The copyright of this recording is vested in the BECTU History Project, the interview is with James Gilbert interviewed by John Taylor with possible interruptions by Stephen Peet. James Gilbert has mainly been a producer and director for television and the date is 5 March 1990, File No 130.

SIDE 1, TAPE 1

John Taylor: Just start at the beginning. When were you born and where

Jimmy Gilbert: I was born in Edinburgh in 1923 and my father, he was Irish, he came from the West Coast of Ireland and he was sent up to Scotland and I was born and brought up in Edinburgh. I was at school there.

John Taylor: Which school.

Jimmy Gilbert: I went to Edinburgh Academy. And then went on and had one year at Edinburgh University.

John Taylor: Anything about your childhood at all.

Jimmy Gilbert: My mother was very keen on the theatre and I used to go to the Wilson Barrat and Bandon Thomas company a lot in Edinburgh. We used to go on Friday night. I also had a great interest even then in the Scottish comedians and pantomimes we used to go to. I suppose I wasn't distinguished at school at all but I was very interested, as ever with people in our business, in the amateur theatrical side, Gilbert and Sullivan operas and school plays and all that sort of thing.

John Taylor: And you took part in those.

Jimmy Gilbert: Umm, and my mother was obviously very keen whereas the other boys would just do it I was sent for special tuition. If I was playing a leading part I had to go and get lessons, singing lessons, I had to get voices production and movement, in other words had to do it properly. I got quite a good indoctrination that way, played the piano, and learned the guitar later, all very much, my mother was very wise, I wasn't really interested in old piano pieces but I could play very quickly by ear, so she stopped me having music lessons and then I became very interested. And I had a band.

John Taylor: What kind of band.

Jimmy Gilbert: Not until I was about 13 or 14. I played piano, and it was piano, drums, guitar, base, clarinet and we used to do gigs. In fact our lead guitarist, a chap called Crossbie ended up as one of the bosses of Ealing Studios so I met him much later in my career when I was directing and he was in charge and by then he'd become an obsessive music nut. So I had a musical background and the only school prizes I won were the reading prizes of which there were a junior and senior one. So that was obviously the interest right the way through school, was music and the theatre.

John Taylor: Scottish pantomimes must have been quite something in those days.

Jimmy Gilbert: Well it was the Howard and Wyndham Circuit. They had the Kings, the Lyceum, the Theatre Royal in Glasgow, the Alhambra, the Queen's, the Pavilion, what is the Citizens' Theatre which was the old Princess Theatre and then there was Her Majesty in Aberdeen so it was a very big circuit. They had a small nucleus of big stars who were earning an enormous amount of money, people like, the times that I went which was in the 30s were people like Dave Willis who was my personal favourite, and Will Fyffe who had gone into films of course by that time, and Harry Gordon, the Laird of Inversnecky, there was Jack Radcliffe, I can't remember all of them. The ones I remember were Jack Radcliffe and Dave Willis because they were my favourites. And in the summertime they used to do the 5 past 8 and half past 8 reviews which were absolutely packed out every night of the week. and that was the Scottish comedians again. But they had English directors, they'd scour the world, they used to go to Paris, they used to go to America, and they'd bring back all the top speciality acts, the top singers, and it was a very expensive, very funny review which was on every summer. And I suppose that's a great influence on me because I used to go to them every time they changed their programme, I used to go to that. And I remember Stanley Baxter used to say to me years and years later when our paths crossed and I asked him to come down to London when I first went into television and he said "Quite honestly, we can't afford to come to London to the West End. We make so much money up there." I remember Tommy Morgan, he was another one, in 1950,51 I suppose he was earning £700 a week and that was huge money, absolutely huge money. Because they used to take the theatre, pay the company, probably not very much, and just pack the place out twice nightly six days a week.

John Taylor: I think very few people down here would understand this about the Scottish entertainment scene.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was killed off by television of course, the Alhambra, next to the Coliseum was the biggest theatre in Britain, and that was pulled down in the 60s.

John Taylor: Where was it in Edinburgh.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was just round the corner from the Central Hotel, right in the centre of Glasgow. It was one of the big Howard and Wyndham ones, they also had Liverpool as well, a big theatre in Liverpool. So the Scottish entertainment scene was very big and very chauvinistic. There was just no limit or there certainly wasn't any limit to the chauvinism of the Scots when it came to entertainment.

John Taylor: Was Harry Lauder still going.

Jimmy Gilbert: No. He was finished. You mentioned Harry Lauder, when I was at the Citizen's theatre, after I left drama school, Jimmy Logan was a great friend of mine because the Logan family, there was another one they had number one theatres and number two theatres even in Glasgow and the Metropole was a theatre in the Gorbals, and that was twice weekly and the Logan family was there then, there was Jimmy, and his mum and his dad and his sister Heater, and Buddy and Bert, they used to come on and they were the darlings of the number two level or number three level of the theatre in Glasgow in the early 40s and late 50s, and Jimmy Logan I got to know through Gordon Jackson, because Gordan he'd just got married to Rown Anderson at that time and they were in Glasgow and they invited me to go back stage and meet Jimmy Logan because even then, although I was at the Citizens and I wasn't in act 3 and wasn't wanted for the theatre call, I'd nip down to the Metropole and see the end of their show because it was quite extraordinary. And Jimmy said if you want to see how we rehearse compared to how you rehearse up at the posh theatre you can come along. So I went along expecting a script and all the rest of it, and instead of that they all met round a skip on the stage and old Jack Short, he only had one leg and played the squeeze box and he was the leader of the family and they would sit around and say what are we going to do this week, oh we'll do this sketch, and that sketch that they'd done before, and you do a song here and somebody do a song there, they would just decide what they were going to do, put a gag in here, a gag in there, but that was rehearsal, a discussion on stage of what they were going to do, what music they were going to play, in the pit was a pretty ropy old band, and they had four dancers one of whom was Jimmy Logan's first wife, who had no choreography or anything. And they would just go on and do the show and it would be a bit rough the first house, and the dancers would sort of, just posture really, but it was the comedy, that was all the people had come for really and

it was extraordinary. And the Queen's Theatre Glasgow was even rougher and that was the nearest thing you could have to blue comedy in the 50s. Just skating on the edge of it, and of course they loved it, and the theatre was like the wild west theatre and of course they loved it, the gallery were all just wooden seats still and they had chuckers out and the back and if people got rough or they heard the tinkle of bottles running down the stairs they would just be hauled out. So as well as being in the posh theatre I used to be very, very involved in light entertainment and have been all my life, have been interested in that side of the business. I used to go to the cinema about twice a week at school, I used to keep copious notes of all the films I'd see. And the ideal Saturday for me when I was about 12 or 13, I'd go to the cinema in the afternoon, and then I'd go to first house at the Empire if it was an act that interested me, and then there was a really tacky cinema which gave you about three and a half hours entertainment which you could just squeeze in another film if you wanted to after that, which was opposite the new Victoria Cinema in Edinburgh.

John Taylor: Your parents were quite happy you went to the cinema.

Jimmy Gilbert: I think so. My mother was a sort of mixture of passion about the theatre and that sort of thing and a religious nut. So her only sorrow was that I wouldn't involve myself in the religious side of it, I found that deeply boring and dull, with church on Sunday morning, and Crusader Class they used to call it in the Afternoon, unless I could escape it.

John Taylor: You had to go to church.

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh yes, very much so, very churchy family. And my father, who I don't think was religious at all, used to go and read the lessons but he would make his escape to whatever club he had immediately afterwards and get a few pints down him. So, but the religion came from my mother's side.

John Taylor: Your father was Irish.

Jimmy Gilbert: yes Huguenots, they came originally from Lyons, in France, they escaped to Ireland and his father was the Methodist head master so he was a Protestant teacher in a predominantly Catholic area in the west of Ireland.

John Taylor: Where about, do you know.

Jimmy Gilbert: In Bally County Mayo. And I think they ran out of Protestants eventually and the school closed down and he retired.

But he took the civil service exams over there, he did well at school, and was sent over to London and came up to Scotland.

John Taylor: Let's go back a bit now. You left school when.

Jimmy Gilbert: I was 18

John Taylor: And went straight to university.

Jimmy Gilbert: I was given one year exemption because I'd already joined the airforce so you were given one year and I joined the airforce when I was about 17½ and you went to school, it seems crazy looking back at that age, thinking of my own children, but I thought I was ancient at that age and then joined the university air squadron there so you were exempt for your first three months training and then went almost immediately to America and trained there, American naval air stations in Detroit and in Florida.

John Taylor: Go on about your time in the airforce.

Jimmy Gilbert: I think one reason, one of the reasons was that subconsciously America was the great place, it really was, if you went to the cinema, every minute of your waking life America was so extraordinary and learning how to fly at the same time was almost incidental except all your friends were doing it. And I remember when I graduated the big thing they gave you two weeks leave and I just went hot foot to Hollywood, right from Florida as well, I did an aerial hitchhike to get there. You used to be able to get practically anywhere by going to army Air Corps bases and as you were in uniform they would give you a flight. And if you weren't fussy about where you were going and how you were going or where you were going to end up you could go anywhere. And I went to Hollywood by Dayton Ohio was the first place and then I ended up in Denver and then I thought I'll never get beyond Denver, because I'll have to get back, back to Florida and I don't' want to be absent without leave when I've just graduated but I met a big army air corp guy, I was saying my ambition was to go to Hollywood. And he said "I'm going in a Liberator Bomber tomorrow and I'll take you." because he was going to a place 60 miles in the desert, it was right in the middle of the St Andreas fault and he said my wife will take you over there. I was put up, he even gave me a tour round, he took me right over the Grand Canyon and everything to show me on route, Palmdale, that's right, we put down at Palmdale and I stayed in this funny little place and he arranged for some friend of his who had a girlfriend there who was going to take me over and the next day I went and she took me over there and everywhere I'd heard of she took me to, all the clubs I'd read about in the Picturegoer.

John Taylor: Were you in uniform.

Stephen Peet: What year was this.

Jimmy Gilbert: This was 1943. And I went to the Stage Door Canteen and I met Joan Leslie there, they were all sitting there writing autographs, Deanna Durbin was there, Brian Aherne who was a flying instructor with Thunderbird Field was there, because he was training British pilots.

John Taylor: You had wings by this time.

Jimmy Gilbert: yes, I had two sets of wings.

John Taylor: Why two sets.

Jimmy Gilbert: You graduated as an American naval aviator, they called them and as an RAF pilot so you were allowed to wear two. It was quite funny, Outside the Stage Door Canteen there was a huge American marine with stripes down here and god knows what across here. He'd obviously been right through the Pacific and he saw me wearing these two pairs of wings and it was immediately, because it was RAF and there were these American ones underneath, little gold ones, and he thought I was impersonating an American officer. And I explained it to him, and he said take that off and put that there, you're not wearing American wings under British wings. Anyway we went in and Brian Aherne took us back to his house which again was an enormous excitement, actually going into a film star's house, and then the girl took me back to Palmdale and I found he'd flown away, he said he'd fly me back again, and he'd gone and there didn't seem to be anyway of getting back to Florida and Florida's a long way away from and I had five days to get back there. And somebody said go into Los Angeles and there's an Anglo American mission there. So I went along there and the night before I went there I'd gone into a hostel and under my pillow I put my money and everything and in the morning it had gone. And so I was stranded in Los Angeles without even any money. And there was this big American guy there, I said Is it possible to get a loan or something, I don't know what to do. And he apparently had played golf courses all over Scotland, before the war and so he disappeared out the room for a minute and he came back and said there had been a whip round amongst all these girls for this poor British boy who was stranded in a foreign country, etc, etc. And they put the hat round and would I please make a speech of thanks. And I was very embarrassed about the whole thing and said No I can't do that I really just want t loan. He said I thought you would say that, right, you don't take the money, I will give you a personal loan, he said enough to get you back, because I said I could hitchhike half the way back, on the condition I sent post cards from all the places I managed to

get to on my way to New Orleans. He still asked me to go and speak to all these girls anyway and say thank you very much for the thought. Eventually I did get back.

John Taylor: Did you make a speech.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, I had to make a little speech of thanks. And I hitchhiked on road to somewhere on the Texan border, because it was mid summer, the heat was just unbelievable

John Taylor: And in a RAF uniform as well.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. And I managed to get on a plane to Shreve Port Louisianna and I made it alright, it was a great adventure, but the big thing was to get to Hollywood, that is the big thing. That is what is known as a diversion, it has got nothing to do

John Taylor: No, this is all good stuff.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was all with this thought, I think a lot of Scots people, I've noticed it since, Bill Bryden who runs one of the directors at the National theatre, he's head of BBC Scotland now and he's a playwright and he's just obsessed with films. He was telling me coming from Paisley, his friends who had similar interests, it was never London they thought of, it was always to do with America, Fulton MacKay was a great friend of mine and they were more at ease speaking American, Fulton was, he could never impersonate an American, he would never get away with it, he could get away with being an American and Bill has been obsessed with films, he's even written a play, Old Movies which was done at the National. And he brings, his idea of what he would really like to do is bring American actors over to the national. He's done all the David Mamet plays at the National. It's America because he was brought up in the cinema in Paisley, that is where all his experience came from, it's the same with me.

John Taylor: Hollywood obviously had an enormous effect in the 20 and 30s on people.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, and in my work in comedy, because I've had quite a lot to do with the American side as well. And the reason we can't get our comedy over in America is our films really never popular in America, our comedies, I think George Formby was reasonably popular in Canada and whatnot, but our comedies were never acceptable across the whole length and breadth of America, whereas their comedy was acceptable in every hamlet and village here. It is the reason why no British comedy has ever been shown on the network in America ever, not even Benny Hill. Whereas

their comedy is acceptable here. Although it's never as popular as ours it's acceptable.

John Taylor: So you were then back in Florida. What then.

Jimmy Gilbert: Then I went up to Canada and did 3 months in Prince Edward Island, I think it was something to do with lease-lend at the time and you got the most thorough training possible because it was a peacetime naval training and you were trained virtually as a carrier pilot, you learned landing and taking off on circles, you were made a very accurate pilot.

John Taylor: This is in what kind of planes.

Jimmy Gilbert: This was small training planes in the harbour and then we ended up on flying boats, on catalinas which I never saw again thereafter. But because I'd been trained as flying boat captains, they sent us up to Prince Edward Islands, for a navigators course, you had to be a pilot and a navigator as if you were a captain of a ship. So I think really my training must have saved my neck because it was so long, it was about 15 months whereas other friends who had gone to Canada it was about 6 months training, and then they were back. And then I came back to England.

John Taylor: It is quite interesting that the training was as long as that compared to the first was when the training was two weeks.

Jimmy Gilbert: I know. It was about a year, including when you came back conversion to land planes, having been trained in the water you then had to be converted to the land. And the whole training all in all took about 15 months.

John Taylor: Did you do any entertainment work during that time.

Jimmy Gilbert: not at all, apart from continuing to play the piano anywhere given half the chance, in any music bar as well in America.

John Taylor: What rank were you then.

Jimmy Gilbert: Pilot officer and then it was automatic flight lieutenant. I was on first of all as a sort of observer, second pilot on Lancasters. And then

John Taylor: This was where.

Jimmy Gilbert: Back here in 1944.

John Taylor: And this was the real thing.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes.

John Taylor: How did you get on with that.

Jimmy Gilbert: I never went over Germany, they used to do raids over France. Then I was put onto Coastal Command, bombers, Coastal Command bombers, with B17 Fortresses and from then on Halifaxes. I did a year of that.

John Taylor: Bombing what.

Jimmy Gilbert: No, it was Coastal bombers, the war was virtually over as far as that was concerned. We were off the Norwegian coast and down to all round the North Sea and up in the Arctic. I was based in Wick and Luchars and Tain, all the way round the Scottish coast.

John Taylor: Doing what

Jimmy Gilbert: Just patrol, and Mets. It was a Met Squadron as well which meant you were going up, the weather was extremely unpleasant, flying mid-winter up in the arctic circle. That was the most unpleasant part of it, very long boring, boring trips. But nothing dramatic like flying over Berlin for which I was profoundly thankful, not being of a heroic mould.

John Taylor: Did you have all sorts of problems with icing.

Jimmy Gilbert: Appalling, they lost as many aircraft but not through being shot down, just people disappearing and what not. I mean my life was saved in the most ridiculous way. The first trip I did was in a Halifax and the flight engineer was so ill being thrown around all over the sky he just sat there and he was not prepared to do any more work. It was the very first trip we had done from Leuchars in the middle of winter because his face was green and he was incapable of work which included changing all the fuel tanks around, we couldn't have got home, so he had to be cajoled to put it mildly into doing and instantly grounded as soon as we landed poor chap. And the way the British airforce was run if he'd been an officer he would have had a nice cushy job, but as he was only a sergeant he ended up in the guard room or cleaning out the lavatories or something. But on the third trip the same thing happened to the navigator, but he really was so ill I mean the charts were just covered in vomit and everything else, he'd just gone completely, it wasn't his fault. He said I'm just not able to do my job, we were beyond, we went so far north

we were beyond radio contact and you didn't have radar either so he said I'll give you a course home. They'd given us a tail wind instead of a head wind which meant that every hour we were going we were 140 miles closer the Norwegian coast and when we came down because we had to come down every hour to take sea level readings at first light when we thought we were in the middle of the North Sea at first light it was like the RKO Mountain, it was absolutely just ahead and we were practically at sea level and I looked out of the window and I saw waves breaking on the rocks and I thought that's very odd to say we're supposed to be in the middle of the North Sea, and you know where Norway comes, it goes up that way and then goes that way we were coming down here whereas we thought we were here. And if he hadn't been sick about an hour or hour earlier in pitch dark we would have hit the mountains, so we had a very large drink to his stomach that night.

John Taylor: How many were there in the crew of a plane.

Jimmy Gilbert: Seven, seven of us. No it was just rather rough mid winter flying in those aeroplanes. But it wasn't so bad for me flying it, it was the crew just thrown about.

John Taylor: And cold.

Jimmy Gilbert: No, they were heated, that wasn't a problem.

Stephen Peet: Were they pressurised.

Jimmy Gilbert: No, nothing like that.

John Taylor: You had oxygen.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. So when I was still there I wanted to get into the film business, I wanted to be a film director, that was the big thing. And I went down from Leuchars, my sister she shared a house with an actress in Beaconsfield with an actress called Everley Gregg. And do you remember in Brief Encounter the woman on the train who always talked and there were close ups of her mouth jabbering away, well that was Everley Gregg. And she was a great friend of my sister. And when I told my sister this was my great ambition, this is what I really wanted to do when I came out of the airforce, Everley Gregg said, they were making Great Expectations at that time at Elstree and she said if you come down I'll take you out to Elstree onto the set because she knew David Lean. And at least I could go out there and meet somebody. So I came down and she took me to the Cafe Royal for a drink at about half past 11 or 12 or whatever it was, where Robert Newton was just getting into great form and I was

tremendously impressed by this, seeing Robert Newton, and then she took me, she had an AC sports car and we went up and went on the set and met Jean Simmons and John Mills and David Lean was very charming, because I was in uniform and that was a passport and then she took me down in the car. She had obviously assessed me in the meantime and she drove the car. She said we'll go back to the cafe Royal and have another drink, she took me back down Gower St and she stopped the car outside RADA and said if you're going to be a director and if you're going to have the temerity to tell people like me what to do you should go in there and learn what it's like to be an actor, learn what the whole business is about and see how the people you're going to push around tick and all the things, the awful things they have to put up with in dealing like you. She was being very serious, to actually sit you outside RADA and do that. And then we went back to the Cafe Royal I was very excited to see Robert Newton being literally poured into a taxi outside and we went back in again. So I thought I was really living and went to back flying in Leuchars. And it was a curious sort of coincidence, because when I'd been flying up at Wick, that's where I met Fiona because the airfield was built on the farm that her parents had, and we'd gone up there.

John Taylor: That was lucky.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was, and you couldn't get eggs in those times at all, so I went up with another couple of pilots and banged on the front door of this farm and it was thick snow and blizzards and everything else and her father brought me in and said you will have a refreshment gentlemen. He was very impressed with officers. And we had a whisky and this that and the next thing and we said we wanted some eggs. So he said his daughter looked after all the chickens and eggs on the farm and his other two sons were running the sheep side or the other one was on the land side. And in came Fiona then, the hen girl, a bit not too keen on passing over eggs to these RAF people. I got to know her there. And then she was learning her RADA set pieces on the farm, by this ruined castle, down by the cliffs, it was very romantic and I used to have to hear her pieces for her while she went off and auditioned at RADA and she got in. And it was coincidental, it was another encouragement to go mind you, that when Everley Gregg said go in there, I thought right I'll go. I went and auditioned for the place and I got in.

Stephen Peet: Just for the record, what was Fiona's other name.

Jimmy Gilbert: She was Fiona Clyne, she was on in the Maggie last week, it was a lovely film, she got a contract with Ealing films with Michael Balcon for a couple of years, but children put paid to that as it did with so many girls. So anyway I went to RADA

and set about trying to.

John Taylor: What year did you get out of the airforce.

Jimmy Gilbert: 46.

John Taylor: And I suppose you had grants for going to RADA.

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh yes, very much so. And I also thing, I was never a great actor or anything, but I think really they were very good, although you auditioned you would have to be pretty terrible, if you had a reasonable service record they were favourably inclined to

John Taylor: Who auditioned you.

Jimmy Gilbert: Kenneth Barnes, a real old stick. And I'd gone back to this same woman up in Edinburgh who had had to tutor me in school plays and what not.

John Taylor: What woman was this.

Jimmy Gilbert: A woman called Turner Robertson, she was the only, there weren't drama schools in Scotland then, there were elocution teachers, I think her most distinguished pupil had been Ann Crawford, because she came from Edinburgh. And Rona Anderson was one of her's as well. Yes, what is now a very big school in Scotland now, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, that didn't exist at that time.

John Taylor: But she tutored you did she.

