I was congratulated on the remarkably tight close-up.

Tight close-ups were the hallmark of *Face to Face*. They were considered daring at the time, with the cameras cutting both forehead and chin as they went in to show the subject, warts and all. Directed by Hugh Burnett, John Freeman set a standard in the art of interviewing in depth which has yet to be surpassed.

Studio E saw the start of the golden age of children's television. In the beginning *Children's Hour* had only gone out on Sundays, but in 1950 it was increased to three days a week, and later to every day. For the very young there was *Sooty*, and by the end of the decade older children were being catered for with programmes like *Crackerjack* and *Blue Peter*. There were live plays too, and for a while Michael Crawford played one of the *Famous Five* in *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*. Rather

**THE "TONIGHT" PRODUCTION TEAM, 1957. PRODUCER, DONALD BAVERSTOCK IS ON THE LEFT, AND JONATHAN MILLER, FAR RIGHT, AS GUEST ARTIST. PHOTO COPYRIGHT BBC**



Copyright BBC

fittingly Billy Bunter (Gerald Campion), became a Brighton restaurateur:

Programmes involving marionettes were always the worst to work on. At least with humans there was usually some indication of when they were going to make a move, and perhaps even more importantly, where they would be heading - a momentary tightening of the lips or a slight movement of the eyes. Marionettes took off without the slightest warning, their arms, legs and head going in wildly different directions. Cameramen used to sweat more over some of the half hour puppet shows than they ever did on a Sunday night play.

Studio E was also the venue for Kitchen Magic. Fanny Cradock was the most professional of performers. It's one thing putting together a half-hour cookery programme in an editing suite; selecting the shots from a multitude committed to video tape over a period of hours. It's another matter entirely doing it live and still coming out on time, which is what she did week after week. The programme was also recorded on 16mm film for archive purposes, and on one occasion we were waiting for the OK to wrap up when word came down from the gallery that the sound supervisor had a problem and could it be done all over again.

Mrs Cradock didn't suffer such things lightly. Picking up a large carving knife, she waved it at the microphone 'Where is he?' she cried. 'Bring him to me. I'll have his balls off and fry them in batter!' Needless to say, the fault cleared itself in record time.

The phrase 'It can't be done' didn't have a place in anyone's vocabulary in those pioneering days. On one occasion a sound engineer, urgently in need of an echo chamber, had the bright idea of rigging a microphone and speaker at opposite ends of one of the toilets at the Television Theatre. All went well until in the middle of a musical number someone pulled the chain!



**THE HEAT FROM THE LIGHTS OFTEN PUT GILBERT HARDING, RIGHT, IN A BAD MOOD ON "WHAT'S MY LINE?"**

PHOTO COPYRIGHT BBC

Gilbert Harding used to complain loudly about the heat from the lights. It often put him in a bad mood for What's My Line? and he was apt to take it out on some unfortunate who was being tardy with his mime. He once told a contestant that he was tired of looking at him.

One day, when he was particularly short tempered, an enterprising lighting supervisor rigged an extra and entirely unnecessary 2K lamp pointing straight at him and then, after a lot of complaining, agreed to turn it off. From that moment on Gilbert's lamp became part of the standard rig.

Paradoxically, Music Hall, which had been killed off by television, found a new home there for a while. Richard Afton was a theatrical impresario of the old school, who always directed rehearsals from behind a cloud of cigar smoke in the stalls. He liked nothing better than to dress The Television Toppers up as nuns and have them sing Ave Maria as they walked down the ramp carrying all before them. He had also cornered the market in unlikely turns; the sort of acts Woody Allen filmed with love and affection in Broadway Danny Rose. People who could hum one tune while whistling another, and at the same time juggle half a dozen plates in the air. They were the backbone of variety, but sadly most of them were living on borrowed time. One brief appearance on television and that was that.

Television drama came - appropriately enough - from studio D, and being live, it was the most demanding of all programme making. Film inserts were a luxury, only resorted to if there was no other alternative. Once the action was cued there was no going back. There were occasions when for one reason or another rehearsals went badly or became so bogged down a

complete run-through was never achieved, so there was no knowing if it would work at all. But somehow it always did. The adrenaline flowed and colds which had flourished during rehearsals totally dried up on the night.

To most outsiders the complexity of it all; the fact that anything ever went out at all was a source of wonder. Often, if you took someone on a guided tour, all they could think of to say at the end was: "Where does the man who reads the news sit?" It always seemed a bit of a let-down to reply: "Alexandra Palace". One evening Maurice Wiggin, the television critic, was allowed into the gallery to watch a production. As it happened the Mole camera crane developed a squeak. Afterwards he wrote about a "mole" being loose in the studio.

Attacks of temperament were rare; there simply wasn't time and they got scant sympathy. Rudolph Cartier, in particular, had a short way with anyone who complained. Born in Vienna, he had served his apprenticeship in the pre-war Berlin UFA studios and was a genius at tackling productions on a grand scale, producing effects far in excess of the resources he had at his disposal. Once, during a break in rehearsal while some technical problem was being sorted out, a forlorn looking extra rose up out of a thick cloud of dry ice and asked via the Studio Manager if she could stand for a while. The response was short and to the point. "Certainly not! Tell her zis is her chosen profession!"