Jimmy Gilbert: She tutored me in my piece, you could teach a dog to do anything, if it was just one piece, you could teach somebody to do it if they had any reasonable sort of you could pick a piece of Shakespeare, and then you pick a piece of your own, I chose Shaw, which Kenneth Barnes hadn't heard of, it was a funny piece, I thought was funny and had a go at, and because he hadn't heard it before he was impressed. Anyway I got in and we had I think at RADA they were used, especially during the war to having a very young boy just straight out of school and fairly effete a lot of them were, and the girls were using it as a finishing school. But this was a totally new intake of course, it was full of people who had lost four or five years out of their life and were determined to work very hard or at least work at it to try and make up for lost time.

John Taylor: Who were your contemporaries there?

Jimmy Gilbert: Robert Shaw was in my class, Peter Barkworth, Laurence Harvey, who was obviously going to be a maverick, even then, in any direction to get on. Robert Shaw and Peter Barkworth were very studious, they took the London University diploma at the same time, they were about the only people who did, because you could take a degree in the same way you can at Bristol now, a degree in drama as well as going to the Bristol Old Vic Drama School. Robert Shaw was, we became quite friendly, again a very ambitious driven sort of person, even then. The men did reasonably well, or some of them.

John Taylor: What about the women.

Jimmy Gilbert: They never did, I gather that's the course, very few women

John Taylor: Were they service women as well.

Jimmy Gilbert: No most of them were young.

John Taylor: Who were the teachers.

Jimmy Gilbert: They were a very poor bunch then. quite nice people but plainly mainly failed actresses and I thought the level of teaching was very poor at that time, it just needed a complete sweep out and it got it, John Furnell took when Kenneth Barnes retired, he didn't hear very well poor chap, he used to sit at the back and adjudicate, and Pinero and Galsworthy and Shaw, any contemporary playwrights I don't think he had much time for. I was very surprised at my interview because after you'd been there, you'd be interviewed by the principal and Kenneth said ah yes, you come from the North, from Scotland, because anything north of Watford, the West End was everything in those days, you had to wear a proper West End suit and have a proper West End accent if you ever wanted to appear in the West End and the West End was everything of course then. And he said what is your background. And I told him, and what did your father do, he was in the civil service, and I told him. And have you got a private income? and I said no. He said there's no need to look like that, a private income can be very useful in our profession, you can say that again, but it seemed to be such and extraordinary old world attitude towards the theatre. But there again there were 700 repertory companies in Britain. Every small town, every small village had a rep somewhere because there was no television and the members of the local rep were regarded as almost part of the family by working class people who came, especially in the North of England, and Harry Hanson and Frank Fortescue circuits who used to do twice nightly twice, twice weekly rep and Carlisle was the famous one because that was three

times weekly, twice nightly, they just winged plays, they changed it like films, so old actors with their wives, they would travel ex number of plays which they half knew, they would do Ma's Bit of Brass, they would do various plays that they'd say they could do and then they would half learn them. But the Harry Hanson, Frank Fortescue lot was I think it was Frank Fortescue, his base, his West End, his big theatre was Wigan and there they would do the theatres right through the North of England, Huddersfield, Wakefield, down to Kidderminster, they all that their theatres. Well Fiona, she was with Frank Fortescue, and you become a star on that circuit, and they had a 21st birthday and they had a big birthday on stage, and people gave her presents from the audience. Al those days vanished because the standard must have been dreadful but nobody had any standard to judge it against because television hadn't arrived.

John Taylor: It certainly had a vitality about it.

Jimmy Gilbert: yes, terrific. But In 1947, 48, I was desperately trying to get a job. I wanted a job as a 4 the assistant

John Taylor: This was when you finished at RADA.

Jimmy Gilbert: Before I finished, just trying to make my way, this great ambition was to get into films. But 1948 is scared on my memory because there was one of the periodic film crises in 1948 which is when I was coming out. And although there was a chap called Schechter, I don't know what he did in the film business, I think he was a film accountant/ producer I met, and he offered me a job as 4th assistant on some tiny film he was involved with. But I just couldn't get a ticket at all. Absolutely out of the question. And so there was no way, I couldn't see any way in at all. And John Casson who was Sybil Thorndike's son had come down from Scotland, this was the Glasgow's Citizen Theatre at that time

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

John Taylor: We got to the point where you were at RADA and you were looking for a job.

Jimmy Gilbert: Well that was John Casson, Sybil Thorndike's son, Lewis Casson's son, and he had just come out of prisoner of war camp and I don't' think he had had very much experience as a director but he was in with James Bridie and it was James Bridie's theatre, the Glasgow's Citizens, and he wanted it to the Scottish equivalent of the Abbey so it would have a school of playwrights and also enable anyone interested in the theatre to work in Scotland without having to come to London. And he was looking for an assistant stage manager who was from Scotland. So

Kenneth Barnes summoned me into the office and I met John and John was ex flying as well, and the fact that I was ex flying and Scottish I got the job. And so temporarily gave up the idea of the film business completely to go into the theatre and get some experience there.

John Taylor: You'd finished at RADA by this time.

Jimmy Gilbert: This was the last term, the very last term. I'd had one job in the theatre that spring, my very first job, at the Byre Theatre at St. Andrews which literally was a cowshed, it was very small repertory, tiny little rep company which Graham Crowdon who was an old school friend of mine at Edinburgh Academy was running and so I went to the Glasgow Citizens' it was really as an ASM and I found that, you don't' realise what you're learning until after you've been there but the fact that you're observing so much and you're working in a company is something now, it's an experience now which is almost impossible to get because there were so many hundreds of rep companies that when you left drama school if you didn't get into three weekly or two weekly rep there was weekly rep or twice weekly rep. But at least you were able to get into a company and play and do things which nobody would give you an opportunity to do unless you were in a company, actors playing 90 years old to 19 year olds totally acceptably because the audience loved to see their favourites and liked to see the people playing each week different parts. But that has gone. My youngest daughter she left drama school about three or four years ago but she and her contemporaries just had to scrabble around getting odd jobs here and odd jobs there, they never really were able to get the real training of working in a company. There are now 75 or 80 reps, most of which cast per performance. So even if you do work for a company you don't get signed up September and you're there to the following July and you feel part of a company and you're prepared to work 7 days a week and everybody outside are richer and more leisured but they're civilians. It's just a totally different way of working. And that is why I found the Citizens was so valuable. And I got a second string to the bow which was very valuable to me later, in that Bridie had decided to do a panto which instead of joining these pantomimes I was telling you about would be a satirical swipe at them. And just a good humoured dig at Scotland and Scottish arts and letters and also take the mickey out of the big pantos they really couldn't really compete with. It was a wonderful company because we had Duncan McCrae who was a great eccentric genius, Molly Urghart, we had Stanley Baxter, we had Douglas Campbell, we had John Faser who did very well in films, we had Andrew Keir, Roddy McMillan, Fulton Mackay. It was just an extraordinary company.

John Taylor: Was this the beginnings of the Citizens' Theatre.

Jimmy Gilbert: No it started in the middle of the war sometime and it was in a very small theatre. There was the Unity Theatre which was, that was a political theatre, and then there was Bridie's which was very much more the start of a repertory theatre. And there was a fellow called something Elvin and he ran the old Princes Theatre in the Gorbals, it was a beautiful theatre, and he had seen what was going on at Bridie's theatre and wanted to make it a Scottish national theatre and it had always been the home of Scottish pantomime, George West was the comedian there and he had been the principal comic dame there for about 20 years, and they had a tradition of 13 letter pantomimes, everything had to have 13 letters. And George West, if the panto was successful it became a tradition of Glasgow life that you'd see the panto before Christmas and then you'd see it again in February and would go right up to the Glasgow Fair in midsummer sometimes, the same pantomime. So there was this enormous tradition. I don't know whether George West died, I think he did. Anyway I think this chap had decided he wasn't going to continue that way so in a great gesture gave it to the, or the lease of it, I don't know what the exact legal thing was, to Bridie so he could start the Glasgow Citizens' in a proper theatre. And John Casson got it all wrong to start with. The first thing he did was close the gallery entrance, the side entrance which went into the Gorbals which went into main side street of it so that people could nip up and down in their working clothes, they didn't feel they weren't embarrassed mixing with the nobs going into he stalls and the dress circle. He closed that and that was very silly because he closed half his audience off. And so unless we did a pantomime or a Scottish play or something which showed Duncan McCrae as a big Scottish star which is what he was, even the classics if we did Moliere and did a Scottish version of it, then we would fill the place. But as soon as the panto finished the theatre emptied, it was the days before smoke control in Glasgow, and sometimes in mid November the theatre would go up and a great woof of cold air would go into the stalls coming from the warrens of the scene docks and what not and you would see people sitting their huddled with literally rugs over their knees. And if it was thick fog in the distance, the back of the theatre wasn't invisible but it was quite hazy. and it wasn't made particularly attractive for theatre audiences.

John Taylor: What was Casson's job.

Jimmy Gilbert: He was the director. He was totally untrained really. And after a couple of years Peter Potter took over and it became very much better as a, a better run theatre company.

Stephen Peet: Can I interrupt, you just said everything had to be 13 letters, I didn't understand.

Jimmy Gilbert: For instance

Stephen Peet: You mean the title.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes the title had to be 13 letters, it was a superstition. So in 1949 I think it was the second year I was there Bridie had decided to do this pantomime,

John Taylor: He took an active part.

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh yes he was chairman of the board.

John Taylor: And he really was chairman.

Jimmy Gilbert: he was very much, it was his theatre, Bridie's theatre. And Bridie wrote this book for this allegedly satirical pantomime called the Tin Tock Cup and he made it 13 letters again. So the rest of the company were invited to contribute. So what happened is that we really tore up what he'd written and Stanley Baxter was really into writing lyrics because he'd been out in, with the army writing reviews in Malaysia with Kenneth Williams, who was in the same army unit. So he was very into writing lyrics. And I was playing the piano all the time anyway and making a nuisance of myself and I used to do lyrics sending up members of the company as part pieces which Bridie seemed to enjoy. So he said why don't you write the music for this. It's all a company thing. So he gave me one number. I think it was called the Six Jamies, the six kings of Scotland, the six James which I put music to. And I ended up writing about two thirds of the score of it, literally I'd never done before. But other people, people were doing things they'd never done before. And the dress rehearsal was a total shambles and there was a terrific amount of tearing up and one thing and the other. But on the opening night it was the biggest success they'd ever had. They just bought the place down and it ran until April and made the company an awful lot of money. So much so it became an embarrassment because they were getting a big arts Council grant, the Arts Council were beginning to say what are we giving you grants for, you've been running this one show from December to April, take it off. So they did. They took it off. But it literally went on until early spring, sometime in March. So that then became, although I never became a very distinguished actor, I took odd bits and pieces and one thing or the other and get an occasional part. But I was really kept on because then the second year McCrae had gone into the Howard and Wyndham circuit, they began to think hey, wait a minute, this theatre company, they're able to pack people in, why are they packing people in, Duncan McCrae, we'll take him. So he then went into the big circuit, the big money making panto circuit, which he was never really cut out

for, he was too eccentric. So the next year was Red Riding Hood, which believe it or not is 13 letters so that was called Red Riding Hood, and Stanley Baxter got his first job was principal comedian and Stanley and I wrote that together. So I, at the end of that season Howard and Wyndham immediately took Stanley Baxter, he was very successful, it worked for him. Then there was a whole series of 13 letter ones, I was kept on really to write their Christmas shows.

John Taylor: Was Alistair Sim anything to do with it?

Jimmy Gilbert: No.

Jimmy Gilbert: He, really, he was so established then in the West End. He had nothing to do with it.

John Taylor: But he was a great mate of Bridie.

Jimmy Gilbert: I think he was. He was always in his plays.

John Taylor: I deviate. The audience must have been very important in that theatre, the Glasgow audience must have been something special.

Jimmy Gilbert: Very, very special and it was John Casson who said to me because I used to find it a terrible let down after the panto going back to the theatre again with nobody out front and straight plays and he said to me, because I was quite a good performer in pantos, I used to do numbers and write numbers for myself, I was good at that, and he used to say you just lose 50% of your talent as soon as the orchestra leave the pit. And that has stuck in my mind. And I actually had one of the most embarrassing moments in my life, Tony Guthrie used to come up and direct and he directed a play of his called Top of the Ladder which eventually went to the West End, because he'd been with the Scottish National Players and he was a great friend of the people involved in the national movement. And we then got caught up, when Group 3 started with Grierson and they did things like The Brave Don't Cry and various other films, suddenly that, although it was of enormous interest to actors there, it was the first crack in the whole purpose of the theatre, because the whole purpose of the theatre was that once you established yourself in the company that you were going to be there, you were able to work in Scotland. But of course it's the old thing, if somebody knocks on your door, because once the company became established with those sort of actors and that sort of vitality and energy in the performers, film people whenever they came to Scotland to make a film, the first place they used to go to was the Citizens', who's there, who's doing well there, let's get them.

So I think the first one of my lot was The Brave Don't Cry for Group 3, half the company went then. Then when I left in 19, I did one I did Laxdale Hall with Group 3 up in the Highlands, but it was obvious then that the theatre, the rule of the theatre would still hold that if somebody was doing well and somebody asked for them, whether it was London or whether it was a film company or whether they're in London and Hollywood asked, they would still go because it's another step in their career.

Stephen Peet: Did you do Laxdale Hall as an actor.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. As an actor. I hadn't directed anything at all at that time. the first thing I directed was, I was asked by Colin Chandler, who was running the now beginning to prosper drama school, which was the Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow to direct Cavalcade and that was while one of the pantos was on. The days were free so I used to go along and direct students in that and that was the first opportunity I ever had of directing which I enjoyed enormously. But it was the music side, and writing lyrics which was the thing which was beginning to interest me a lot. And Tommy Morgan, going back to Tommy Morgan, in 1951 he'd had 13 years at the Pavilion Theatre in Glasgow and it was his 13th year and he war deeply superstitious and he felt he needed some new material. And the fellow who was writing sketches said why don't you get Jimmy Gilbert, he's writing all this stuff down at the Citizens', get him to write some new material for you. So I went up to see Tommy Morgan, and he had a marvellous voice like this. And he said I need my name in some of them. So I did about 2 songs with his name in it, I wrote about 12 songs for this show, which had a very distinguished title of Festival Frolics of 1951. And I thought that's great, instead of having just two pianos in the pit, which we had at the Citizens' Theatre, now he's actually going to have a pit orchestra and it's like writing a score for a musical,

John Taylor: You were writing words and music.

Jimmy Gilbert: So we went along to this opening night at the Pavilion in Glasgow and what he'd done is strung all the songs together into an opening number and that was it, the whole thing was over in about five minutes. And the deal was he was going to pay me £5 a song. And as there were 12 songs it was £60 he owed me which for an actor was a lot of money in 1951, if you were on £10 a week it was a lot of money. And Tommy Morgan looked and said it's just the opening number, £60, he said, right, his straight man was called Tommy York and he used to pay the company under the stage on the Friday and he wouldn't give me the £60 all at once, he made me come every Friday and get a fiver at a time for 12 weeks. And Stanley Baxter went, he dines out on this

story, he went back to see Tommy Morgan, he had been to see this show and he went back to see him in his dressing room and he said I see Jimmy Gilbert has been writing all this music for you, it's great. He's been writing music for me as well. He said That Jimmy Gilbert got more notes out of me than I ever got out of him, which was one of the best jokes he made I think.

John Taylor: You were saying the most embarrassing moment

Jimmy Gilbert: They used to have a big charity show in the Theatre Royal which is the home of Scottish opera, it's the biggest theatre, it became Scottish Television's headquarters when they opened up STV and then Scottish Opera took it over. It really is a huge theatre. And they used to do a thing called Stardust, a big charity concert every year and it was on a Sunday night. And they used to get the stars of all their big shows and then if there was a really big top headliner at the Glasgow Empire or at the Edinburgh Empire they used to come over from Edinburgh as well. It was a huge charity do and they asked each theatre to send two stars. Well they went down to the Citizens and they were wise and Duncan McCrae said no way, and Baxter said no way, no way at all. And I was doing a number at the piano which I'd written which was really just sending up these old home time numbers, straw hat number and cane with an old variety artiste's daughter who was a tiny little girl with a mass of red curls on top. And who Tony Guthrie called the sponge because he could see her floating through the sea with this red hair like the tail end of a sponge. And when I was asked would I do, I said yes sure, being stupid and ignorant I said I'll do it. And the sponge's father as soon as he heard about it withdrew his daughter from the deal instantly and said you can't do that. And instead of seeing the red light and saying no, it was weeks ahead, if things are weeks ahead you say yes you'll do it. And I said to Stanley I've only got this one number to do. And he said I'll give you one that Ronald Frankau used to do in a night club, which I heard him do which was very funny number, he said you'll do that very well. And it started Thanks for having me Miss Worthington, thanks for having me for tea. And it was one of these terrible 30s slightly risqué cabaret numbers which I decided to do first and then I would finish off with the number I knew but without this little redhead, the red headed girl, getting up from the piano and doing this soft shoe thing on my own. And I still cringe at the thought of it, because they put me on first, no chorus line or anything, big grand theatre, I hired a dinner jacket, had my landlady up in a box, there with her husband, she insisted on coming along. And died the most grizzly of deaths, on a Sunday night in Glasgow starting with thanks for having me Miss Worthington, thanks for having me for tea. So I think I learned something then, never do anything in public that you're not trained to do. And Molly Urqhart, she was alright too

because she died the death about 5 acts further on because she had been persuaded at the last minute to come and do something so the two of us just went out and got drunk. But I learned a very salutary lesson on that one.

John Taylor: Did the audience express disapproval.

Jimmy Gilbert: No they just sat in stunned silence. I remember Jack Radcliffe, there again I should have learned through having been at Jimmy Logan's rehearsals, because I went to rehearsal in the afternoon, assuming again a rehearsal, the MD just said where are your band parts, and I gave him the music and waited, and he said thank you very much and that was it. How you got on and how you got off you had to find out, what do you need, grand piano, fine. Then Jack Radcliffe came on and he was the compere, and he said and now somebody who is trying something they are not really used to doing themselves, I'm sure you will give the traditional Theatre Royal welcome to, I staggered on, it was awful, terrible. But as I say, you learn these things. So I did about four and a half years.

JIMMY GILBERT

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

Jimmy Gilbert: Well I got married in 1951, I was still at the Citizen's then. But I left the company as such in the early part of 51, just before I got married, I went freelance and started to do broadcasting with BBC Scotland as an actor and still writing lyrics and music where I could and hoping to get jobs as an actor. I still wasn't sure in what direction I was going to go.

John Taylor: Were you still interested in films

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes in direction, I'd then started to think, especially in Scotland, because television had just started up in Scotland, because it started in London first and then came up to Scotland, I think it opened just in time for the Coronation as far as I can remember, when was the Coronation

John Taylor: 53

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh it must have been on before that. It was on before then, because when I got married Fiona had been at the Perth Rep and I'd been at the Dundee Rep, the touring rep as well. Graham Growden had taken over the touring rep of the Dundee Rep and he asked me to go and join him, really as an old friend, a friendly face. So they released me from the Citizens' to get experience at another company's expense and we had an extraordinary experience of one night fit ups, going around in a converted wartime ambulance and putting the scenery up and taking it down in halls all around the East of Scotland which was again very good experience, but more experience as an actor than a director which is what I wanted to be. But now the emphasis had gone eventually into getting into television, into the BBC which seemed to me the more practical. I couldn't get into the film business when I tried to in 48 so I thought I'll try television which seems to be a big thing which is now about to burst on us. And at the end of 51, it seemed to me as if a career in Scotland, I'd been offered a job as an announcer at the BBC and I thought that really would be the complete cop out. It would be a very secure job, because we were expecting a baby the following year, 1952, April 52 and it seemed if I took that, that would be it, we would just be living in Glasgow announcing all my friends but not actually ever doing anything yourself. So I went down to London. I'd been, thinking films the whole time, agents coming down to the Citizen for people for films and a woman called Helen Gunnis with the Christopher Mann Agency suggested that I came to London and she would see what they could do for us. So Fiona went, one of the last things that had happened in Glasgow, we had now decided to make a break and try something different whatever it was,

John Taylor: What kind of salary were you making in Glasgow

Jimmy Gilbert: £11 a week and that was with Fiona was doing odd radio work and I was doing odd radio things as well, so I suppose we were earning between us about £15 a week. We had a wonderful flat in the poshist part of Glasgow, up in Park Circus, Claremont Terrace which is rather like the West End of London, beautiful, beautiful houses with painted ceilings. And we were right on the top on the, we had the attic flat which also had a billiard room with these three great glass domes in it and our rent was £3 a week of which £2 were rates and it had constant hot water and buckets emptied for you.

John Taylor: I think I lived in this flat.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was above the Norman church. This was 7 Claremont Terrace.

John Taylor: We lived in one, we lived in billiard room on a top floor with glass things.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was 7 Claremont Terrace.

John Taylor: I can't remember the address.

Jimmy Gilbert: It had gardens in front of it with a key to it and you went in this magnificent front door and there were painted ceilings. 92 stairs to the top. Going back to Tommy Morgan he was living in Kelvin Court which was regarded as terribly posh in Glasgow, because it was like 1930s art deco Odeon type flats and he'd got two of them one on top of the other. And when I told him I got this flat in Claremont Terrace, he wanted to know what the rent was. And I said £3 a week and he said My God son, you're ambitious. He thought that was an enormous rent £3 a week, for somebody on my income. Sandy Mackendrick was brought to the flat by Moultrie Kelsell, because they were casting the Maggie and he had decided that Fiona was the right person for this part. So we had this very distinguished visitor who came up these 92 steps up and she got the part in The Maggie and then went down to London the following year to make it. And she had a contract for a while with Ealing, Michael Balcon. And that's what really made us go, because I'd gone down and Helen Gunnis had introduced me to Sidney Box and Muriel Box, and I went out to their house out in Mill Hill and they had a film company, Independent London Films, which was Bill McQuitty, Sidney Box, Muriel Box and they gave me a contract as an actor, so we thought well there's money coming in for 6 months anyway, we're alright. And being over anxious, Fiona was pregnant gain. We were going to have two children. She just about made the Maggie because they did all the locations in Isla then the big scene was done very careful with Sandy Mackendrick lying on the floor of the studio and her put up and skillfully lit so you couldn't see the fact that she was pregnant, because she was supposed to be this innocent sweet virgin Highland girl trying to teach Paul Douglas the errors of her ways. She had that film and I did a couple for Sidney Box just smallish support parts. The first one I got a featured billing for was Street Corner which Muriel Box had written and also directed, that was in 1952 I suppose it was. And I did Above us the Waves, all those films at the time, a terrible film called X the Unknown which was Dean Jagger, he was the star of that one. I always remember that because I was a nuclear physicist, and it was all shot, it was meant to be some ghastly piece of ectoplasm which was coming out of the centre of the earth and I was standing in the middle of some wilderness or the other and there was a great big well which went down in to the middle of the earth and I was turning the handle and bringing up something. And unbeknown to me this terrible bit of ectoplasm was in this bucket and about 3 weeks later I was asked to come back again and do this same scene again except that this time I had to sneeze and drop the thing. I didn't know why I had to sneeze. But this was because the whole plot had been changed that I let the thing go back into the bowels of the earth. It gives innocent amusement to a lot of friends when they see this film

John Taylor: Were you playing the part of a Scotsman

Jimmy Gilbert: I was in Street Corner, terribly dour Scot who ended up with Barbara Murray. I got shot a lot too. Terence Morgan shot me twice, once in Police Dog in the first minute. But then it was one of those bits of luck that happened, Christopher Mann, Helen Gunnis, she sent me to the Theatre Royal, Windsor because John Counsel who was running it at the time, every

Tuesday he used to see new actors and actresses and what not. And when I went along to see him as an actor, I didn't realise that Noel Gay who always wrote the music and lyrics for his pantos had just died, he'd dropped dead the month beforehand. And when he was asking what I'd done I said I'd been at the Citizen's this that and the other and I said also that I'd written the music and lyrics of the pantomimes. Well at that time there were three theatre companies that were doing Christmas shows with original music and lyrics. There was the Bristol Old Vic with Julian Slade he was doing it. As I found out myself in Glasgow, and Noel Gay was doing it in Windsor. He said would you like to play some songs so I went down into the pit with his musical director and just sat at the piano and played. And he told me afterwards, it's in his autobiography, he sort of shook his head to Peter Bentley, the MD, oh he seems a nice chap, it's a pity. And then I said to him would you like to hear some songs I've written for my children. He said yes, sure. So I played some songs that I'd written for my children and which I used to sing to them at night. That's it he said, You've got the job. That was alright. I think he thought it was all a bit satirical and that wasn't what his pantos were about. But that was alright. So I wrote with Mary Carridge the first Christmas show which I loved doing. Then I said to him, because Julian Slade down at Bristol he was writing a musical, why not write a musical. And he said alright, every week in July Ascot week that's when the royal family come, why not have a go at writing one. And Beryl Reid she lives at Honeypots down at Watergate and she's always said she wanted to do something here I'll have a word with her. So we went off to Shrewsbury and we saw Beryl and she liked the idea of doing it. And a chap called Ronnie Hill who used to do a whole lot of reviews at the Watergate and I'd just been doing a couple of reviews at the Watergate with Beryl which was nothing to do with as an actor, and he then had heard about Julian More who was ex footlight. Ronnie Hill suggested him, he thought he was very clever. So John Counsel then arranged a lunch at the Ivy which was real living, where I met Julian, and the memory of London Fog and standing outside the Ivy, I can see him to this day was Donald Wolfit with a cape over his shoulder and a funny hat and looking every inch the actor manager standing outside the Ivy. Julian and I got on very well together and we wrote this review for Ascot called the World the Limit for Beryl Reid, it had nice things in it but it wasn't really right. But Noel Gay's son Richard Armitage, put on Me and My Girl, who also dropped dead almost the same age as his father, in his early 50s about 2 years ago, he decided he was going to transfer this to the Garrick but it didn't work out. And it's just as well it didn't transfer because I don't think it would have worked. But it was the most extraordinary occasion for us because the show coincide with the rail strike in that year, it was 55 , so the Queen had found herself with a house party at Windsor, because they cancelled Ascot because of the rail strike. So one morning John Counsel rang me up and said do you have a dinner jacket. I said no, He said you better get one fast because the entire royal family is coming tonight. We've had to ring up everybody with seats and get rid of them and we've got 46 of them and they're occupying practically the whole of the first 4 rows to see your show tonight. And it turned out to be the biggest royal gathering in any theatre since the days of William IV, we found out. Afterwards we stood at the pass door, they were all in the dress circle, they were going down to meet the cast. Julian, Ronnie Hill and myself stood there while the royal family went past us, we met everybody, it was like the waxworks come to life. WE met the Queen, Prince Philip, I was sitting with Princess Margaret, and I hadn't had a dinner jacket either. I went off, somebody told me there was a second hand clothes shop where I could get dinner jackets in Villiers ST and I went into this place. And this chap told me you're in luck, it cost me £4 and it had belonged to the head waiter at the Savoy Hotel, it had a wonderful stripe all the way down the side. And I had patent leather shoes, and I had a hole in the sole. There was no time, I hadn't the money either. That is how we met the entire royal family all in one go. Ronnie Hill I also had met because there was a song that I had done and I went along to the players theatre. I had this

song which came from a Canadian review called the Hussar and I auditioned this , Don Gemmell ran it and I think that I was taken on because of the song rather than the performance. But I did one stint at the Players singing this song with a funny hat about a silly hussar. And I met Ronnie Hill there and other people, Hattie Jacques who I met later, she was doing My Old Man It was all this light entertainment thing. Annie Leak, she was there who married Tony Hancock's brother.

John Taylor: When you were at Windsor was Pat Cargill there

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. He was in the first panto I wrote, Idle Jack he was. I used to take him home as he lived in Sheen. Duncan Lewis was the Dame. He lived round the corner in Richmond as well.

John Taylor: They were very good those pantos.

Jimmy Gilbert: They were smashing. they were lovely it was the centre of my year writing pantos there. I thought that show was going to transfer and went up to Wick to the farm where we now with our two children up there. We'd had a house which we'd bought, £2000 a 7 bedroom house, freehold, in Richmond Hill, we'd borrowed £700 and we got this house because we felt by doing it up we could do up the basement, it was on 4 stories which we did up ourselves and the ground flour, and the first floor and the bedrooms at the top. And according to our affluence then we would actually just about survive by being on the ground floor which had one long room with two big rooms going through and what had been a hall going into the garden, kitchen bathroom outside loo. So under extreme circumstances we could let three floors which paid the mortgage the phone bill everything else and we could live on the ground flour. But this time things had got really rough so we'd let the whole house and Fiona had gone up to the farm to whole up for the summer and save rent. And with this prospect of this show going on. Then the bad news, the phone call came from John Counsel when, they said sorry it's not on they've changed their minds. I immediately came back down again and I had the idea of a musical about the Edinburgh festival. And I passed this on to Julian and the two of us sat down and thought it out and then we went out to John Counsel and said how about this idea of a festival. The whole idea is to get the world which comes into the place which is theatrical rather than us going out to the world as we did with the Worlds the Limit which is a review. He said didn't you think it's a much better idea if instead of the Edinburgh Festival, very few people know about the Edinburgh Festival at that time and do the Venice Film Festival and do the whole thing about the film festival. And we said yes that's a great idea. And that's how we wrote Grab me a Gondola which went on the following summer and that was a huge success and ran for 2 years in the West End. And that was wonderful and most unexpected experience. When that show open I had minus £36 in the bank which was a lot of money in those days. And suddenly the unforeseen things like amateur rights and foreign rights suddenly there was quite a lot of money coming in. But we had a terrible moment before that, John Counsel had a terrible season running up to Grab me a Gondola in October 56. And in fact he was down to his gas shares, beyond which he couldn't go. He said I can't put your show on at all because I just haven't got the money and I can't afford it. So w decided to raise the money ourselves to give John to put it on. So we put an advert in the times asking for backers and we got 3 replies, one was from some man who had been left money by his auntie in Aberdeen and he wanted to invest it in the theatre, we thought that's not much use because there is no production office there, its just a sum of money. The Players Theatre were interested they had just done the Boyfriend but they were only interested in doing the show if it was done at the Players so it was no use to John, so everything was down to these two gentlemen who came along, a fellow called Neil Crawford and David Smit Dorian

who was General Smit Dorian's son and they were a couple of gay gentlemen and they wanted to get into the theatre and they had the money. He was Crawford of Crawford biscuits and so we auditioned for them. And it was very little money when you think about the millions required for a musical nowadays it was £5 we needed it was a lot of money. if you hadn't got it. We auditioned, I played the piano, Julian gave a resume of the story as it went along. and it was like being in a B movie making a show and they said yes they would give the money. And the show went on in October at Windsor. And by this time I'd completely run out of money with the house and had decided that as this show was going to go on it had to succeed and to stop any work at all apart from having enough money to keep going so I got a job in Macfarlane and Langs biscuit factory at Isleworth working as a packer there during the day. A very sympathetic fore man, I used to keep a suit there and if there was any auditions or anything like that at the sow, because we also auditioned, we had to find a star because John was rather keen on, she was the one who was going to get up when the lights came on in London, I can't remember her restore her career. And that wasn't what we were looking for at all. And I remember once saying to the foreman I've got to go up and audition this piece for June Havoc, she wanted to do a musical, so I went up to her apartment up in Mayfair and played and on the opening night we got tickets for, the Macfarlane and Lang social club came along, very enthusiastic, and the girl John wanted, I was made keen, I wanted, and this is where luck came into it because he didn't know Joan apart from her being in Revue, but they had a quota at the Cafe de Paris where they had to have apart from American stars, they had to have 2 or 3 British stars every year. And Joan was doing a week there. He'd already offered the part to this other girl, please will you just come along and see her do her act. So John came along to the Cafe de Paris and we saw her and she was just everything we wanted. And we sat in John's car in Leicester Sq. afterwards and said you're absolutely right we have to have her. You'll have to rely on me on how we get rid of the other lady who had been offered, I don't know how he did it. H e probably told her it was a load of rubbing she'd be better out of. Or something to make her feel good. And at that time also, I'd been applying for the training course at the BBC to be trained as a director with no luck at all, again having been brought up in the movies I thought the best thing was to keep at it all the time and I just never let these appointments people go a month or two weeks without ringing them up or writing to them and when I told John about this. Because John didn't know I was in the biscuit factory or anything he didn't know my great ambition was to be a director.

John Taylor: How much did you get in the biscuit factory

Jimmy Gilbert: It was £6b basic or £7 basic and you could do overtime, and I was allowed to go and do overtime when and as I wanted. And also every week for a shilling you got a Dundee cake fresh, wonderful Dundee cake except that all the raisons had sunk to the bottom so they didn't well them. And the other week you got a tin of biscuits which had been dropped and broken also for a shilling. In fact there was one marvelous coloured bloke I was very friendly with and he used to say Jim are you a bit hungry this morning. I'd say yes, I haven't had any breakfast, you used to have to get there quarter past 8 to start work. So he would drop the tin. Oh dear, it's dropped. And then take the lid off, and that used to go into the broken biscuit . But I quite enjoyed it, and the foreman said, because you're brought up in the Scottish work ethic, if you're going to do something you've got to do it properly. And the job was as a checker, you were given a great big list of all these things like granolas and custard creams and all the rest of it and you went round with a great big trolley and you had to collect them and then you built a house with these tins of biscuits all around you by a whole with a conveyor thing. So when the lorry came up and it was all loaded onto the lorry, everything had

to be loaded on according to his weighbill so his first stop was 11 his biscuits coming out the proper order right to the back, I was really quite pleased, the foreman said I'll quite miss you, you were a good worker, you can always come back here. I was quite proud of that.

Jimmy Gilbert: What about the first night at Windsor

Jimmy Gilbert: The first night again it was like living in the movies it was an absolute riot. It was just a huge smash hit from the first go and at the end Julian and I were sitting in about the fourth row of the stalls and I had a was there and members of my family and what not and there were encore and shouting and then the cast were all standing there applauding us and we had to stand up and spotlights on us and we bowed. It was a wonderful, wonderful moment. In fact that was probably the absolute ultimate, more than anything else I've ever done that was the biggest moment. We had nothing absolutely nothing. Then to have this going on was quite extraordinary.

Alan Lawson: You were still at the biscuit factory.

Jimmy Gilbert: No I'd given it up. I'd given it up about a month beforehand. Again it was this strange thing of tow things happening at once. Because john in September, we opened in October how glad I am I told them I'd been working in the biscuit factory "What on earth are you doing there. I said I would have given you money. I want you to do more shows here. I would have given you money an advance of royalties and whatnot. And then I told him really what I want to do is direct for television. And he said "Why didn't you tell me. I know Madden, Cecil Madden who is a very old friend of mine and if you'd told me." I said "I've been knocking at the door for the last two years. I've been ringing up and writing letters and going for interviews. They're very nice but they do absolutely nothing, I don't meet anybody. So he wrote, he sat down behind the desk and he said I'll write a letter to Cecil Madden. I hope this won't embarrass you but the BBC is a funny organisation, you clearly have to go to the top. and so he wrote this letter and showed it me and said "What do you think of this then." I said thank you very much. It was a very generous letter. Post it now he said. Off it went, he got his secretary to post it. Two days later I got a letter from Cecil Madden saying John Counsel had written this letter and would I like to go in and see him. So I went in to see Cecil. He couldn't have been nicer he said I will pass on a recommendation, Ronnie W was head of light entertainment at that time. He spoke to Ronnie and he spoke to Graham Muir who was one of his producers who died a couple of years ago. So then I got a phone call from Graham Muir the next day. This is in less than a week from Johns letter. Went in to see Graham Muir and Graham, again he comes from Scotland as well. we got on very well. And about three days later I was summoned to meet Ronnie W and asked to bring this material, the previous musical we'd done with Beryl Reed plus Grab me a Gondola. I brought both of these along and Ronnie took them. Then I got It was only again about three days later I was told I was going to be on a board. So within a fortnight of John writing. This must have been earlier than that, this would have been August. It was in the summer. And while I was still in the biscuit factory. I then went and did a board. There was Tom Sloan who was head of Light entertainment. There was Ronnie W. There was a somebody from personnel. And I went along to the audition was at Lime Grove in a room there somewhere. I went in and said. I fortunately remembered that when I was still at university I'd gone for an interview at BBC Scotland. and said to them I want to join the BBC. And they said what as. I didn't know. I said as a programme engineer. I thought that was a producer, somebody who engineers programmes. And they said are you sure, you're not really technically trained for this. When they found out what I really wanted they said there's no point coming to the BBC unless you've got something to sell. IF you want to come to drama or

light entertainment or music, go away, go into the theatre, do something like that and come back in 10 years and say I've got something to sell. This was almost 10 years. I said I've been to the BBC already BBC Scotland, they told me to come back in 10 years and now I've come back. Here I am I'm stating my case That apparently was quite good . They wrote that down. Almost as if they were obliged to listen to this chap because he'd been told to come back. And the audition or the interview seemed to go quite well. When I was still in the biscuit factory. I remember coming home and Fiona meeting me with tears pouring down her face. She had this letter saying that I'd been accepted by the BBC. This was before grab me a gondola. So actually I started the director's training course the week before we opened in London so both things actually happened. I had an actual west End hit and starting this television training course literally at the same time so life began to look very good suddenly. I did the course which lasted about 6 weeks and sat with John Grist he was the one person I got to know very well.

NS: Where was the training course

Jimmy Gilbert: Marylebone, the High ST. I thought it was a smashing course.

Alan Lawson: Was it a general training course.

Jimmy Gilbert: Directing.

Alan Lawson: In any field

Jimmy Gilbert: Any field. It was 6 weeks.

NS: Who else was on the course with you.

Jimmy Gilbert: John Grist was on it. I can't remember who the others were

NS: Who was running the course.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was a drama producer who is now dead. But I was very impressed I was a bit nervous thinking that there would be, there were a lot of BBC people and people in broadcasting from abroad, Nigeria, all over the world and I thought they would be jumping They did start by saying this is a camera and this is a boom. And they took you right the way through it and then you did your won training exercise at the end. I'd done a thing for the World Service, for American Radio, and I got Anton Rodgers who I'm working with at the moment to do my training exercise. And I think because of that, Tom Sloan who was head of light entertainment, he then took me on as a producer director in the music, really as a music producer

NS: Music in what sense

Jimmy Gilbert: Pop. The first thing I did was called off the Record which is the equivalent of Top of the Pops which Jack Payne was fronting and it was all the current hit records, all these people who are long since forgotten like Joan Regan, and Frankie Vaughan who is still there. 50s, mid450s.Alan Lawson: Can we go back a bit on Counsel, he is a many important many in many people's careers

Jimmy Gilbert: He was quite extraordinary, I admired him tremendously, because Julian was very foolish, Julian was caught up in what then became the 60s. I was all for staying with John, Julian is a brilliant lyric writer but he wasn't very hot on structure and the structure of a book is very important. I didn't have anything to do with the book. I would get the idea of the show

and then Julian would write the book but John was marvelous at getting hold a piece like ours was and force it, the structure to work theatrically, which Julian is not good at and never really been his weakness right through his career. John had virtually had said to us you're going to be our resident writers, you can do a show any time you like. To be given a theatre like that at your disposal is just unbelievable and he would have done it too. But Julian got involved in the West End. I was sharing. He was working with Monty Norman, David Henneker and Mankowitz, Wolf Mankowitz, and I think he felt it was going to be a step backwards, going back to Windsor when you were able to have your shows being done in the west End But they weren't originations, the shows he was working on were the book had been done by Mankowitz or they were translations, like Irma La Douce which was a huge success but they were virtually translating an existing French success. There was no substitute for a really good script doctor, which don't exist in this country, they do in America and he never really had the success as a book writer right through his career.

John Taylor: But Counsel. people tended to make fun of him to a certain extent, but he was such an exceptional thing running that theatre.

Jimmy Gilbert: Not to the actors , the actors never made fun of him because the actors were treated so well by him there. He was the first producer to give holidays with pay to actors back in the 30s. Normally brought on at the end of the contract that was it. But he virtually started what became an accepted thing through Equity that if you were there for say 3 months you got 7 days and if you were there for 6 months you got 14 days, whatever it was. Because he said actors never have holidays because they will never take a holiday unless they know they have a job at the end of the holiday. They always think I don't know if I can afford it, I don't know if I'm going to be out of work, if I'm on holiday the phone might ring so he was just removing that pressure form them to make sure they had a holiday. And he never accepted a subsidy, never accepted an Arts Council grant even when the theatre went right down to the share level somehow something used to happen, he would come up with some money. Grab me a Gondola, for instance, that paid for the entire theatre to be redecorated.

John Taylor: Were you there are the 40th party

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes.

John Taylor: And Mary Counsel was important too.

Jimmy Gilbert: She's still there. I don't know how active she takes there. But he used to take a ridiculous salary too john. He never that was why it was important to him, he had a percentage on Gondola, that was the first time he'd ever made any money I think. They used to give him a car and give him a house to live in, he was like a vicar really, but he never really earned a lot of money out of it. But it was a cinema in Windsor before he got hold of it and it went bust in a year and he got money together again and opened it again. And it was really the war, when he was away in the army

John Taylor: And Mary ran it.

Jimmy Gilbert: And then he was a colonel and he was on Eisenhower's staff, he was the one with somebody else who actually formulated the act of surrender. He used to tell me I don't know in what way they made out the act of surrender to the Germans.

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

Jimmy Gilbert: Where will we start with the BBC, there was a big market for music programmes at that time, this would be 1957, that was when I joined them. Grab me a Gondola was now running in the West End and I was working as a light entertainment producer and it was mainly music programmes. There is no market for music programmes at all now, people aren't interested in them, it wouldn't matter if it was Frank Sinatra you wouldn't do a series with him. And in those days there was. I suppose it was to do with the theatre still and the dividing line between theatre and television wasn't so different. A lot of the producers were people who had come from the variety theatre in the light entertainment department. And people who had been at university or with my sort of background, straight theatre were really a bit suspect. The light entertainment department has totally changed now form what it was then but the sort of producer that were there some had them had been variety agents quite tough customers and not really what you would have called very imaginative producers, ok as far as getting 2 or 3 cameras taking pictures of signers or acrobats stand up comedians but there was none of the variety shows then for lack of a better word had none of the sophistication of say the Two Ronnies, Review was really the thing I was interested in but I remember Ronnie in one of his letters to the department saying there was absolutely no future in review translated to television and he just couldn't have been more wrong, as the went. I'd only been there for two years and I was asked to do something which would be now but Brain Brook who ran a theatre in Johannesburg asked me to go out and redirect Grab me a Gondola in Johannesburg which one never thought twice about then, it was about1856. Went out there and put the show on there but I'd never directed in the theatre before so that was my first opportunity of doing it. And that seemed to be reasonably successful.

John Taylor: With a London cast

Jimmy Gilbert: No with a local cast. There was one person in it was Sergio Frankie whose father was an Italian craftsman who had gone from Italy to Johannesburg and he had just so sensational a voice and he was cast as one of the secondary characters and I was so astonished by this man and his voice that I regigged the whole thing so that this secondary character got most of the best songs in it. And the next show we wrote I brought him over, by this time they'd gone to Italy, this was 1960, a thing called the Golden Touch which was a disastrous, it only ran 2 weeks at the Piccadilly Theatre, but it brought Sergio Frankie over and the poor chap was unemployed having brought his wife and children over because he couldn't get a license to work in London. He eventually went to America where Ed Sullivan gave him a slot on his big show and he was so successful that he was been a huge star over there ever since of the cabaret circuit, Las Vegas and all that sort of thing

Stephen Peet: You were working at the BBC but you were doing these other things as well, were you short term contract

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes short term

Stephen Peet: A series of short term contracts.

Jimmy Gilbert: That's right. The policy of the BBC then and I hope it is still the same that if you are asked to do something outside it is for your interest and their interest to do it and not get yourself locked into just working away in your department. As there were comparative few people got the opportunity of doing that they didn't mind it. It was a way of hanging onto people and still not pay you very much money. which was always the thing about the BBC. Nobody would be so good to you so just stay here and accept this miserable salary we're going to give you.