That line always comes to mind whenever I hear anyone complain about

their job. Most of these rejoinders lost something in translation, for it was part of the Studio Manager's job to keep the peace.

'Tell her zis is her chosen profession' became simply 'No, I'm afraid not.'

Producer Douglas Moodie's classic 'Tell that girl she's not getting value for money at her acting school' became 'Would you mind doing that again?'

For the technical crew it was a continual memory test; repeating at speed shots and camera positions carefully worked out during rehearsals, knowing all the time that there was no stopping.

For the performers, who until then had spent their time rehearsing in church halls with chalk lines for walls, there was the need to accustom themselves quickly to the set, making even the simplest of things, like the opening and closing of a door, look as though it was something they did every day of their life.

With more than enough problems to occupy their minds, they often displayed a touching faith in the ability of a large camera dolly to stop on a sixpence, sometimes only a matter of a few inches away from their face. After a particularly fast move across the studio from one set to another - a move which we had never quite made during rehearsal - we ended up hitting the end of a bed in which Felix Aylmer was about to die. To say he didn't bat an eyelid would be untrue, but just as the vision mixer cut to us he did give a very realistic final tremor.

I don't recall a drama production ever totally grinding to a halt, although there were times when it came perilously close. There were also occasions when one saw impending disasters through the viewfinder and there was absolutely nothing to be done about it.

Once, when I was holding a shot of an empty window, an elderly actor who was making his way back to the dressing room, appeared on the other side just as the director cut. He then proceeded to make a meal out of peering into the set to see what was going on. Since the action of the play was supposed to be taking place on the thirtieth floor of a New York skyscraper, the air in the gallery was blue for a while.

It went an even darker shade of blue during the closing stages of what had been a long court-room drama. When the foreman returned to deliver the verdict his eyes suddenly went dead; always a bad sign. There was a pause while he mentally tossed a coin. Mathematically it should have been a fifty-fifty chance, but the dice were loaded against him. He got it wrong and phones in the duty office began ringing as viewers complained. He was lucky to get out of the studio alive.

They were fun days and one could fill a book with stories about them. But in the early sixties BBC Television began moving to the new purpose-built, state of the art Centre at the White City. A senior cameraman by then, I helped form Crew 17 - and that was just in London alone. Anything was now possible, but as with everything in life there was a price to pay. With the arrival of video editing it was like working on a production line; all very efficient, but the sense of immediacy had gone and with it a lot of the job satisfaction. There were no longer the highs when things went well or the lows when they didn't.

Eventually, on April 1 1966, I took the plunge and moved back into the real world outside, swapping the panning handle for the pen. The years went by, until one day in 1990 I received an invitation from the BBC to attend a party being held at the Lime Grove Studios to mark their final closing. The old scene dock, now empty of sets, had been turned into a buffet and was packed with familiar faces. Some people came bounding up, hardly changed after almost twenty-five years; others hobbled around with the aid of a stick, hard to recognise.

It was a strange occasion; a step back into the past. But the memory of all the happy times I had spent there was still fresh in my mind and I felt sad as I said goodbye for the last time. Sad that in more ways than one the party was over. Perhaps it's a sign of age, but there is a lot to be said for the days when programmes occasionally finished early and there was time to relax for a few moments; watching the potter's wheel, or the endlessly viewable speeded-up film of the London to Brighton train journey. There was even a time when the BBC rang a bell during the interval of a play to warn viewers it was time to take their seats again.

Nowadays they are hardly allowed to draw breath in case they switch channels.

Sometimes, of course, the reverse was true. By sheer coincidence, while I was writing this piece I received a letter out of the blue from Pat Kirkwood. She has just finished writing her autobiography and someone had drawn her attention to a mention I made in *Bears and Forebears* of her mammoth performance in Marie Lloyd. She reminded me, among many things, that the programme had over-run by three-quarters of an hour, but in the excitement nobody cared! I had totally forgotten both the over-running and a moment towards the end of the show when she collapsed and died as she was taking her final bow. We were all so caught up with the story one of the technicians ran onto the set and tried to revive her. Like the earlier occasion when a group of scene hands were caught in shot, it looked so authentic no one outside the studio realised it was a mistake. As Pat Kirkwood says in her manuscript "... a 'live show' if ever there was one.

But nothing is forever, and in the years since I left, the BBC has also changed immeasurably. Once upon a time, for all its faults, it was the envy of the world; now it seems to have lost its way, like a giant ship without a rudder, and with it has gone much of the respect it once enjoyed. To an outsider the staff, not surprisingly, seem dispirited. That, too, is sad. One hopes it won't stay that way for ever.

The Lime Grove studios have been demolished - there was no last-minute reprieve, and where they once stood there is now a block of flats. In its day it had been a wonderful dream factory; a miniature Hollywood in a London back street. There had been a spirit of adventure, of pushing things to their limit, and for the public something for everyone, regardless of viewing figures.

The BBC missed their chance when the wreckers moved in. I'm sure a lot of us would have been only too happy to make an offer for some of the rubble; enough perhaps to build a small flower container in the garden, or even a tiny window box. It would have been nice to be able to point to it and say: 'Once upon a time that was part of Studio G - Ah, yes, I remember it well!' ■