Jimmy Gilbert: What shows had you directed at the BBC

Jimmy Gilbert: Just Off the Record that's all

John Taylor: Was it a weekly

Jimmy Gilbert: Fortnightly I think. Fortnightly, It was 45 minutes live television, you couldn't have done that weekly. because it also involved which at that time was quite a lot of trick photography. It had to be worked out with the designer. I only mentioned the Johannesburg thing because by the time I came back, I'd only been away 3 months, Johnny W had gone and Eric Maschwitz had come in. And Eric Maschwitz as head of light entertainment was a totally different sort of person. He was the theatre. He'd written a lot of West End musicals, he'd written a lot of wonderful songs like These Foolish thing and Room 504, a Nightingale sang in Berkeley Sq. all that very sophisticated sort of thing. And he didn't know anything about television at all. But he used to say that, I know nothing about television, you're you write musical s as same as me, you're involved in review, do a review. I said Ronnie W said that' the last thing. Oh forget that Do a review. I said Who with. Anybody you like. So I said I've just been working with Stanley Baxter up in Scotland. Oh I've seen him, yes, yes. you do it. And so that was the brief, just do it. And there hadn't been any review at all so there was nothing to get terribly upset or worried about or wondering if there was anybody you had to worry about because they had done a certain sort of a show or not. This was about 3 years before that was the Week that was, it was 58 or 59, the winter of 58. So I brought Stanley Baxter down, he'd never done any television, for musical content I thought what I would do, the reason big musicals had been put on the in the first place although they'd flopped and look for good songs, use that as the musical content. Nobody else would have heard these songs before but they would all be by people like Gershwin and Cole Porter and the rest of it. And I brought I wanted a small company, rather like you with your show I wanted no compere at all because I felt a review a compere on television he would be either so good he took the thing over, or he would be so bad he would screw the thing up so we didn't have one. And I used Graphics instead with voice overs. We got I got Stanley and Betty Marden to play opposite him. And then as a company Richard Waring who became a writer and also wrote for us, was just a very small company. And we did these shows, 45 minute reviews live with dancers as well and using film because Stanley being an impersonator, a character impersonator there was no way you could do it live using all his characters. And again we'd nothing to go on, So everything was shot on film, his bits and we did 6 of those. And it was very successful so we did 7. And because it was so different I got what was the equivalent of a BAFTA award and so did Stanley. It was very successful.

John Taylor: what WAS THE SHOW CALLED.

Jimmy Gilbert: on THE bright side and that was really the first review ever on television, Eric Maschwitz. He was the one he said do it. And it's interesting, to start with I'd done all the old sketched, the classic sketches, until we got a style of our own. and the use of old material however brilliant and however clever didn't really work. Our new stuff which I'd got form new writers who are still writing, people like Dick Vosborough and Barry Cryer and Richard Waring and I can't remember all the people, most of them are still writing today, and I found out that television review worked better with our second rate material in comparison to the classics we took from the old West End Reviews, theatrical stuff which didn't really work. So we found our own style of writing really by the time he 2 series was on, we were beginning to know what we were on about. And then it came to an end because Stanley

didn't really want to do any more. He's always been rather nervous about continuing something successful in case it rails and so he's really gone on repeating his success throughout his life without developing much further, very successfully, but that is the reason he didn't want to do any more. And then Ned Sherrin, television review seems to work in cycles, its' a thing of great fashion, they usually last for 2 or 3 years and then come to a halt, because THE next review type was completely different which was the journalistic type, That is the Week that was which was 64 I suppose when Ned took the best elements out of mine, used some of the writers, he took David Kernan out of the show and he did a journalistic sort of review which had an enormous impact of course but people forget that that only ran one year, one season. And then it became to so Much a Programme, which was not as successful as that was the Week because it had lost the novelty the edge slightly. And then they did it a third season, it was called BBC 3 and that was without David Frost and it was pulled half way through, before the general election, they just felt it was going to be too much of a liability. And so David Frost, then this going in cycles of fashion in review type programmes whatever you like to call it David Frost was now at a loose end and I think whatever department, whoever did That was the Week that Was they didn't want to know about David Frost any more. So David was presented to the light entertainment. And Tom Sloan who was now head of light entertainment said I wasn't you to do a show with David Frost a review, it's a bit dodgy because there had been so many rumpuses about TW3 and David Frost and in the 60s these prophets of hate and so on. But this was to be an entertainment programmes so I was just given David Frost and the two of us got together to decide what to do. And we went on a tour of Europe. And I remember David had the idea we'll use all these marvelous cabaret acts all over Europe, people who have never seen before. It ended up as a great big swan. we went to Paris and saw various agents and went to various clubs. And then we went to Amsterdam and then we went to Brussels, then we went to Copenhagen. WE were disappearing down to Berlin when he got a call to call home he was disappearing off to India or somewhere so we abandoned that trip but by finding out what we didn't want to do we found out what we wanted to do. And that was to make it, it was going to be a report about a different subject every week. And Tony Jay was going to be the script editor as far as all his satirical comment was concerned, Tony Jay who wrote Yes minister Later. He was the script editor that side. I was appointed the comedy script editor to help me Marty Feldman, suddenly we had the start of what became 70s comedy. Because then David wanted John Cleese in because he'd seen him in Cambridge Circus which was a university review and I'd seen him in Edinburgh He also wanted Ronnie Corbett because he'd seen him in Churchill's Club where he used to go. I wanted Ronnie Barker because I'd been working with Ronnie Barker a lot. introducing him to television because he'd only been on radio. And we wanted a girl who could make some sort of political comment so Julie Felix was the girl. The comment and the writers we had on regular contract were Terry Jones and Michael Palin and Dick Vosborough and Eric Idle and Marty Feldman himself, Graham Cleese with John Chapman writing sketches as well. So looking back on it we had an after show party I think in 1966 or something like that, it was quite an extraordinary picture of what was to become the whole of the comedy thing in the 5670s with the Two Ronnies put together for the first time and virtually the whole Monty Python team were there, we had Cleese, Chapman, Palin Jones. Eric Idle we had writing the odd thing but very little. And Tony Jay being script editor so you virtually had Yes Minister Monty Python, Ripping Yarns, Fawlty Tower, they were responsible for that , that little nucleus of people. It's an extraordinary gathering together. That did exceedingly well. We did Frost over England out of that. And got the golden Rose of Montreux for that and I collected a BAFTA awarded for that one as well. for the review. You could see the review had great impact when it worked. The next review I wasn't involved in that had nothing to do with situation comedy, that was a cycle, after that finished you couldn't do any more, it was fashionable it was successful but then it sparked

off into different areas and the next review I was involved in was Not only but also with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore who were a previous era really, Beyond the Fringe, 1960, but this was their television off shoot from that particular review. I loved doing that series but it was nerve wracking because Peter Cook and Dudley the way the worked, we did it fortnightly , a 50 minute show which included film which they did a lot of film including every beginning, every ending had to be different and more outrageous than the others, it had to be people, how on earth did they do that. But everything was written literally at the last second. You'd do a show and there would still be wondering what we would be doing for the next one of film. They would go and lock themselves away in an office at television centre with a tape recorder just like this and then they would talk it, they never wrote anything. Then it was transcribed by my secretary who used to go potty trying to get a script out of all these ramblings on a tape recorder. Then I would get this rough thing and try and home it down into a script and then you would have to go an d look for the places for shooting and edit and cut it and rehearse it. And the Pete and Dud sketches they used to run about 20 minutes. But you were virtually an editor as well as being a director, to get the material you had to do that in order to be then able to go out and do it. And it was very stimulating but very nerve wracking. But they were so brilliant, a Pete and Dud sketch some of them were wonderful. And because the BBC had no policy on tape retention they're all wiped and not in existence. I could go on for an hour on the BBC tape retention policy at that time. There was just no policy at all. The only bit of policy I saw was when I was running comedy at the BBC and my manager used to come in once a year with these great print outs and say what will we keep. And I'd say we should keep that. Well you're only allowed to keep 2 so keep the beginning and the end bits, keep number 1 and 7 and the rest can go. The only reason Hancock survived is that the BBC bought them back from ABC of Australia. That is the way they were able to show the Hancock tapes. The amount of stuff that got wiped. The whole social has been wiped and of course they'd have made a fortune on them as well now. But nobody realised that at the time. And I suppose because THEY WERE tele recordings and inferior quality, they always said, you know those boxed tapes, those Philip tapes that their shelf life was 10 years maximum and it meant having a whole new bureaucracy and it had to have a completely new building practically for sorting all the stuff they were doing, they just let it go.

Stephen Peet: Do you mean on paper

Jimmy Gilbert: On tape, and then it was edited down and then we'd cut them back, but they were never very keen on cutting their sketches. 11 minutes. Those were shot on tape in front of an audience. But we always used to have at least one big film item plus the opening and closing, this was one we did it always had to have not only but also and you would see the title revealed. For instance one was on the Arc Royal and we got all the sailors on the Arc Royal to paint it on the deck of the Arc Royal and then we had the helicopters and you'd start close in and pull out and see you were on an aircraft carrier and we had that wonderful captain of the Arc Royal he became very famous, I think he was an admiral eventually. But he was all in favour, this was 1971, 72 and they were going to scrap a lot of ships at that time and he allowed us to do it and gave us all the full facilities for doing it because of the publicity. He came up with a marvelous idea. You remember at the end of Not only but Also the e two of them used to sing Goodbye Goodbye, well what they did was when they had the carriers out in the far East they used to buy cars for £5 or £10 quid or something and they would drive them around and when they wanted to get rid of them they would bring them onto the carrier, go out to see and put them onto the catapult and just shoot them off. And they would disappear, the same catapult they use for jets. And he said why don't you get a piano. You're all sitting around the flying navy and we'll catapult it off. which was a

wonderful idea. We had to get dummies made of Pete and Dud and his only stipulation was that we put Fly Navy on the side of the piano because that was their big headline at the moment. We did that and shot the piano into the sea at the end, Goodbye goodbye it was a very spectacular show 0 to give you a whole aircraft carrier, The only stipulation was, and our stipulation in gratitude to the crew Pete and Dud should do a concert that night in one of the hangars, but one of the jets took off and just went straight up straight in and never came back so we had to abandon the whole thing, the carrier then, because we were going up and down the channel and this captain had to come back and look for that wreckage of the piano in case it got confused with the wreckage of the aircraft they were looking for. And as they were not feeling in the mood the concert was cancelled. I remember we all went into the mess then, do you know in the navy when things happened like that everybody came in and had a drink on the people who had been killed. They all had a drink and it was on his mess bill. The navy then put the money back into his account. But that was just one example. Another one which I didn't do in the previous series, it was painted in the white horse on Salisbury Plain. That was the sort of thing they wanted to do and there was plenty of money to do in those days. You can imagine that doesn't' come cheap the opening titles and changing them every week. And that really was the just review became very much television review became the writer performer, there was no point in doing it without the writer performer. And since then again it's

John Taylor: Did you get much opposition on that form the establishment, was there much criticism from outside.

Jimmy Gilbert: No it was hugely popular

John Taylor: I can't believe that the establishment

Jimmy Gilbert: No by today's standard it wasn't really bold in that way. the sort of things they really did which stirred people up were the original attitudes in beyond the Fringe which nobody had ever seen before like the RAF sketch about we're wanting volunteer, there was a sketch really taking the piss out of those sort of stiff upper lip RAF attitudes. People had never seen before it was more attitudes I think and I remember the in on the Bright Side, Frank Muir and Dennis Norden were comedy advisers and there was a sketch which was really a send up of World War II movies rather than taking the piss out of the battle of Britain but what it was Stanley Baxter was a RAF pilot and he was standing on top of the cliffs at Dover having a picnic with his girlfriend and it was all very Noel Coward his speech and at the bottom of the cliff the friend arrives and waves up to them and says you've got to come back , the squadron is being recalled and it's all very stiff upper lip and it ends up farcically with don't look back, don't look back and she disappears over the cliff. And they're looking up at the lazy circles in the sky as the battle of Britain and frank and Dennis you wouldn't believe it now as ex RAF people and the attitudes of those days which was only 15 years after the battle of Britain, you really can't have that, it's only about films, no you can't have that about Battle of Britain pilots. its a very funny sketch. Its alright if they're in naval uniforms. I said you mean it's ok for this guy to get shot in a ship but it's not okay for him to be shot up there. So we had to make him a naval officer and the chap Richard Waring coming and waving at him was a chap in the navy. And it was still the same sketch. But instead of looking up here you look across the channel. After Beyond the Fringe that was blown sky high and that sketch was done many times thereafter. It was put back into air force uniform. Everything is so fashionable it was funny at the time but it just became a corny sketch. if anybody had seen it and thought that sketch was banned in 1958 they wouldn't have believed it. I think beyond the Fringe was mainly attitudes like that. And the marvelous sermon that Alan

Bennett gave which really took the piss out of these longwinded vicars. That sort of thing. They didn't use any bad language or very little. Only the odd bloody. They weren't like that at all. there wasn't any problem with things people might want to cut. I remember Tom Sloan being absolutely furious with me, ringing me up after the show because we'd done a tiny quicky with John Cleese as a police inspector all we'd done is he says the trouble with the British public is they're all stupid. That's all it was one of these sort of things. And Tom was saying this is the sort of attitudes about the British police I will not have propagated in my department. They're a fine body of men and all the rest of it. I couldn't believe it. And Bill Cotton who was his number two. I just looked at him. Your boos has just run me up. He was furious, he was on the phone. He said if you wish to speak to the producer of the Frost Report will you kindly speak to him through me and went in and had a real up and downer about it the net day. But there were some fairly conservative. But it was about attitudes.

John Taylor: But he was a peculiar one.

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh yes. He was a bit and he had a sort of drink problem as well, so maybe by 9 o'clock he wasn't really himself when he was ringing up. Very conservative attitudes. He came from Dumfriess, he was the sort of person who did a lot of very good things for people in his department but wouldn't allow anybody to know he'd done them. That would be a sign of weakness. But actually if you were in trouble was very good, but his attitudes were very strange. Have you ever met Joe McGrath, he was the original producer of Not on But Also the first series. He got so angry with Tom Sloan, no he was the original Frost producer, a Degree of Frost, he was a very clever young director but he fell out with Tom Sloan he left. It was the old traditional BBC attitude.

Stephen Peet: Did a Square World come into this period.

Jimmy Gilbert: I forgot that one. That was mechanical comedy. I did the Montreux entry for that. That #s another weird thing, about fashion, because I hadn't done the series of Its a Square World but in 1963 I was asked to do the Montreux entry and there is no doubt that would have won the Golden Rose that year in which case Frost over England two years later wouldn't have because they wouldn't have given it to the BBC twice because it really was the distillation of Michael Bentine's mad ideas and all I really did was take the best bits out of the programmers and reshoot the whole lot as a one off. And there was one particular sketch that I just had an instinct about because I had been to Montreux and I could see how much political infighting there was among the jury members . It was so important to win in those days because television was a totally different thing in the 60s, it was new, anybody working in television you were like a space man, now everybody's in it but back in those days it really did mean something to win that Montreux prize, certainly in entertainment terms it was the number one prize in the world in television. And again to show how it's changed, when we did win we had the front page of the Evening New, Frost all over the world, great front page coverage of us coming back with the prize, the BBC won the Golden Rose about 3 or 4 years ago and it got about an inch space on page 5 because television itself has changed so much. Its just a piece of furniture in the corner. But going back to Bentine I just had a feeling in my water about a particular sketch which was a send up of Juke Box Jury where you voted on pop songs. And what he did he had intercut United Nations, where Krushov had gone to the United Nations and was beating the desk with his shoe. Do you remember he took he shoe off to beat the desk. Well they intercut our panel with Krushov and the United Nations panel, where everyone else was saying it's a hit Krushov was saying niet niet niet, it was very funny but I had been on the drama jury

at Prague at the drama festival and I'd seen a lot of political maneuverings that went on there. But ii didn't know about it at this time just how much the political maneuverings went on but the whole of the Eastern block before the voting at the ending at Montreux had a dinner party which shows just how individual the votes were and they had decided as this was, I heard this from the German juror after the event. As the Russians had b been disqualified, they had done a brilliant ballet programme which had been shot in gigantic studios in Russia, it was quite magnificent and it ran for about an hour, it was over time. But nothing to do with light entertainment at all. It should have been in a straight arts festival, and so they were disqualified. This year, This Square World was obviously the winner, we got the international press prize for it but as far as the other one was concerned we got nothing because they had said this is not entertainment this is political satire by enclosing newsreel shots of Krushov we disqualify it and nobody on the eastern block would vote for it at all. Not a question of we didn't win, they wouldn't vote for it so it was out. The winners were all announced live which went back to television to England and they all got the bird, because they thought Bentine should have won it. When I went up to collect he press prize, shouting and cheering. So really it was a just a great big political battle. And the German juror was interesting. He said I didn't want to vote for the Czechs because they won it last year, I couldn't vote for you because I knew it was a wasted vote so I voted for the Americans, which I didn't thing was very good anyway. That was the voting. That is how I remember Square World. And poor old Michael Bentine he was so disappointed and upset about that. That really was his, the distillation of everything, goon type humour.

John Taylor: It sounds as if working conditions were very easy during this period Somebody said do this and you just went ahead and did it.

Jimmy Gilbert: It was all expanding. Every year we used to be told income is up 10 % because you had all the black and white period up to the mid 60s with people every year buying new sets, they were getting more and more license fees. Then with the installation of colour there was BBC 2 in ↔the mid 60
and with BBC2 came ↔______________________colour on 2 and then colour
on 1 ↔______________________came about 68 so it was all going up
↔______________________and up and income was coming into
↔______________________the BBC and the Radio Times at one
↔______________________time apparently paid all the staff
↔______________________salaries. There was plenty of money
↔______________________about. For the opening of BBC2 I did Kiss em
Kate as a big musical. And I brought over Howard Keel, Pat Morrison, huge cast of singers and dancers. I had the two big studios, Television centre slinked together 3 and 4 and used another studio as a music studio for the orchestra, 12 cameras 6 from one studio into the other, for at the end of the day and hour and a half television show, it was very expensive. And even in the early 70s I produce Pickwick that was another 90 minute musical with s studios and 12 cameras and orchestra of 40 and 12 dancers and masses of extras and huge cast and everything else.

John Taylor: These sound like good days. Who was the director general.

Jimmy Gilbert: The directors general, when you're working at that level you're not really aware of the sixth floor top brass because YOU never really met them therefore you weren't particular y interested. Your boss was the head of group.

John Taylor: When did Sloan go

Jimmy Gilbert: He died in 19 and Bill Cotton was his number 2. And when Tom Sloan, Eric Maschwitz, he was 60 when he arrived so he did 2 years or 3 years and Tom Sloan was his assistant then tom became head of light entertainment and when he died Bill Cotton became head of light entertainment. He had been head of variety and became head of light entertainment. And they started head of comedy Duncan Wood was the first one about 1970, because situation comedy was something which only started and then became my life till the late sixties, mid sixties I suppose.

John Taylor: What was the

Jimmy Gilbert: Hew Wheldon when he was managing director, the quality of people there and David Attenborough when he was controller of BBC 2 you had a very high powered very creative top brass with tremendous status as well I don't think they ever achieved that level while I was part of the management they never got that sort of level again of people. I think possibly people of that calibre who weren't BBC careerists. David Attenborough wanted to get back junbels again. I think he found the whole business of being an administrator a bit tedious. He took over from Peacock because Peacock was a disaster for the first couple of years although he's done extraordinarily well since. He tied up with John Cleese in Video Arts and has become a multi millionaire along with the rest of them.

John Taylor: It sounds from your point of view it worked very well

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, he had this cult, he was the first person to talk about it, this thing of excellence, that was the most

JIMMY GILBERT

SIDE 5, TAPE 6

John Taylor: Huw Wheldon, his job was

Jimmy Gilbert: He was managing director I think he was the first managing director. I can't be sure of that but certainly Huw and they had a very good top brass there in the early 70s with Huw, David Attenborough, Bill Cotton running the variety side, and Sean Sutton who was running the drama side. Humphrey Burton he was running music and art. They had a lot of quite celebrated people. Cliff Morgan was running OB and Sports. People were very high profile, image as far as the public itself was concerned. And television itself is very high profile. Everything we did was watched and commented on, good or ill. It was easier in a way because people used to watch things irrespective. Certainly my world was much easier, comedy. As the years have gone past and the decades have gone past they've heard most of the joke so and seen most of the situations and the audiences have become a lot more sophisticated than the material because they've seen it all and heard it all.

John Taylor: Grace Wyndham Goldie and Baverstock, what about those, did they cross your horizons. Only I used to hear of them. Grace Wyndham Goldie I just used to hear of her as this legendary character. I think Donald Baverstock had peaked. He had left and gone to Yorkshire Television by the and Yorkshire television started I know he asked me to go up there with him. That was 1967 or so. Unpredictable mercurial sort of man. He was a friend of Alasdair Milne's, the two of them. Baverstock had left and that was the famous time that Alasdair Milne and Tony Jay had said any organisation which can't find a place for Donald Baverstock has no place for us in it and they both left. And they started JBM limited with another chap called John Llody who's since died. And they started up on their own. One of the first independent companies. And then Alasdair went to Scotland as controller of Scotland and Baverstock went to Yorkshire and Tony Jay started Video Arts with John Cleese and Peacock which was to become one of the most successful independent companies making films.

John Taylor: They were pretty good people and it must be important in an organisation like the BBC to have people like that running it.

Jimmy Gilbert: I think so because loyalty is the big thing and if people on the top are being supported all the way down the chain it is felt that somebody is watching you and supporting you you're much more likely to take chances and be innovative than if you think somebody is not going to support you people are inclined to play safe. And I think the big thing certainly with his dictum about excellence if you really had done everything as well as you possibly could and fell flat on your face you would be supported as long as you referred up on anything which was liable to cause them embarrassment. But once you had referred it up you would be supported to the hilt.

John Taylor: And this encouraged you

Jimmy Gilbert: to stick your head out, you were encouraged to stick your head out. Even in matters of budgets if you were having a budget meeting increasing by 10% every year it does mean then that if you had done as how which was worth doing and if you had overspent it always use to be just as well your show was successful as it was you might have got into trouble didn't care if you overspent as long as it was on the screen. And I think but then when I say

the BBC has changed I think all television has changed totally changed. Instead of being run by ex programme people as the BBC was always run by, and if you look at ITV, most of the bosses in ITV when I first went to Thames, Brian Cowgill was the managing director and he had been controller of BBC1 he was an ex producer, Alasdair Milne was the director general at the BBC ex producer, they're now all run by accountants, Richard Dunn who is a very good administrator is running Thames, Michael Checkland at the BBC he was an accountant. Everything has to pay now, everything has to work to certain financial limit.

John Taylor: Even within that , someone who is a

Jimmy Gilbert: I found it was only the last 2 or3 years that I found uncertainty and really settled in. This was late 70s. I'm jumping ahead. I became head of comedy in 1973 and I did that for 3 ad a half years. That was very hard work but one of the most stimulating bits of my life. And when Bill Cotton became controller of BBC1 in 1971, I didn't want to become head of light entertainment group at all but once he's gone and I was offered it I suppose I better try it out so I became head of group for about 5 years. That lasted until 1981 the years before my retirement date was due and I got out before my retirement date. I was offered something at Thames and departed. But I found those last two or three days, BBC was very unsettled the bosses themselves were looking downwards and supporting the heads of department seemed to be fighting their own corners on the 6th floor. Ended up with the strange things which are all being publicised and put in books like Aubrey Singer being fired by Alasdair Milne summarily just being told to go. Alasdair Milne then getting fired by his own board of governors. That was symptomatic of what to me was wrong with the BBC in the past couple of years. It seems to me as they were uncertain on the 6th floor that uncertainty permeates right the way through the corporation and became very bad for moral.

John Taylor: Do you think it was caused by political pressure from outside. People like Wilson and the present government And the moving of Charles Hill in must have been very unsettling.

Jimmy Gilbert: I suppose so. I really am not a political animal at all. I couldn't tell you the ins and outs of current affairs.

John Taylor: The change, do you think it came from pressure from outside, made the top management nervous

Jimmy Gilbert: I'm sure of it. I remember once we had a 6th floor luncheon whereby Margaret Thatcher who allegedly was disapproving of the BBC at that time was brought along to meet all the heads of all the departments. And I was head of group at that time, it would be 78 or 79 and the lunch on the top floor was uncharacteristically Spartan, it was sandwiches and cola cola, the odd glass of white whine on a buffet table. Alasdair was going to bring in Margaret Thatcher and introduce her to all the various we were all standing around with a glass of Perrier water in our hand and she came along and I don't think she learned anything at all because she was introduced each group head what they were supposed to be doing. She didn't learn anything from what we had done. When she came up to me I was introduced as head of light entertainment she immediately said to me Well if you're head of light entertainment why haven't you done something more for Ken Dodd. I didn't realise Ken Dodd was a great political animal up in Liverpool. She said I saw ken Dodd at the Palladium and he was absolutely brilliant. But you don't seem to be able to do anything for him on television at all and really I do think something should be done about Ken Dodd and that's all my conversation was about nothing else. Then she was taken off to Syd Lotterby who was producing

Yes Minister, allegedly her favourite programme. But again Syd never got a word in edgeways. I think that as an exercise wasn't a great success except that I learned I should be doing a Ken Dodd show. I have to say it was quite funny. We all swapped stories afterwards. She didn't learn a thing. I'm sure she wasn't impressed by the Perrier water. but it was a good try from Alasdair's point of view.

John Taylor: The pressure must have been intense. It wasn't only her, Wilson had been doing the same thing earlier on The thought of bringing in Charles Hill from ITV

Jimmy Gilbert: But the BBC swallowed him up hook line and sinker. He became a total BBC man

John Taylor:

Jimmy Gilbert: They seem to be doing all right. The BBC have got it made because they were told to do what they do best which is quality programmes. I've noted a tremendous difference in Thames since I went there. Thames was almost like a BBC by the Thames There was very little difference working at Thames except I felt it was rather like going back in time to when it was really lovely working at the BBC. reasonably small and one was able to see everybody that one worked with everyday. The building so large that as head of group I had about 140 people I was responsible for and you just didn't see them that often. Light entertainment are a bunch of pirates anyway. They don't turn up. And everybody from Tom Sloan onwards, he used threats, I used alcohol to get everybody together at least once a month but there was always a reason why people were off filming or editing or doing something or another so you didn't actually see the people you were working with nearly as often as you wanted to. Whereas down at Teddington it was so small, about 40 people in the light entertainment department. you met them everyday or most days. It was back to that nice feeling of working as a group.

John Taylor:

Jimmy Gilbert: Light entertainment was scattered over various floors and various buildings. We had some people on the third floor, we were on the fourth floor, qw apew our, doe instance Not the 9'o'clock News and Parkinson were at the old 600 group at the other side of Television Centre, they felt very nice and independent we never saw them at all which suited them fine, they just got on with it. In some ways it's quite a good thing so long as you trust the people you're working for but it's nice to have the feeling that everybody's working for

John Taylor: And as long as they trust you too. Yes. That's right

Stephen Peet: When you came the head of group did you miss being in production yourself directing or were you rather tired of it after all those years.

Jimmy Gilbert: No I had been asked to become an executive but I'd always turned it down. I sometimes used to think I might accept it for the wrong reason just because I was getting tired or got a bit fed up with all this work or try something different. But head of comedy is something however, I'd thought I'd always like to do some day, just give it a go. In 1972 I'd done the first series on the Last of the Summer Wine and Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads, two cracking series, I thought when I'm offered head of comedy and I've just done that I'm taking the job for the right reasons, everything is going well, not going badly. So I'll give it ago for three years.

John Taylor: Did you direct those or produce them? Direct and produce them. And I'd also done a feature film in Australia the year before.

John Taylor: Weren't you on your knees with work.

Jimmy Gilbert: No I left, I would leave, go

John Taylor: Even at the time like that.

Jimmy Gilbert: In 1972, I never thought twice about it.

John Taylor: Were you still on short contract. No, I was on staff, I had been persuaded by Tom Sloan in 1965, he said you're always wanting to shoot off somewhere, if you become an executive producer you'll get more money and you'll get any perks we can get for you', you'll get and if you ever want to leave you're on 3 months notice which you are on a BBC staff contract, a pension scheme as well, whereas if you're on contract you're on 3 year. You have to give three year's notice. 3 months or 3 years, more money, it sounded a very good deal so I took it. He said it won't affect you if you want to leave if you want to go off and do your thing so long as you give me 3 months notice so I can get in somebody else in to do it and so long as you haven't agreed to do something tied in by the contract as a name producer. For instance the Australian film, I'd been doing something with Harry Secombe, we'd just done Pickwick, and I was doing Mammy with Hugh Leonard the Irish writer and then I was doing Tales from the Lazy Acre and I was half the way through directing Tales from the Lazy Acre when I got the offer to direct this film in Australia and I went to see Tom Sloan, that's what I mean Tom Sloan was very good, he knew it had always been my ambition form my Hollywood aspiration days to direct a feature film and I'd never thought I'd get the chance. I told Tom, I've now been offered a film in Australia and I want to do it. He said if you can find somebody who will take over your last three shows and you can persuade the cast and Hugh Leonard and everything else it's ok by them, yes you can go. So I spoke to David Croft who wasn't doing anything Let me look at the scripts as ever, before I'll do you a favour, let me look at the scripts. Yes these are very good scripts, I like them yes. Push off and I'll give you a whole list of addresses in Sidney. That's how I did that. Also I'd written a musical for the opening of the New Birmingham Rep which opened in 72 so I actually had that as well I'd got Ronnie Barker, we did a Ragtime version of Falstaff the Merry Wives of Windsor and Bill Freedman who is a Canadian producer, one of the biggest producers in London taken over all the old Aubery theatres and he liked this, this show was called Goodtime Johnny and we were due to open in November 72 and that was pretty tough because I'd half finished this series Teales from the Lazy Acre, I'd done all the filming in Ireland and was rewriting the show with this American director, with Julian Moore, and then we had to do casting and then I got this film and had to fly to Sidney and do all the casting for this film and come back again in a fortnight, the rehearsals for this musical in Birmingham and 3 weeks after that start shooting in Parks, out in the Bush. And I did the film came back and there was the pilot of Last of The Summer Wine on my desk. And I found that fascinating, having done a feature film I was then able to open up Last of the Summer Wine and use a great deal of film in that. It then established the pattern of it.

Stephen Peet: You keep mentioning the Australian feature but you haven't said what it was called.

Jimmy Gilbert: It wasn't a very good film I just wanted to do a feature film I would have done anything. It was called Sunstruck and it was written by Stan Mars and I got Elwyn Jones, I used to come here to his house to get a bit of

reality put into it. The whole Idea was of a Welsh schoolteacher who had been offered one of these jobs in the sun, teaching in the sun they called it. Trying to get schoolteachers from England to go out and teach in small schools in the outback, they just needed more teachers. this teacher going out to one of these one teacher schools in the outback. And a very simple little tale about how eventually he taught them all to sing and they had this school choir and he brought this little rustic choir for what happens every year in a big hall there, a choir festival and it was great fun to do.

John Taylor: Was it shown in Britain

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, it was a fairly simple minded film But I just loved it because I was now doing what I'd always wanted to do in the first place at last.

John Taylor: wanting to play Hamlet.

John Taylor: That's right. And I got on very well with the Australians, a good unit, a wonderful unit. I was told before I went out there by Ted Kotcheff, because he'd just done Wait and Fight with the same unit. He said if you go out you get the best unit in the world, if they're making one film you'll get the second best unit in the world, third forget it. The difference between the top and the bottom at that time.

John Taylor: what DID YOU GET.

Jimmy Gilbert: I got the best and I think they were setting up one other film, I got a cracking unit.

John Taylor: The thing which strikes me about all this is the immense about of work television people can get in compared with film people. Film, you look up Michael Powell and it's 15 , 20 films, but yours is hundreds.

Jimmy Gilbert: Successful series wouldn't be very many, we'd done quite a lot, 15 or20 is an enormous amount of feature films The volume of work you've done in television is enormous, writing and producing and directing, compared with the film industry.

Jimmy Gilbert: I've never been out of work in my life.

John Taylor: you CAN never have stopped work.

Jimmy Gilbert: I suppose Fiona would say that, I've never stopped work. She found being married to an executive very much easier than being married to a television producer because when you're directing all your won shows it's all the filming as well, especially something like the Frost report which was 13 weekly shows and you would do the shows on a Thursday and on Friday morning you're there at half past 9 with your group round you wondering what you're going to do next week and filming that weekend possibly without a script completed and you're going to film it and find locations for it and edit it and dub it and everything else, rehearsing and working of the scripts and rehearsing the cast during the day, it was far too much for one person, now they wouldn't do that. My son now is doing exactly the same, he is head of comedy up at BBC Scotland and he's doing the same kind of review programme but he can produce he can direct when he wants. He's got producers, he's got directors he's got a team round him which in those days if you were at the BBC if you were a producer you were a producer director and that was it. You The whole thought of having anybody else directing was unheard of. You had a secretary and you had a pa and that was it. There were the Three of you, you

just got on with it. You were given a blank sheet of paper and that was it. Do a show.

John Taylor: You lump a series together as one thing but surely they were 13 different things.

John Taylor: Linked together by sketches 2 minutes long 3 minutes long and in order to get a 30 minute show, we managed persuade them to cut it to 25 on a 13 week because that other 5 minutes would just have been a killer, but you really need a 43 to basis of material to really make it work you need 2 times as much material so you could sift through, otherwise you would have just that amount of material and you would have to shoot it whether it was good bad funny or indifferent. so you had to always oversubscribe, that was the difficult thing to convince people in the BBC when they saw you script bill. You'd say I'm sorry that the name of the game. that's it. If you want a good show you have to pay for tit.

John Taylor: How did you get your finance agreed. Did you have to go to the accounts department or the budget department.

Jimmy Gilbert: The BBC was weird about budgets . They had above the line and below the line very much at that time.

John Taylor: What is above the line and below the line.

Jimmy Gilbert: Money that leaves the building and money which stays inside. Real money which goes outside. Below the line was the commissioners canteen, my salary, everybody else's salary. that was below the line. Then they brought in total costing, when did total costing come in 1970. I can still remember despite total costing Aubrey saying when he was running BBC 2 he was supposed never to say things like that What is real money and it's that that's all I'm interested in. We're total costing at Thames now. Because if they don't get the franchise in 4 years time it will become a four wall operation We have to really big now the same way as if we were an outside company so our budget had to be very accurate on a total budget basis. But I mean if you were doing successful shows we never went daft about money but if we overspent a bit you overspent a bit. You had a manager which was of vital importance. The comedy department and variety department both had long term managers, the same manager who was in variety who was a senior manager in light entertainment and he could budget a budget to very creative financing but he could balance a budget of 10s of millions to come out almost on a 10 piece by balancing one against the other but always budget conscious. it came roughly on target at the end of the year. You know that a certain type of show is going to be expensive and you balance that against one which is cheaper.

Stephen Peet: On your list of credits there is one production you haven't mentioned, The Walrus and the Carpenter.

Jimmy Gilbert: That was Hugh Griffiths and written by Marty Feldman and Barry took. It was a series, it was quite lovely series, it was Marty as the Jewish writer wanting to write about his father's friends. says a young writer always writes about his own friends and then he writes about his father's friends, and when he's old enough he writes about his worn friends again or his own experiences. And these were his father's friends. And he had Hugh Griffith and Felix Amyler as too total opposites. Felix is a retired school teacher very dry and Hugh Griffith as this terrible old reprobate. who used to meet every morning in the churchyard out of loneliness. Total opposites and talk and go off on little adventures, it was 1965, it got wonderful notices. But talking

about Tom Sloan. After the first series Hugh Marty Feldman and Barry Took were very proud of this series as they had every reason to be and when we went in to discuss a new series which was about half past two in the afternoon, he'd probably had a good lunch instead of saying I liked that that was lovely maybe we can think about how we're going to make it better next year he just sat there and said what went wrong then. So that was the end of the Walruss and the Carpenter. Marty Feldman and Barry Took just went ashen with anger and said if it's something commercial you want we can write you that. Can you. Yes. We can write you some rubbish. And they did and I was slumbered with Marty and Barry's new thing with Marty Feldman and Irene Handl called no Appointment Necessary in a hairdresser's shop. which quite deservedly died the death and was never heard of again. That shows again how even that series the Walrus and the Carpenter the influences IT CAN HAVE, IN A FUNNY WAY. because Hugh Griffith as you know had a terrible drink problem and he got so drunk on the first show we had to scrap the whole programme. The Walrus and the Carpenter, I had to scrap the whole programme. I went on like a cinema manager after we'd done the take when it was about 15 minutes over, only because he was so plastered and say now Hugh Griffith he has been very courageous and brave he's not feeling very well, if they smelt his breath, but now he's going to come out and do it again, now he's feeling better, I went in to see him, We'll have to try it again Hugh. And he came on and I could see then that he'd been so overcome with remorse and guilt and everything else that he'd been knocking more back so it was useless so I just cancelled the whole thing. And next morning we went in for the Post Mortem, and we went in to see Frank Muir who was running comedy at that time and he said What's it going to be James is it the boot. I said I don't know, I really don't know what can you do. He said the only person he respected was his wife who was an Australian lady from Melbourne who was terribly, terribly proper and terribly English although she was Australian and he said to me can you come this evening and meet my wife and I'm sure between the two of you, you might be able to arrange some way in which this terrible pressure on me, the studio audience pressure, I said are you going to give him another go or what. He said it's up to you to think if you can get it. I said we can try I went that night to his very gorgeous apartment in Kensington and he made some terribly obvious excuse, I have some telephone call which I have to make to Hollywood, I'll leave you two together. And she said, "What happened?" I said he just got paralytic. She said Oh go that's what I thought it was. And I knew of course that Hugh was listening with his hear at the door to what I was going to say so I had to couch it far more diplomatic terms than that. And she was couching it in far more diplomatic terms and what she did was she said I will come there every camera day. I will arrange for a hamper to be sent from Harrods with a half bottle of wine and chicken and fruit and what not I will turn up at 5 o'clock and he will know that I'm coming at 5 o'clock and every thing will be alright. So that's what happened and it was, he was alright. He used to call me his baby sitter whenever he felt like having a drink he used to ring me up and talk about the wife, if you get home late at night and he'd say she was out or she's done somewhere and he was lonely and if I didn't come he'd take to the bottle again. It was sheer blackmail. So I used to go to his house he didn't drink at all and I'd drive up half canned driving home which made Fiona very angry. ST: When you say you had to cancel that show was it pulled completely

Jimmy Gilbert: Completely. What happened was again is extraordinary, there was a scene in a library and it was being played by an Australian actor as a real tramp, a character Hugh Griffith was playing these scenes in the churchyard and the scenes in the library, this one particular episode, even when we made it we couldn't put it out so we did 2, 3, 4, 5 was going to be number 1 again then 6 ,7, and Gordon played this part and he was going to Stratford so I had to recast it and I recast it with Warren Mitchell. And Dennis Main Wilson was just then doing till Death us Do Part as a one off comedy playhouse He had

offered it to Leo McKern, it was originally written for Leo McKern to play Alf Garnett, he turned it down, Dennis Main Wilson was watching the Walrus and the Carpenter and saw Warren Mitchell playing the part that should have been playing and thought god that's it we'll have him. And always dines out on that story that that is how Warren Mitchell became Alf Garnett. Just because Hugh Griffith got paralytic. So that is Dennis' story. The other thing which was a direct outcome of The Walrus and the Carpenter and Tom Sloan saying what happened. Well quite a lot of people apparently on the research into the series why it got wonderful reviews it didn't do better, was because these were two elderly gentlemen who were in very, very financially, they'd no money at all and so they felt embarrassed about laughing at the problems of old people. And apart from Golden Girls which treated in a very broad way and all frightfully prosperous and having love affairs and what not , there's never really been a successful series taking old people when it's real, the reality of old people and getting a comedy out of it and putting it in front of a studio audience. You could do it if it was drama but as soon as that studio audience comes in and laughs it cheapens the whole thing. Something happens anyway. When I got the first script of Last of the Summer Wine. I read it and this was about 3 retired people in their 70s who were pensioners, who were very lonely who had nothing in common at all and who met together every day in the library in where we ended up and then went back to their separate houses only brought together because of their loneliness. And I immediately having done the Walrus and the Carpenter had a red light thinking are we going to be in the same problem and probably if somebody else had produced it, it would have been cast with old actors and certainly the series wouldn't be running now it would have been dead. So what I did was that I went up to Doncaster to see Roy Clarke and told him what I felt they all brought to be brought back that they had at least 10 years of obviously useful life in them. So we made the Peter Sallis part who is virtually Roy Clarke's soap box or was then, and made him redundant, he had been made redundant by the Coop where he had been working And the army guy he had been retired because he hadn't got the proper rank, he wasn't an old soldier. And the Bill Owen part, Compo, was again somebody who was just unemployable. Therefore he would always be unemployable. So they were virtually, I treated them on all the filming, when in doubt I just asked them to behave like children and kick thinks around and play with things. So that all went back to the Walrus and the Carpenter, the Walrus and the Carpenter affected the last of the summer Wine enormously as far as an attitude was concerned. And also the people we cast. Instead of being 65 to 70 year olds we were able to cast them as 50 55 year olds.

John Taylor: It's one of my favourite series. I can't remember the name of the man who played the third man in it.

Jimmy Gilbert: Michael Bates was the original one and when he died Bryan Wilde became Foggie and now the new man Michael Aldridge he has had enough so he is leaving and they are going to bring Bryan Wilde back again so Foggie is back into the new series. If somebody had told me it would be running in 20 years time.

John Taylor: The title music is so nice as well .

Jimmy Gilbert: That was originally Roy Clarke had called it the Last of the Summer Wine but when I got the script it had been called The Library Mob and episode one of the Last of the Summer Wine. I rang up Roy and said This is a dreadful, be careful how you say it because it's your boss whose changed it, nobody will want that title. But we changed the subtitle to the title and called it Last of the Summer Wine and I had a delegation from the actors who knew nothing about it at all and said they loved the series and could I please change the title because they hated Last of the summer Wine, nobody would watch anything called Last of the Summer Wine, Do you know what they were

going to call it, The Library Mob. Oh that's great can't we call it the Library mob. Nobody will watch it. I think that was Bill Owen's influence, he's quite a commercial animal is Bill, nice man.

John Taylor: I knew him when he was Rowbotham at the Unity Theatre.

Jimmy Gilbert: That's right he was in reviews there.

John Taylor: What problems did you have on Summer whine or did it just go like clock work

Jimmy Gilbert: The weather more than anything. The cost is such an enormous thing, 3 weeks filming up in Holmerford, but even in Manchester, it's twice as wet as Manchester because that's where it's all dropped on the other side of the Pennines.

John Taylor: But it was exactly the right place.

Jimmy Gilbert: But the author, when I went up to see him. I'd been tipped off about Holm by Barry Took who said he'd worked there, his second job was in a funny little hall for stand up comics in Holmesford, because I was describing the sort of place I was looking for and he said do try Holmesforth and I'd never been to I mentioned it to Roy Clarke who lived in Doncaster and he'd been ca copper in Rotherham and he showed me where he imagined it, right on top of this hill over looking acres and acres of Rotherham slums and back to backs and terraces, there was a great hill of them which was his pad when he was in the Rotherham police. And that is where he imagined it. Extraordinary. I see it exactly the opposite. He said let's go and have a look at H. So we went to H and stood up on top of a hill and he said this is it isn't it because it had this marvelous claustrophobic feeling of a town at the bottom of a valley so on all their day trips whenever they went out, wherever they went they still had town there, so it was never very far away from them, But it looks foreign, bits of it were quite foreign with the houses hanging on the edge.

John Taylor: For me it's exactly the right location.

SIDE 7, TAPE 3, 19 march 1990

Jimmy Gilbert: By which did you come a producer

Jimmy Gilbert: When I went to the BBC it was 1957 and this was from 1957 to 1973, was when I became head of comedy, I was an executive producer from 1967 but that was just a way of giving you more money, giving you a car park red sticker so you could park. I think that my professional life really changed gear when the Two Ronnies came over from London Weekend Television to the BBC, and I was virtually taken off production for a year and told that they were my responsibility I had to find them a variety show and I had to find each of them a comedy series. So we started on the variety show.

Stephen Peet: What year was this

Jimmy Gilbert: 1971 and we started with the variety series first because that was the most pressing one and Ronnie Barker and I, because Ronnie Corbett was perfectly happy to let Ronnie Barker speak for him as he was a writer as well as a performer and Ronnie and I had worked together over the previous 10 years and I'd given him his first television in comedy and we were old friend and he

had been in the Frost Report as well, that was in the mid 60s so we just sat down to knock out a format for their variety show which became the Two Ronnies and it was as ever you look back to what had worked best and modifying it and turning it to something which is new. And in actually fact the format of the Two Ronnies which I produced and Terry Hughes directed was the opening and closing where they did their talk to camera over the years, it was really David Frost taking in the Frost Report with jokes loosely tied to topical events but were really bent to whatever it was that week in a news at 10 format, we use two of them and do a Frost Report type thing minus Frost. The party sketch which they always used to have for many years with the tow of them at a party talking together was an old Jones and Palin sketch from the frost Report as well and that was the only way I could persuade Jones and Palin from Monty Python to write for the Two Ronnies was to say how about doing your party sketch and then how about doing another party sketch and then eventually getting other writers to do the party sketch when Jones and Palin were too busy. And his solos which were a big feature of the two Ronnies his word play and puns and alliteration and parodies they were singles which he used to do in the Frost Report and he took straight over into the Two Ronnies. The serial film idea that was Ronnie's idea he wanted to do that himself and write them himself. And Ronnie Corbett also had the idea I must do something I'll do it slightly different, I won't stand up I'll sit down. So that was his sit down piece and it was all jumbled together. And then Ronnie Barker wanted to do a musical medley at the end which we'd discussed but never done in the Frost Report which was a straight lift from round the Horne, I think it was Round the Horne that used to have a musical parody at the end and it was all put together and it was just one of these lucky things that it worked. And the format never changed I shouldn't think for 20 years, or 21 years, however long they did it. So that was the variety one and to have a comedy series for Ronnie Corbett actually took 8 years to find one, we just never made it. We did pilot after pilot and they didn't really work. We did a series a couple of series as well but they never really took off. With Ronnie Barker with him being basically an actor and not a performer I suppose it was easier and we did one called Seven in One which was a virtually comedy playhouse series to find a pilot which would then make a series for Ronnie Barker and Seven in One I did in 1971 and commissioned 2 scripts from Roy Clarke out of which came Open All Hours which was one of the pilots and I commissioned two from Clement-Le Frenais and one of those eventually became Porridge, two from Hugh Leonard and one from Simpson and one from Barker himself. And which although we didn't make a series of it Yorkshire Television made a series of it with Clive Dunn so it was just one of these very fortunate series called Seven at One out of which we got three series. But Porridge it was an interesting thing it was called prisoner and Escort which was really just about a convict being taken to prison after conviction and the two wardens were Brian Wilde and Fulton Mackie who played originally the prison escort to Porridge itself. And it was really an anecdote the con who said he wanted to have a pee, got out peed in the petrol tank so the thing broke down in the middle of a wilderness and then they had to put up in a lonely farmhouse. Ronnie Barker escaped and then went round the fog came down, he went round in a circle and ended up where he started and it was just a perfectly constructed anecdote a short story and the writers Dick and Ian were very, very nervous about taking it further. They wanted to take the other one called I'll Fly you for a Quid which was about an old Welshman who died with a winning betting slip in his hand and the family then tried to open the coffin, very macabre story to get the winning betting slip out and eventually the priest gets it first because he needs it for his roof fund. which was another really lovely, the anecdote, and I don't think it would have happened, Porridge would have happened if it hadn't been for an extraordinary stroke of luck because the writers were really against it, Barker wanted to do the other one the I'll Fly you for a Quid. But living opposite to us in Richmond was a chap who had retired and he was a social worker and he had come over to see me about six months before

saying there was a convict who he had befriended who had been in goal all his life and he wanted to become a writer or an actor and he as a social service to this bloke wondered if I'd see him. so I brought him to the office and a fellow called Jonathan Marshall and he was a very plausible rogue. My secretary was terrified of him because we found out he's really been up to no good, going and beating up people apparently but he obviously was quite talented and very keen and I started to give him odd exercises extra work just to introduce him into television and when Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais were a bit nervous about taking prisoner and escort into prison which is what I was very keen on happening, Jonathan Marshall arranged for Dick and Ian to go to Brixton goal and meet the governor. I thought this might give them a bit of local colour and encourage them to write it. However they were more appalled than ever, having been inside the prison it is so awful and so depressing that they' still didn't see this although they hadn't decided out of hand not to do it they were still in two minds whether they were going to do it or not. And Jonathan Marshall at that time had got in galley form a book which eventually came out a book which he had written called How to Survive in the Nick and I introduced Jonathan Marshall to them and also brought the rights for this book for television which was then given to Dick and Ian in galley form and appointed Jonathan Marshall as script editor, not script editor but sort of research to use his book. And it was that really that turned the tide as far as Dick and Ian, they could then see it almost as a domestic comedy of survival within prison. and when you think of it is in the first series or two until Richard unfortunately died it was almost a domestic comedy turned on it's head, almost to like Steptoe the confines of the prison cell the most effective one was the one where Barker and Richard Beckinsdale pretended that they really could have gone out this Saturday night but they would just have quiet night in and the two of them just talked and fantasised and reminisced about their lives and it was I thought one of the most effective ones of all the series so I don't know what has happened to Jonathan Marshall now but he was consultant, crime consultant on it for 2 or 3 years. And if he ever hears this I don't think Porridge would have happened without him, That was a stroke a luck.. So that was Ronnie Barker looked after because the then heard of variety with the Two Ronnies he had Porridge and then when Porridge ran out because the authors went back to America Bill Cotton and I when I had become head of comedy, Bill cotton and I went over to Los Angeles persuaded Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais because they were writing the American conversion of Porridge called on the Rocks and it was a quiet extraordinary revelation of the difference at that time between British comedy and American comedy that the American version of Porridge they felt, obviously for the same reason Dick and Ian had felt originally that it was too depressing a subject to have as a comedy without lightening it and apparently, I didn't see the pilot they set the whole thing in Hawaii and they even had a palm tree waving outside the cell window to try and cheer the whole thing up. They turned the whole thing on its' head. They couldn't find the equivalent of Ronnie Barker I don't think so they tried to split the whole thing up into a gang show and it just didn't work. But anyway they were writing scripts over there for the series so whereas the British series of Porridge had been adapted for America I felt because they said they couldn't write this any more, I felt if we went over there and persuaded them they could then anglicise the scripts they were writing for America back for England and do them as they should have done without any of the this Technicolor pussyfooting which was going on over there which destroyed the series over there in America. Then

John Taylor: Did you do that

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, we did that and we got the final series which was the proper version of what they were writing in America.

Stephen Peet: Was Porridge EVER shown in the States.

Jimmy Gilbert: I don't know. I don't know how that would work, at one time certain if for instance you were selling the rights for something in America you sold the total rights and that was to prevent for instance on the Rocks being on CBS and Porridge being shown on Channel 13 which they could easily have done they could have put one against the other and at one time it wasn't possible to show the originals if the other versions were on air which it was at the time. I don't know if Porridge was shown it probably has been now. And then after that that was about 1971 I went back and made a film in Australia and then did the last of the Summer Wine and the Likely Lads before Whatever happened to the likely Lads before coming Head of Comedy in 73.

John Taylor: The Likely Lads how did that come about

Jimmy Gilbert: That really was I'd gone over to Australia to do the film and I thought I was coming back to do a chat show series which I wasn't keen on doing and I'd agreed to do it as a punishment for being allowed to go to Australia so I wasn't contesting it but they knew I wasn't very keen and the BBC being the organisation it is instead they'd given it to somebody else and there were 13 scripts all beautifully typed and all beautifully set out in hard covers 1 to 13 of Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads. And I read them and I just couldn't believe my luck. because I barely altered one word. you could say it was production it was direction in that one, I didn't need a producer because Dick and Ian had done all the work themselves in America, it was just an immaculate scripts

John Taylor: They were written in America

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. *

John Taylor: And you directed it.

Jimmy Gilbert: I produced and directed it but as I say it needed very little production in it as far as script was concerned they were all there. It was a matter of recasting certain parts as most people had got older. I had two bees in my bonnet at that time. I felt there wasn't enough reality in comedy and everything was based in the South East of England everything seemed to be London to south east and film was only used for taxi or car at edge of pavement character comes out rat a tat on the door, cut to studio that was it wasn't quite as dramatic as that but film was used very, very little, it was nearly all studio based and it was very nearly all metropolitan based as well. But I wanted to do was get comedy out of London. I'd already been involved with Manny and Tales from the Lazy Acre over in Ireland and able to use a lot of location filming over there and that had whetted my appetite. And then I'd gone to Wales and done a 60 minutes drama with a lot of filming in Wales and I just felt that this would be marvelous to use locations specially as the BBC at that time could afford it they were having that 10 percent rise in funds. When I met Dick and Ian, when they had done the original Likely Lads the North of England was the back streets of Acton, I don't suppose anyone would have known. But what I asked them to do, if they'd written something in the north east let's use the locations so we all went up to Newcastle and stayed up there and shot around there and around Hexham if they were going out on a bicycle ride on the hills they went on a bicycle ride on the hill s and we got a feeling of location about it the same way we did with Last of the summer Wine in Home so I think that is one of the big things when I became head of comedy. Because I felt that getting out of London and reflecting more of what was going on all over the country and using film, because ITV at that time used no film on comedy at all. But that was reasons of cost more than anything else. For instance they were able to do and it worked brilliantly, when they

did duty Free which was all in Spain and the whole thing was done in the studio but then it was shot as a theatrical farce and they didn't attempt any kind of phony reality so it worked. When I was asked to do head of comedy, when Duncan Wood went to Yorkshire I really felt n doubts about it, I had been asked once before and I didn't want to do it. But because I'd had a very successful year with Whatever happened to the Likely Lads which we got the BAFTA award for that one plus Last of the Summer Wine plus the film plus I had a musical on in Birmingham I felt it wasn't running away for anything it was a successful year, it wasn't as if I was taking the job because it had been a bad year and this was something it can't be any worse than this, I really thought I was in the right frame of mind to see it as a challenge and a development and I did it for nearly 4 years.

John Taylor: what DID THE job comprise of

Jimmy Gilbert: Well you had a department of about 130 people you had I suppose about the 15 producers and the main job was to find between 120 and 1230 programmes for BBC 1 and between 45 and 50 programmes for BBC and you hoped that at least a third of them would be runners, that would be another series as long as the series was successful and in fact you hoped half of them would be so you would only have to find a half and that is still a lot of programmes to find in the year but there are certain points in any output when thing begin to run out and at that particular time the cupboard s was fairly bare so the first thing I did was start a comedy playhouse series to try and find out of 3 programmes you'd hope to find 3 series out of it but in the event it just didn't work out. There were no, we didn't get anything out of that series at all. I think the public had rumbled the idea of comedy Playhouse as being an audition piece and instead of looking at each one and saying I thought that one was a bit better than this one they would watch the firs programme and if they didn't like it maybe they would watch the second and the audiences just disintegrated because they hadn't enjoyed the first tow , they thought this is a rotten series and of course the cost of that is enormous because normally all the costs of filming and design which are huge are put into the first episode but then the costs are then spread over 13 or episodes. But if each one is being designed and cast and all the costs are being put into one and it doesn't work a financial disaster so if you don't get audiences as well, that really killed off the whole comedy Playhouse concept People tried doing the odd 6 or 7 since. ITV HAD tried it. Channel 4 have tried it. But for some reason that first episode where everybody tries to jam everything into 30 minutes where you have to establish characters get to know them, interest the audience, be funny and leave a cliff hangar at the end it just doesn't work anymore, it may again but it just hasn't happened and is really better now to use the method of working on script which was always to have a pilot script and then if you liked the pilot script commission immediately a back up script which could be script 3 or 4 of the series just to see if it has any legs in it, to see if there is any development or is it just a short story is it something which is very funny and very clever the door is closed at the end of that episode in which case you waste an awful lot of money if there is no development. So really that was it basically to work with writers and what you would hope again is that because IT was the BBC and the reputation of the BBC was so high people would come to you as the representative of the BBC comedy but that wouldn't be enough. What I found and what I did was to go out all the time looking for it which you have to in order to find out what is happening and read anything which you think might adapt into a comedy series, listen to radio go the theatre a lot it was an incredibly demanding job. AT the end of each year that I did it I used to keep lover for two or three weeks and go up to Scotland up to the farm and recharge my batteries and come back again, it was the most demanding 3 or 4 years of my life but also the most rewarding. Because he did at that time, we had the most wonderful writers who were

working for us like Clement- Le Frenais, Roy Clarke, we found some new ones, Books that I read like Reginald Perrin, that was an example of a book which adapted extremely well into a series.

John Taylor: It was a book originally.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. I read the book Bit was by David Nobbs and I thought it was so weird, and also because David Nobbs himself was a television writer, there was no point in getting a funny book which is all narrative unless you know who is adapting it. Because David Nobbs had written for mainly television review, he was a Frost Report writer I knew that he could then adapt the book into a series. I remember reading the book and then I wrapped it up and posted it to Leonard Rossiter who was playing in a theatre up in Oldham and I got it back within three days and he told me later he'd only read the first chapter and decided to do it. So that was a bit of luck. I didn't Know you Cared was another series which Peter Tinniswood had written and we got two series out of that. And just going on adaptations now, Woodhouse, I did two or three series with, I went over to America and got co production money on that and did a series of that. But in a funny way Woodhouse didn't really work, it started on BBC1 and we moved it to BBC 2 and we had John Alderton and Pauline Collins playing in it. I thought it was delightful and I as very pleased to see in the last biography of Woodhouse which Sheridan Morley had done where he said that Woodhouse thought that that was the one series which was really true to what he felt his books should be done as, that was very rewarding. I remember going over to his house at and filming in there. It was literally 3 weeks before he died and David had written all the intros we were going to do 13 initially and I took a film unit to his house in R and there was just his wife and his sister there the 23 of them and one servant lady who came in every Thursday and he was such an innocent person it was impossible to imagine all those silly stories about him during the war, he was so innocent and so naive and such a lovely man and he was sitting there typing away half past 8 every morning at lunch time he would stop. That is what Ethel said when she said we could come and film she said he does have his lunch at 1 o'clock and he always watches this soap opera edge of Night and it's getting very exciting if you don't mind we won't come back till 3 o'clock. I showed him all the intros which had been written for each one of these, I said do rewrite them if you want, and he rewrote every single one. and this was aged 892, 93, just before he died. And he learned them all. He said oh I forgot all about this one, I must go away and reread this one again before I do the intro so he padded off into another room. That's really god that, I'd forgotten all about that one but he did, he did 10 intros before lunch. He only had 3 left and back he came after his look at the soap opera and knocked off the other three. It was quite extraordinary, he did the whole thing and we were finished by tea time. No autocues, nothing at all, he just had them all written out, he would change them before each one, he was such a meticulous craftsman, every word and comma seemed to matter, even in the intros to his own work on television. And he told me about his knighthood as well which he was obviously very proud of and I said to him did you not want to go over to Buckingham Palace to get it. H e said I couldn't do that. The British ambassador realised I was a bit old for going back and he suggested I go to Washington but I didn't want to do that either. Eventually there was a little local airfield and he said he would fly there and they would do it properly with the sword on the shoulder in the house. But he said the really reason I didn't want to do it was my 90th birthday celebration was so disrupting in the household here and there was only my wife and my sister here and there were so many reporters came for my 90th birthday. And he said if I went down on one knee I really don't think I could get up again. That is what he said, he said my legs are not as hot as they were. That was Wodehouse, that was lovely meeting him, it was very sad

when he died so shortly afterward. The series that came to mind in that period, the other thing was commissioning new series was really the most important thing you did. And I made myself responsible for the main casting of them. The Good Life for instance that started with the writers coming in with a book called Self Sufficiency and saying they wanted to do a series based on people, a man who was fed up with his life in his office and the hurly burly of modern existence and commuting and the rest of it. You don't mean he is going to leave london and go and live in the country in a little country cottage because that's been tried so many times and it's never worked. Oh no he said, it's the complete opposite of that. They're not going to leave their house in Surbiton at all. And I was looking for something for Richard Briars. And I said look, can you write it all down on one sheet of paper and I'll send it off to Richard Briars. And the next day they come in with this piece of paper. I sent it off to Richard. And immediately Richard rang back and said I love it, I want to do it. So I commissioned the pilot of that. And the pilot was done by John Hart Davis and it was obviously going to be very successful so I commissioned the series. The funniest thing of that whole commissioning thing was the casting of it. Because I'd just been to see Norman Conquest the Acykborn trilogy, and Richard was actually not in that he was in another Acykborn which was down at the Criterion with Paul Eddington in it but the two ladies were in it and Penelope Keith and Felicity Kendall and I was very impressed with both of them especially Penelope Keith who I actually had not seen before. So when were discussing casting with Esmonde and Larby who had written the good Life. I said I've seen this marvelous woman Penelope Keith who sees an absolute dead ringer for Margot. They said they'd actually written it for a woman who they'd seen in a commercial but hadn't seen do any television at all. I said you is she and they didn't know. I picked up Spotlight and said that's Penelope Keith who I've seen in the Norman Conquest and they said That's her that's the woman, by a complete coincidence the lines had crossed on this woman and Margot of course in the first episode she wasn't in it. The first episode was rather like the first episode of Reggie Perrin Leonard Rossiter was in an ice cream factory getting fed up with his work and Richard Briars was in an office I think it was an advertising agency getting fed up with his existence there. And the end of the first episode of the Good Life was of the two of them dancing in their fountain in the garden celebrating the fact he had given up his job and this is what he was going to do and a voice over from Margot next door with the lights coming up saying for god sake do shut up, you're making up such a noise. She didn't really start taking over the series until about 3 or 4 episodes in but they were such a delightful company and they got on so well together there was never any resentment that you might have thought there would be, that this was a series for Richard Briars and people remember it more for Margot than anything with Penny Keith. Hannah Gordon was offered the part originally and she didn't want to take it because she'd just done a series with Peter Barkworth and she thought the character was too similar and having seen Felicity Kendall I think we did alright by having Felicity Kendal in it. I know Hannah told me since she's kicked herself for turning that one down. But that's often happened. It's an extraordinary thing about chemistry and how actors come together and near misses and how people come into this film, all different directions. It's only when you look back on it you realise what a weird way sometimes these apparent bits of good fortune have happened.

Jimmy Gilbert: If you'd got good scripts and you've got good directors and producers and what not the actors they're the bonus. I think the worse thing is when you bring in good actors and have to ask e them to lift an inadequate script which they can do. But you don't get really excellence unless you give these actors good scripts and then they can contribute so much creatively. I remember having a great argument with Paul about interpreters creators, we

were talking about this whole business of Ireland where creative artists are allowed to live tax free but actors are not included and he was going on about it. I said well directors aren't included either, I mean the creators are surely the writers, the sculptors the musicians etc and that is quite right and proper. He didn't agree with that. You've got a creative input but if you had never lived and you had maybe done a brilliant job in Hamlet the play would still be there. The fact that you hadn't done it wouldn't make the play any less. A very heated argument. But it is absolutely true without the writers, that is where I consider the job was with the writers. For instance when John Cleese came in with his wife and announced that he wanted to do a comedy series based in a hotel. And I said that's rather a conventional thought from you. People have done hotels. I would have thought you would have done something much more original. He looked dryly and said I think we can make it a little different which he did with faulty Towers, it's probably the best comedy which has come out of any network. It's quite extraordinary how comedy can date but that one seems to get funnier and funnier. My only contribution to that was to ask him to do a pilot of it because he wasn't going to be able to write, he wrote just one script to show what it was about. I said why don't' we do it h/bs gw as bi I'd rather do the whole batch next autumn when it's written. I said why don't we do this one. We'll give you a set. If there are any, if we make any mistakes with casting we'll put them right. Anyway you'll have a cassette and while you're writing the next 5 scripts you'll be able to refer to this cassette and see it and hear the voices of the actors, surely this will make life a little easier for you. And he agreed to do this and about a month later he rang up very nervously. He said you've done this pilot. How am I to know you're not going to put this out. I said you're not, it 's ours to do what we like with it. But this is the BBC of course they won't put it out. We won't do anything with it unless you want it to happen. because the BBC has given it's word it won't Which is what John Lloyd was saying it is an honorable organisation so he accepted that totally. But I think you can just. I know it so well but you can detect a slight difference between episode one and the rest of it. Because the writers themselves were able to hear voices and see faces and that is usually why second series second series are not writing in the dark, it's not their imagination entirely, it's being filled in with voices and faces. And I think that is one of the basic differences between working in comedy in ITV and the BBC, apart from the fact that we had 30 minutes at the BBC and there was no commercial break in the middle, it's the fact that the BBC would give a series a chance to develop. Often a series didn't work the first time or apparently didn't work the first time but if a head of comedy thinks there is mileage in it and is able to convince the controller of either BBC1 or BBC2 it deserves a second series almost inevitably a Controller will go along with head of department unless he things he's just gone totally round the bend. Whereas TV unless it worked in the first 6 was just taken off. I remember once, when I was at Thames being told by somebody there one series which had not worked but if it had been at the BBC would have been immediately been just commissioned for a another series, had very good reviews and everything else, obviously ripe for development, being told by this man who shall remain nameless you stand a much better chance if you change the title and pretend the whole thing is another series. Not a chance. The fog of bureaucracy which was mentioned about at the BBC they could actually act incredibly quickly if the moment was right and I felt something was good I could literally get into the lift go up see Bryan Cowgill who was Controller of BBC1 at that e time and say as I did once with John Sullivan, the first script of Citizen Smith, John Sullivan who has since written some of the best comedy which has happened in the 80s, was working as a scene shifter during the week and he was hoovering the carpets at the house of Lords on Sunday with his partner in order to exist while he was writing until he got his first break. And he took the script, the first Script of Citizen Smith into the BBC Club Bar where he met that resident very eccentric genius Dennis Main Wilson the producer who did To Death us do Part

and was always to be seen in the bar of the BBC Club Bar with a pint in one
hand and a whisky in the other and a cigarette somehow

JIMMY GILBERT

SIDE 7, TAPE 4

Jimmy Gilbert: Talking of the fog of bureaucracy, Dennis Main Wilson met John Sullivan who said I'm a scene shifter here, I'm trying to get at least as close to television as I can, I've written a script will you read it? And Dennis read it and immediately bounded a long to my office. And as Dennis was a great bon viveur at lunch time He was the original person who was called a legend in their own lunch time and he was the he came along with this script and said !This is wonderful, you must read it, you must read it." And I read it and it was. And immediately Dennis brought John Sullivan in and I commissioned a second script in as a back up script, went upstairs to see Brian and said we've got a great script here we must pilot it. And there was a lot. And to cut a very long story short we had done a pilot we had looked at it had a second script and commissioned a whole series of 7. And that started John Sullivan off. I always quote that because when you are really in a hurry you can just nip up in the lift, if you're on the fourth floor the BBC could work very, very quickly. In comparison with ITV where you've got an Idea you've not only got to get it passed your own controllers at Thames. But then they've got to get it passed their network committees and then when its on air, you've got to get a second series passed all the other ITV companies network committee and all sorts of jealousies, what I gather, although I've never been to one of their committee meetings. For instance if something as an example from Granada has been turned down as a second series because IT hasn't worked, it may have been an absolute turkey too and not deserved a second series, then if a first series from say a Thames comedy series which did deserve a second series they would say you wouldn't allow us to do a second series of what we wanted yet look at the figures you've been getting for that one, bloody awful the same as ours, no we don't want it. Do it London only if you want, we won't take it for the network. There was always that feeling about it and the policy of repeats. Because often repeat can build interest in a series. And whereas by Equity rules there are xx number of repeats allowed per year for the BBC and ITV you had to decide it in ITV certainly by 5 as far as the big 5 were concerned. So you can't necessarily get a repeat to engender an interest to set up as second series. Dads Army for instance didn't really work that well the first time round. But judicious repeats before the second series it built and became a huge smash hit. The Good Life didn't take off immediately either. The audiences didn't really start to build till before the end of the first series. Last of the Summer Wine was the same. The End of the first series it built to 10 million, and then the start of the second series it went back to 5 and didn't build to 10 again until the end of the 2nd series. And it wasn't until the 3rd series that it really took off. So it's a matter of judicious nursing and this business of the head of comedy being able to go from the fourth floor up two floors knock on the door and say to a Controller how about this, is this worth having a go at. It actually short circuits the whole thing to an amazing degree. If you've got a rapport with the Controller. I found Brian Cowgill marvelous. He's very competitive. But I remember I only really had one altercation with him and that was when I promised him something and it had collapsed for some reason or other, an artist had gone out or the script wasn't right, something like that. And he just raised his eyes to heaven and said How can I run a bloody network if I haven't got any bloody stuff and turned round looking out the window. Then he swung round again and said Oh come on let's have a drink. He was very, very supportive. I found him great to work with.

Stephen Peet: One thing about the John Sullivan story

Jimmy Gilbert: That was Citizen Smith, we then got two or three series of Citizen Smith. And he then became firmly established as a BBC writer. And he then went on to do his biggest success which is Only Fool and Horses. But he hasn't had a real failure. He was just an instinctive writer. And he just I would say out of unsolicited material that was the only one which suddenly you realised you'd struck gold by reading a script. WE had a script unit so that all unsolicited scripts were looked after by a script editor and then he would pass on unsolicited scripts to you. But I don't remember apart from that one anything really coming which ever turned into a successful series.

John Taylor: What about Steptoe.

Jimmy Gilbert: That was Galton and Simpson, that came out of a comedy Playhouse back in the 60s and so did Till Death Us do Part. That was Johnny Speight, that was a Comedy Playhouse which became a series. before.

Jimmy Gilbert: No, this was one of the early ones. I mean comedy Playhouse originally started because Ray Galton and Harold Simpson who had done the marvelous Hancock series and then Tony Hancock got the idea that he was bigger than his writers which was the biggest mistake he made in his career because without his writers the scripts, he was nothing, not nothing but a shadow of what he was with good writers. he have the bonus to the brilliant script. And when Hancock fired his writers, and fancy firing Galton and Simpson at the peak of their career, Tom Sloan who was the head of light entertainment at the BBC at the time said we well give you a series where you can do what you like, it will just be your writers playhouse. And that is how comedy playhouse started, not as an audition piece for 13 or 20 writers to be selected down to 13. But as a showcase for Galton and Simpson themselves. And out of that came Steptoe. Sorry I've got a bit sidetracked.

John Taylor: Did you have to alter the scripts at all from his original one,

Jimmy Gilbert: They needed no alteration at all. He was just a very good, beautiful structured writer as well. Because although it appeared he had come out of the blue he hadn't. He had been writing sketches for the two Ronnies. He had been doing short pieces over the years but he had never got a 30 minute script together until Citizen Smith which had enormous appeal for people of his won generation, for young kids. He found difficulty in further vehicles because he was writing, I think it was George Kauffman who said You first of all write about your own friends and then you write about your father's friends and then when you've got a bit of experience you then start writing about things which have happened to you and your own friends and experiences. But he has never had a turkey since he started to write. He is just an instinctive writer who works very hard at it and who structures his scripts beautifully.

John Taylor: What about Carla Lane

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, that was Carla Lane, she was writing the Liver Birds, and then she started to write more bout personal experiences that she had had in her domestic life and her domestic problems which came to fruition really with Butterflies which was a beautifully observed piece of comedy.

John Taylor: Was that one of yours.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, that was at the time. I'm just trying to think. Yes Minister I can remember the very minute that was commissioned. Tony Jay rang

me up and asked me because he had been script editor on the Frost Report and he asked me for Lunch at Jonathan's which was a great favourite of people at the BBC, do you remember Jonathan's it's a restaurant just at the back of Olympia. and he was sitting down there quietly reading. and he said I've asked you for lunch because I want to do a comedy series about politics. I know about politics, I know I can get the sort of comedy into it that I would want and you would want and that's why I've asked Jonathan Lynn to write the as a partner so I supply all the factual background to politics which is really my scene and Jonathan will come in with me, and he was ex Footlights and had been running the Cambridge theatre and highly intelligent and erudite man himself but with a great eye for comedy. He had written several scripts which I remember from the early Doctor series. And it was just a very, very shrewd paring by Tony Jay himself. That was a classic instance of somebody coming with an idea to you which on the face of it seemed a rather serious idea. You just backed talent. That was another thing that Bryan Cowgill always used to say. Back bloody talent he said. If you get somebody like Tony Jay and Jonathan Lynn say they feel instinctively that they've got something it's certainly wrote a script of years before that came to fruition. What they wanted to do they were both so busy with their various things. Tony Jay was Video Arts and Jonathan Lynn with his theatre projects he was doing. They wrote the pilot we made the pilot and then it sat on the shelf until , not until we were ready but until the writers were ready because it required so much research and so much background it was really a matter of saying whenever you're ready we'll do it. That was in order to get 6 the first 6 scripts done, I think it took about 2 years, 2 and a half years before the series went on air.

John Taylor: When you do a pilot do you have shows of it, do you show it to an audience to see how they react at all?

Jimmy Gilbert: No, that is the American system where they make a pilot and put it in front of a selected audience where apparently they have buttons they press. where they give their reactions to it, funny, not very funny, very funny.

John Taylor: And you do it on your own judgement

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. You have to do it on your own judgement really. You obviously discuss scripts with senior producers whose opinions you respect. You send scripts down the corridor to people and say what do you think of this. what do you think of that. And it either confirms your judgement or we'll take a flyer on this one anyway. Because both at the BBC and ITV and Thames you have a pilot fund, you have a scriptwriter fund and a pilot fund where you have x number of pilots you are budgeted to do if you want to per year. Because pilots are very, very expensive because of this whole business of tying up a producers and directors time just for one 30 minute piece of comedy with all the design and filming concentrated into one half hour. It pays off if it goes into a series, but you've got o be fairly sure that the script is fairly close to doing it as you want to before you do it. And the other thing is that there is no point if you decide to do it. That is another big thing, comedy Playhouse often didn't work is that once you are committed to doing a series over a period of time with a possible transmission date, you're then committed to casting it. You might have a wonderful script and that script appeals to the actors that you want to play it and they want to play it but they're not free. So suddenly you've got a scripts but you do it with the wrong actors. You know it's the wrong actors but you're committed to a series and you have to do it. It is very much better to get your scripts and record them at a time when the actors you want are free and the studios are free. And sometimes that can be months ahead because they are doing something

else. Otherwise those magic bits of chemistry in casting, you've deliberately throwing that away.

Stephen Peet: Can I ask you one thing, here you are head of the department with this enormous output and you're going out to Hollywood and chasing writers and presumably going to the theatre and having lunch with people to discuss things, how much of the output were you able to see before it went out, did you see everything?

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh yes.

Stephen Peet: Or did you delegate.

Jimmy Gilbert: You didn't go to the studios, I go to the studios for every pilot and I tried to go for the first and last episode of a series but it wasn't always possible and what you would do , I stopped, I just didn't have time, unless I had to go out to lunch. And so I started having working lunches. You remember the famous BBC working lunch come in on a trolley, and a bottle of wine or so and just have these working lunches. I sometimes had 3, 4 working lunches in a week. salads and cheese and fruit and wine, it was great. They would come in at 1 o'clock and you would then take your jackets off and sit and talk and that became, having to go out to lunch became the exception rather than a rule. You would have a viewing day of all the output, you would view, the main thing about the BBC rather than ITV and where it was such a relief latterly just to go to ITV with a small department again was meetings, meetings took up so much time, with programme review on a Wednesday, and as you had such a large output you had to have liaison meetings with people so that they knew what you were doing. You would have Controller's meeting with BBC1 on a Thursday afternoon, you would have a Controller's meeting with say the controller of BBC2 say on a Thursday, you would have directors of programmes, managing directors meetings say once a month and in between that time of meeting you would have to have meetings with your own finance people with your managers so that all the time you were feeding information down and up because without that nothing would happen. Also it was , you had to view the output, you couldn't see it, and it was I think every Thursday morning, I used to view the week's output, all the tapes were sent to me and I would go through them all, but sometimes you had to take some home as well. No it was very time consuming and totally exhausting. It was very, very exhilarating but exhausting, genuinely exhausting. At the end of the year two or three times I just disappeared and went up to the farm, Fiona's people's farm and just walk and walk and clear my head for a week or two weeks because I wouldn't like to go back and do it again, not because of the actual output, if it could be divided that you could concentrate on the creative side of it and delegate not so much the viewing and the programmes and the studios but delegate all the administration to somebody else, that would be very much more enjoyable way of doing the job. But on the other hand can you delegate communication of information, you can't actually. because you're virtually going up and selling ideas and listening to criticism from Controllers, you've go to have that sort of relationships. But on the other hand if it's going to be a meeting with Controller 1 at 5 o'clock which it was officially, I remember with 1 on a Wednesday. and 4 o'clock BBC2 on a Thursday, it wasn't like that , even with some one as precise as Bryan Cowgill the meetings would overlap they would say hang on hang on. You've find a 5 o'clock meeting you were going up there about half past 6, quarter to 7 and then it would drip on to half past 7 to 9 o'clock at night and you'd say I cannot come up, I'm going to the theatre tonight and then they would say either postpone it for just pop up for quarter of an hour. But the Controllers, I don't know how they had any time for themselves at all, I don't think they did. Because they were not only seeing all the various heads of department on a regular basis every week

and people from the regions and Scotland Northern Ireland, Children's Religion, they all come in with their plots and plans, 3 drama departments, but then they had to view all this stuff which was being sent over from America they were meant to be buying and they had to view plays they had to view the output so they were able to talk about it at programme review and talk about it to the head of the departments I would have thought that was about 8 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night top 7 days a week.

John Taylor: How much did you rely on audience research for judging the success of a programme. Or how did you judge the success of a programme.

Jimmy Gilbert: Well obviously the audience does count, it must count, if it is starting to drop off, audience appreciation you would get the audience appreciation figure and obviously you had a smash hit if you had a big audience and a very high audience appreciation index. But the audience appreciation index especially for light entertainment was a big dodgy because they were inclined to appreciate things which had been going on for years and the characters had established themselves in their minds and they had grown very fond of the characters irrespective of what they were saying and doing. and it was really our job to decide when and usually before the audience appreciation had dropped to decide either rest it for a while or take it off, we think it had outstayed its welcome, And also the audience appreciation figure, if an audience was dropping often the audience appreciation figure, index would go up because eventually you're getting down to the audience that's enjoying it. If you have a mass audience for something which really isn't a mass audience show the audience appreciation index is probably very low. But as the audience comes down it finds it own level. I don't know, you 're obviously hoping that the general public is going to share your opinion. You can't be so arrogant to completely ignore it. But the same time there is a fine judgement , in an early series to say whether something is worth pushing forward in spite of an obvious audience indifference. Sometimes it works and it does go up and sometimes you're wrong. You have to take it off. There was a lovely series which we liked enormously called the Other One written by John Esmonde and Bob Larby with Michael Gambon and Richard Briars which the producer and myself and other people t television centre loved . The public didn't like it and we thought we'll give it another go, it's worth another series and we were totally wrong because the second series it went down even further, in fact it just went out the plug hole at the other end. So however much we liked it there was no flying in the face of the audience so we took it off.

John Taylor: Did you have the opposite of that> That you didn't like and the public took off with.

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes, very, very broad comedy is very like that. For instance, when we put on Are you Being Served, Michael Mill I think or was it Duncan Wood had done an original series of Are you Being Served and working of the basis of backing bloody talent as Bryan Cowgill would say, when David Croft came in and said he wanted to do more Are you Being Served and couldn't understand why it was being taken off. I said I'll go along with you on that, let's do another series. And there was a lot of resistance within the BBC about are You Being Served. They felt this was a very vulgar, non BBC comedy series. And even within the department itself they didn't like it at all and never liked it. But it was worth having another go at and it became a huge success, a smash success. And there would still be an awful lot of people in the BBC that didn't like it. when I was running the group we put on Blankety Blank for the first time I remember Cliff Morgan saying I never thought the day would come when \ programme like that would be on a BBC screen. And Alasdair Milne was very supportive of it. And I remember Ian Trethowan meeting me down in the corridor and saying God that Blankety Blank is terrible. And I

said well it's very popular, who is going to take it off. And he just looked the other way, he seemed to see over my shoulder somebody else he wanted to speak to. And thereafter at programme review boards Alasdair Milne with a steely look , a half smile would say what did people think of our very, very prestigious success Blankety Blank and nobody would answer this. And it's still running and god it's dreadful now. But it was a huge success at the time. That was really brought about because I wanted to find something for Terry Wogan who was working in Radio at the time and hadn't done any television apart from come Dancing and doing odd outside broadcasts. And I went down to MIP looking for something for him. And I was shown the Match Game by an American company and then with about 3 or 4 other ideas brought it back to Television Centre and handed them over to Alan Boyd who was an absolute genius at translating money making games for contestants which you can't do on the BBC to watered down versions which became very popular. And he took that talent with him to London Weekend and then TVS. But that was the reason Blankety Blank ever came on the screen. And Blankety Blank was so called because that was the Australian version of an American game show and Alan Boyd happened to think it was a catchier title.

John Taylor: Game shows came under you.

Jimmy Gilbert: Not in comedy. When I was head of Light Entertainment. That was a case of a very, very unpopular decision within the BBC which eventually becomes accepted because the public love it. It was the same with the Generation Game. Bill Cotton told me I got exactly the same stick for the Generation Game. They said How do you put this trivial ghastliness on our screen. And it ends up as the Generation Game one of the jewels in the crown. No you have to stick your neck out occasionally.

John Taylor: The BBC has a fantastic record for comedy, there is nothing equal to it.

Jimmy Gilbert: No, but I think really it was because of this terrific tradition of comedy in radio. The writers who were writing the most successful comedies in the 60s were people who had been writing very successful comedy in the golden days of radio. Galton and Simpson were radio writers, Muir and Norden were radio writers. There was a tremendous tradition of comedy writing, with Johnny Speight as well, Johnny was a radio writer. And they translated that talent to television.

John Taylor: Did it come out of the music halls originally

Jimmy Gilbert: I think it was a radio thing more than anything. I think the variety side, variety were from the old days of music hall and variety. But it wasn't until review, the review pattern of the sketch type show took over which was right up to Not the 9 O'clock News and Alas Smith and Jones and French and Saunders. This is really all in the review tradition of Sketch writing which has gone right the way through in television terms the first Stanley Baxter series I mentioned right the way through TV3, the Frost Report, Monty Python, Cook and Moore right up to now to French and Saunders which is variety. That is why the word variety is so silly. There is still ahead of variety at the BBC although there hasn't been any variety for 10 or 15 years. But nobody can think of another name for it. They thought of entertainment. But they can't say it's entertainment because everything is meant to be entertaining whether its a religious programme or a political programme it's meant to be entertaining. there is a head of light entertainment or you can call it Controller of Entertainment, But that particular side of Entertainment which is the variety side which people are still calling it

variety, if somebody could invent a better word they would, because there isn't any, it's a complete misnoma. I always felt that radio was the most marvelous form of piloting, getting back to the cost, a pilot for a television show, say then would have been about £60,000, now it's about \£100,000 on ITV to do a pilot could be £120,000, it can be done for a fraction of that cost on radio. And I had a very successful liaison with David Hatch when, I'm jumping ahead now to when I was head of light entertainment, he was running light entertainment on radio and I was running light entertainment on television and we decided to get together and we used to have regular lunches once a quarter. He would tell me what He was doing, I would tell him what I was doing, we thought we were both working for the BBC it's ridiculous that we don't get together on this. And He was always having a problem with money because they didn't have any money in radio compared with ours. So I persuaded Alasdair Milne who was again very supportive to fund four writers a year on radio and the whole idea would be that they would get the immediate benefit of that. So writers would wouldn't be able to afford to give up their job for 12 months would still be in jobs which they didn't want to do but had to do to pay their rent, they would then become completely contractually tied to the BBC radio for 12 months. There was no question of that 12 months being extended no matter how clever they were, this was a 12 month thing to get them launched and then they had to go on another 12 months would be given to 4 more writers. When they got into further financial problems and they had a producer cut from their establishment and I went to Alasdair again can we fund a producer there out of our money and he said sure go ahead. So we got a producer funded through television. And the whole idea really was that they would have the immediate benefit of these writers who would all be chosen by David Hatch, I had nothing to do with it at all, we were just paid for it, he would develop them and hopeful in 5 years time television would get the benefit out of it. But it happen incredibly quickly and we got an immediate benefit out of it, almost embarrassingly so, in that John Lloyd was working as their senior radio producer, he was only about 26 at the time and was obviously extremely talented and he was putting on a series with Peter Spence, To the Manor Born, with Penelope Keith. Now David Hatch had decide d as his policy, they would not just be a repository of television series, because that is what's happening. You would do Dads Army and then they would do Dads Army on radio. You would do whatever comedy hit was on radio you would do the radio version. He said I'm not going to do that. And he decided whatever was going to happen, everything was going to be an origination on BBC Radio, and To the Manor Born we said we would take it after the radio series which was happening that autumn. I think Penny Keith got wind of this, or the agents got wind of it, that television was interested. And she said I'm not going to do radio first, I will do the television version. They said you can't do that , it's a radio series. I'm just not going to do it. So although it was an embarrassment we of course had this smash hit To the Manor Born which came as a direct result of us trying to help radio. And suddenly we'd stolen a radio series from them. And David, he was completely understanding. He said I'm not blaming you for this at all. I understand the situation, don't worry about it. So he wouldn't do it on radio afterwards either. He stuck to his guns. And the next thing which happened was John Lloyd. He asked to come over to see me. He was very disgruntled about the whole thing, he said you've stolen my series you may as well steal me too. And I said what do you mean. I would like to come over to television. I said you're a staff producer with the BBC, you'll have to resign if you come here. And he said Yes, I'm quite prepared to do that. Because I said you can't just come over here as a staff producer. So he resigned. Now David Hatch had lost his senior radio producer. He arrived in the January and he said what do you want me to do. I said why don't you do a review. I'm looking for one, just do one. H e said what sort of review. I said it's up to you. I said Eric Maschwitz said that to me about 10 or 15 years ago, just do a review and I'm saying the same thing to you. Go and do one. He said alright. I said I'll give you a director which is Bill Wilson

and we'll show you in the general direction of the canteen and everything else and we'll give you an office, but we're not going to give you senior producer who is going to tell you how to do it because that would be totally defeating. You're supposed to be coming over here with your own ideas, we will help you translate it onto the screen with a director and everything else but it's up to you. WE will give you a pilot in the Spring. So John Lloyd brought his Week Ending lot with him from radio, which is another programme which is now being filleted, that was their biggest prestigious success, Week Ending and he brought the writers over. I'd been trying to find something for Rowan Atkinson because he had done a big show for London Weekend Television, he'd done one for Thames and it hadn't really worked and his agent was Richard Armitage of Noel Gay, who was also my agent, he said I want to do something for Rowan, I said we've got John Lloyd from radio here now, why don't you let him join the team. He said oh no, I want something for him. I said it hasn't actually worked for him doing it all on his own at the moment. And pointed out that in Beyond the Fringe where you have four people, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, they didn't come and do it on their own, they did it as a team and then sparked off in different directions once they'd all established themselves. Why don't you let Rowan join the team with John Lloyd , he knows and whom I'm sure he will trust. So Rowan came in as a member of the team of Not the Nine O'clock News. And he did his pilot in the spring, typical radio attitude. He had only been there for two weeks and said he was disappearing off to ski, because he had a skiing holiday. I said you can't do that. The pilot is only in about 10 weeks. As a radio man where you just do it on the day the idea of all these planning meeting just hadn't occurred to him. he was that green as far as television was concerned. But he got it all together and they did the pilot in April and the pilot was just as rough as they come. It had one bit of casting which didn't quite work and he was using things in his imagination which weren't really very practical. And fortunately and again it was just one of these good bit of fortune the series was billed to go out about a month, 5 weeks after the pilot there was a strike so that we weren't able to do the series anyway. So we were saved by the bell. And Not the 9 o'clock News didn't go out to the autumn. We got the whole summer to get it right. We got it recast, all the bits that hadn't worked, Griff Rhys Jones was brought in, again another radio producer of David Hatch, John Lloyd was a great friend of his, he whipped in, BBC Radio was very seriously depleted by David Hatch's generosity. And the series then took off completely and just became a smash success. And they did then all spark off in their various directions once the series had gone it's usual 2 or 3 episodes, 2 or 3 series. And there was a certain sort of gratification to me because my son then became script editor on it. Because he had been writing, while working for the Gas Board he'd been putting in odd sketches and sketch ideas to John Lloyd and when John heard about Colin, my son, working as a pa up in Glasgow he worked him down as script editor since he wanted a pa who could write. And he is now running the comedy unit up in BBC Scotland. There is one of these things that certain sorts of programmes are lucky for everybody And everybody at the end of it seems to spark off and go in different directions on their own. But then John Lloyd himself brought another series which he'd done on radio to television, which was the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy which we also got through John. Then of course his huge success which was much, much later, that had happened much later when I left the BBC, that was Black Adder. But that all stemmed really from not the 9 o'clock News as this great nursery for things like Smith and Jones

SIDE 8, TAPE 4

Jimmy Gilbert: Going back to this radio used as a nursery slope for television. There was certainly the thought at this time that unless you had made it from radio to television by the age of 30 you'd had it and you'd be there for the rest of your life, which actually wasn't true but probably had been true until radio and television started to work together instead of working apart and almost in rivalry together. One is the wealthy elder and senior partner. I still think there should be very much cooperation in the BBC between the radio and television departments. For instance when I was at Thames I found to my amazement I could buy after Henry, I thought it was just a bit a cheek and impudence buying something from BBC Radio but I found Simon Brett who had written After Henry for Radio had offered it to television and it had been turned down. They said it is much too bland an offering. Well it was, it was only one dimensional on radio, and it had to be the plots had to be thickened for television. And it took 2 and a half years working on the scripts with Simon Brett to translate them from Radio to Television. But once he got he message about what was required for television rather than radio, after the first 4 or 5scripts which were virtually radio scripts which had been adapted for television and they wouldn't have worked, they were too one dimensional or two dimensional, he got the message after about 4 or 5 scripts and series 2, 3, 4 and now 5, have been written by Simon very successfully and the last two years have been nominated at BAFTA. That really shouldn't happen. There should be somebody listening to what's happening on BBC radio or somebody in BBC Radio liaising so things don't go out side the organisation. They've lost Whose Line is it Anyway. It was a BBC radio series which was picked up by Channel 4 which is running very successfully with Clive Anderson at the moment.

John Taylor: Who owns the copyright on those? The writer. The writer owns the copy right but again purely on a personal thing of gratification. I tried to get back to work in the national regions, I tried with Stanley Jones who is an old friend but it didn't work probably for reasons I didn't know anything about, That the Welsh radio and television networks with the two languages it wasn't as simple. But it's worked very successfully in Scotland which my son has done and he's translating it, a series he was doing on radio, Naked Radio and just translated it to video where it worked very successfully on BBC 2 and they are able to have found a whole lot of young writers up there who would have been given an opportunity to do anything on television because it's so expensive. You can't actually start saying that writer is worth a go, not if it's costing £100,000 and you've only got 2 pilots a year, one pilot a year up there in Scotland, whereas you can do things literally for hundreds of pounds, certainly for £2,000 if you're doing and giving the writer of hearing his work done publicly in front of an audience even if he's not actually seeing it on the screen. So that was really quite a successful partnership between radio and television, for us, I really don't know what radio got out of it at the time. After 3 or 4 years I really had no intention of doing the head of light entertainment job even if I'd been asked, but Bill Cotton who I'd been working with he was head of light entertainment and doing variety and I was doing comedy. And he was then offered the job of controller of BBC1 and it was the first time someone from the entertainment side of the BBC was offered a senior job such as that. It had happened on commercial television, especially in the early days, all the people running commercial television had come from the variety side, the entertainment side, And they asked me to do it. I thought I'll do it maybe for 2 or 3 years, see what it's like and go back to production and then maybe do something else. But the way it worked out I did it for 5 years of which 3 years I enjoyed doing enormously

and the last 2 years I didn't really enjoy very much. Because I found the whole atmosphere at that particular time in the BBC seemed to have changed., we're coming to a period of great uncertainty and uncertainty on the 6th floor which then was spreading down right through all the programme departments as well.

John Taylor: Which year

Jimmy Gilbert: I left in September 82 so it would be sort of 81, 82. The old days of certainty within the BBC seemed to me disappearing and with that, the great thing about the BBC was the feeling of loyalty from the top which spread it's way down so all the department heads felt this support which was coming from above and which they then were filtering down to all their producers and all their executive producers and right the way down. If that feeling of loyalty and support is watered down that the people running the organisation have to be concerned with fighting for their own corners rather than fighting for the people below them and working for them then people start playing safe, if that's what they want that's what they get, I feel they were beginning to lose the way.

John Taylor: was it caused by outside political pressures.

Jimmy Gilbert: I think so and the way that political pressure, the reaction to that outside political pressure. I wasn't privy to all the political wrangling decisions being made at the time but it was perfectly obvious in the way that the sixth floor of Television Centre where all the major decisions are made, they weren't in a state of disarray, there was a feeling of unease a feeling that somehow instead of everybody working together for the common good there was a slight suspicion of unease and almost as if they didn't like each other very much, although they did personally. It's a difficult sort of atmosphere to describe. But it was definitely there and I wasn't the only one who felt it. It ended up in all the big explosions which ended up with Alasdair Milne's departure and Aubrey Singer's departure, there was Bryan Cowgill's earlier departure to Thames, there was as I say I remember Bill Cotton saying to me once about the end of the 60s and the early 70s, I thought he was talking through his hat. he said you can't take the existence of the BBC for granted , you never know. in 10 or 15 years time there will be no pension fund , no BBC and it could all go. It is something which has to be very jealously guarded and very jealously fought for, because Bill was a great BBC man and we got on extremely well together. We were almost opposites in a way but we were very close to the way we thought as far as which direction the BBC should go and which direction light entertainment should go. I always felt that he was a great loss to the entertainment side when he decided he wanted to go further up in the hierarchy. He didn't want to leave the BBC he had been offered , I think it was the managing directorship at Thames and he decided not to go and that was back in the early 70s and I suppose that he felt that he had done light entertainment there was no further he could go in that direction, he was going to stay within the BBC so he had to go further. But I always felt he was most comfortable and happiest when he was working amongst the light entertainment side of the business. I had never any temptations to join the 6th floor, or no ambitions to become a Controller because that was taking you one stage further away from programmes, one stage further away from producers. And I think that was another reason after 3 years or so, if you are working with so many meetings which you have to have, because now as head of Light Entertainment I not only had to have all the programme meetings you had to have staff of 140 people who were working for you, you were in charge of their careers, you were in charge of promotions, you were in charge of all the boards for production assistants, production

mangers directors, producers, you had personnel meetings you had to everything seemed to be meetings every minute of the day. Because of this I felt I was withdrawing further and further away form everyday contact from the people I was working with and the people I had worked with all these years. It was all getting too big, too large, too impersonal, I was actually almost doing the job I'd come into this business to avoid, really. So that when I was offered the job of head of comedy at Thames at a time I would have had to give up the light entertainment job in any case whether I wanted to or not, it seemed an absolute rejuvenating release , to go to Thames to find a small corridor again, with the producers all in offices which I saw every day, directors I saw every day, being given a brief by Philip Jones who was my erstwhile rival at Thames to just continue doing everything exactly as if I was still at the BBC , not to worry about film which ITV were never very keen on using because of additional cost, just anything I wanted to do within reason he would support me. A very much smaller output of course. Looking for 8 comedy series a year on the main network, 2 for channel 4 which had just opened, because Muir Sutherland had an arrangement with Jeremy Isaacs to supply 3 Thames comedies within 18 months plus a new consortium for supplying new British ideas to the CBS network in America. So it was a fascinating job. You not only had to find 8 comedy series for ITV but 3 for this marvelous Channel 4 but anything up to 18 programmes ideas to pitch to CBS executives in Hollywood 2 or 3 times a year, all within this small, it was like going back to the BBC 15 years ago. Producers all met in the restaurant, or the bar. They talked about each other s programmes. There were no meetings at all which was one of the greatest things. Philip Jones was controlling you. The fact that Teddington was where the studios were for Thames and all the administration was up at Euston meant that there was no feeling that the administrators were breathing down your neck at all. They almost regarded coming down from Euston to Teddington as a day in the country. You very seldom saw them, although their influence was considerably felt by the Controller who was Phillip Jones at that time. But as far as running the department was concerned it was like being executive producer but complete control over your output. It was the dream really of having an executive job without any of the boring administration. And certainly for the first 3 or 4 years it was great. As again uncertainty has now crept into the ITV network, the old uncertainties I felt at the BBC which were drifting away the last 2 or 3 years of my career at the BBC, in the last 2 or 3 years those uncertainties have crept into ITV and you can feel it, the way that there is certain nervousness now about the franchises and the way that everything has obviously brought down to size so it is going to be financially viable when the franchises come up in a year's time, that is obviously at the forefront of all decisions made by executives at Thames and throughout the commercial television network. And in a way the thing has become full circle. The BBC now has really got it made with their arrangement. They've been told to do what they do best which is to make quality television programmes which they do brilliantly and whether they have been sorted out politically I don't know but they're in a situation now, it seems to me from the outside, certainly from the next few years they've settled down to what they do best. ITV has the uncertainly of not knowing what is going to happen in the next couple of years and whether it is going to be a quality threshold or a financial threshold which is the most important in the bid. And of course the feeling of security which people had at Thames, I was told by various people, when I said I was going to Thames, they said Thames is the nearest thing in the commercial network to the BBC. It's very similar, certainly it was packed full of ex BBC people, I knew as many people at the bar at Teddington as I would have known at that time at White City. But with the ironing down, with the reducing of the numbers of people, they have done in order to make the thing more financially viable, it has brought in this thing of uncertainty again, so that people who have worked for Thames for most of their professional life, now have this same feeling of unease and nervousness as I detected when the

BBC were going through the same sort of uncertain atmosphere of the 80s. And we'll have to see how the thing works out with the franchise. But certainly now it seems almost as if the financial side of it seems the most important overriding principal.

John Taylor: It is crazy to destablelise two very good television stations.

Jimmy Gilbert: Well nothing can stand still obviously, Channel 4 thing disappeared because the commissioning editor wasn't going to be forced to take 3 programmes every 18 months when the whole idea of Channel 4 is to encourage independent companies and give a balancer to the network. That was just a new company being able to get some sort of entertainment from an established source until it got on its feet. I can understand why that went. The CBS disintegrated after a while too, because they are having their problems over there too as the major networks I should think they're feeling very uncertain too. It seems to be a world wide uncertainty with instead of 3 major channels in America you've got 40 buttons to push and the advertising is spread over a much wider area. The whole thing is being fragmented, it could never stay the same. Therefore, ITV couldn't hang onto something when programmes are going to be flooding in from all directions, from satellite, from cable television, cassettes, you can't pretend it's still back in the 60s or 70s. And hopefully as Michael Grade said on the radio 3 days ago we will end up if we have any sense with 3 public broadcasting operations which is BBC1, BBC2 and Channel 4 and two free for all commercial organisations. But if you have the 3 public broadcasting organisations maintaining the standards, that means 3 and 5 have to come up to certain standards or people won't watch them, the advertisers won't advertise. I personally have a more sanguine, the same sort of view that Michael has, it is very difficult to get the British public to pay their licence as it stands without asking them to pay for cable or satellite. People don't like paying licenses and now with poll tax and interest rates to ask them to pay monthly fees unless they thing they're going to get something absolutely breathtaking, which I don't think they're going to get. It's difficult to find innovative good popular material for 3 networks. But try and find it for 5 networks plus all these extra channels which are coming in, if the British public are as sophisticated, sometimes I think the public is more sophisticated than some of the material which is dished up in front of them. I think if they had got used to a certain quality of television, I just can't believe they are going to accept something lower, even where there is an unconscious rejection , I think they will reject crap. Why not. If they're not, they've got 3, 4 choices at the moment without having to put up with a whole load of rubbish they're asked to pay extra money for. Sky Television at the moment is not exactly a temptation to spend extra money on top of your licence fee, I would not have thought. It may be different with BSB, it sounds a bit more promising as far as the content is concerned it's just a bit of hardware. It will all come down to what programmes they're pushing out.

John Taylor: If this government wins the next election the political pressure is going to be put on the BBC again.

Jimmy Gilbert: Oh yes. They've just got a temporary reprieve. And I'm very glad to hear they were talking about it at BAFTA last night. Obviously they're going to have to be very vigilant. But ITV will suffer just as much as the BBC if the BBC were to go down because it's the BBC that maintains the standards that commercial companies have to meet. And the interesting thing at the moment is that advertisers seem to be really interested in getting hold of ABC1s they're the ones they're really after, the people with the money to spend. Sometimes you would thing a particular series the advertisers won't be too interested in that because the ratings aren't that high but when they're actually looking at the breakdown of the public they're reaching, if the

programme reaches the ABC1s, they're going for this particular audience which has the money to spend. I think this is why they would have loved to get advertising on BBC1. I used to read that the advertisers said they would regard commercials on BBC 1 as the most valuable commercials they could possible get because that was the audience they were after.

John Taylor: If things go on as they are at the moment they'll get advertising on BBC1. This government's policy is to breakdown power bases and the BBC is a power base of quite exceptional proportions,

Jimmy Gilbert: I'm not a political animal, but I've noticed whatever government has been in they've always assumed that the BBC is biased against them.

John Taylor: The other ones haven't taking really positive action to tame the beast.

Jimmy Gilbert: They've tried with lord Hill. But that the organisation just swallowed him up, he became one of theirs.

John Taylor: They weren't as skilled politicians as this lot. She had exactly the same story about the civil service, about what a good organisation it was, they've just broken it down, they've broken its power base.

Jimmy Gilbert: It's very interesting now television is really being run by accountants. It always used to be programme people who then got promoted up and up and up until the programme man if he reached the pinnacle he would become the director general like Ian Trethowan did and like Alasdair, but Alasdair got broken on the wheel and is now run by an accountant. Thames is run by an accountant, It has to pay its way now. I think that is a good thing in a way so long as that isn't the overriding principle, the output and the whole attitude to programming isn't changed. I think if you've changed most of your life at the BBC you never stop being half of you always being a BBC man and the one thing I've been able to do , it's a matter of training, that seems to have totally changed, the bringing up of young people so that people had a career within the BBC. Now it seems that they still have the same training but the bright ones as soon as they're trained instead of thinking they're going to spend 10 or 15 years at the BBC they just disappear and go to the independents. I sometimes thing it would be a very good thing, because it must be a very expensive course the directors course and most highly sought after one as well they should tie them down to a two years contract, a 3 years contract so that they get some sort of benefit out of it. Because what happens is the ITV pay face value to training but they don't really train people, they don't have the same courses and the excuse has always been they only have the franchise for 7 years and therefore what is the point training somebody for something which may disappear. It not an argument really because they have been there for an awfully long time. It looks unless something drastic happens they still will be there, or at least a lot of the companies anyway so it means that now they're gone independent I'm still thinking light entertainment terms, they've gone independent, if I've see someone whose bright which I have done with tow young possible directors whom if I'd been at the BBC I'd just have pushed on the course and they'd been brought on. You can't do that in commercial television so I've just rung up my friends back in light entertainment and said We've got somebody here or somebody there would you like to see them. The first one they trained him and he's working as a freelance and he's working for the BBC and I've brought him back and he works for us as a comedy director BBC trained. And then he goes back the Beeb then there 's another chap, Nick Byb, I rang up Nick Moore and given him a years training contract so he'll work for a year as a production manager and then presumably he'll go freelance. It's a very generous far sighted view that is

it's quite a problem the whole business of young people thinking they've got a career in the BBC and will end up aged60 with a pension. That seems to have gone out the window with the bright ones. They don't see themselves working for any single organisation all their careers.

John Taylor: Understandably so when they see the uncertainty of everything.

Jimmy Gilbert: The whole fragmentation and they don't want to feel, they're young and ambitious and you don't want to feel you're being left out of what is now seems to have become the mainstream. Just taking the Not the Nine o'clock News lot. They're all got their independent production companies now, Rowan Atkinson was working for us last Christmas doing a one off, that's with his own company with Thames. When he goes back to the BBC I suppose he'll use his own company. Smith and Jones have their own company.

Jimmy Gilbert: What about programmes you made a t Thames

Jimmy Gilbert: The biggest restriction is the transmission time, because of the news at Ten until recently when I got a 9 o'clock slot with the current comedy series I'm doing at the moment it was very much mid evening four days a week, Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday and between 8 and 9 o'clock so absolute prime time viewing commercial television following things like Coronation St or This is Your life so the room for experiment especially without an automatic window which I had the first year or two with Channel 4 is, it has to be very popular programming. We have tried doing more experimental type programmes and latterly we've had a certain amount of success. It never gets block buster viewing but things like Biz which I did with Richard Griffith and Ben W which was written by two youngish writers Norris and they gave us the opportunity to do a second series. The first series although it was well received by the press never really took off the public but they gave us a second series, the press said you must give this another go and very much supported by David Elstein and Richard Dunn who is the managing director said yes have another go at it. which is great. The second series although it didn't become a huge blockbuster you could tell the audiences were just beginning to latch onto the characters. How overdo you latch onto a character if you only get 6 episodes, you've got to get to know these people and like them. If you don't like them, OK forget it. JT; It seems most important to nurse it

Jimmy Gilbert: Terribly so. One of the first things because there were a lot of gaps in the schedules when I first went over there. And one of the first series I did when I went over there is still running and that was Fresh Fields which became French Fields and that really it started on quite a serious supposition, which was the Fresh Start courses at the Further Education institute at Richmond where people who were children had left home and they wanted to continue their education in their 30s or 40s. The further education institute is quite remarkable you can just take practically any course that you want, it's just like a super university and that gave me the idea of doing this thing. In fact Fresh Fields was called Fresh Start to start with, it was also tied up with a restaurant on Richmond hill called Mrs Beatons where local housewives go in a different day of the week and cook food. All these kind of things tied up into a woman's desire not to let herself vegetate while her husbands career is booming. And also the other idea it was really a basic terribly simple concept whereas Carla Lane's comedy was becoming very much into divorce and unhappiness and people having a terribly wretched time and no married couples in television comedy seemed to like each other very much, they were all going through this most terrible problems and I thought let's have something where the actual husband and wife seen to like each other and are

supportive. And I gave the script to Julia McKenzie and she liked it and she said look Anton Rodgers, I've always wanted to work with him , how about having Anton, so Anton came in. And it's been a continuing successful series. And then we dropped it after 26 episodes and that won an international Emmy which was quite extraordinary for quite a simple little ordinary comedy series. And Julia has been nominated once or twice for awards and she's got one or two personality best comedy actress so it's been very successful. So we dropped it for about 2 or 3 years, the old BBC thing if something is running out of steam which it was drop it and either have the odd special, which was the David Croft Jimmy Perry thing or keep it alive by having one show a year, Christmas special sort of thing, And with the new Channel Tunnel and 1992 the idea of actually taking them over to France and filming in France, something which would have been unheard of in ITV 10 years ago, spending all that money in filming over there, and it was expensive bound to be when you take 40 people over the Channel and putting them up in Hotels. Although it didn't make an y money for Thames because we had to have all the sets of the original Fresh Fields rebuilt after three years plus the new sets in France plus the OB, they saw that as an investment for the future, that we could get two or three series out of it. And it seems to have paid off. There you know the current management at Thames is very supportive to our department and comedy in general, extremely supportive and John Howard Davies who is the controller and David Elstein who is the director of programmes, excellent relationship which is absolutely vital, there is a mutual trust between the two which is the same way I felt about Brian Cowgill at the BBC when I was working as head of comedy. It is what Brian Cowgill used to say, I can tell if you're got a good idea or not a good idea just by looking straight into your eyes. That is person to person relationship. We're doing, that has been the most successful series. We've revived Shelley, After Henry has been a huge success for something again which is very gentle but delightfully acted and beautifully written and basically is a four hander. There is very little film We've got five series out of that in about 5 years. So that has been a huge success. We did a series which Roy Clarke wrote with Fulton Makay called Man's Best Friend which was a very bizarre series which we did for Channel Four. We did a series with Dennis Lawson called The Kit Currran Radio Show which was meant to appeal to younger viewers. But again it was very difficult to get that sort of series with that sort of audience to follow coronation ST, 8 o'clock on Monday. It's oil and water, the one audience doesn't want to see the other and inheritance of the audience has been watching the half hour before and the one following you so there is a pattern of viewing is very important it is what Bryan Cowgill used to call Back to back comedy, if you had one comedy following another each helps each other. Then he got wildly over ambitious and on a Friday night he said I know what I'm going to have now I'm going to have back to back to back comedy and then you find you had to find three comedy series for one night. Obviously the placing of the opposition is all important. there used to be the soft options, if you were against This Week at the certain soft ride. They are few and far between now and there are not many places on the schedules you can hide. Each programmes has to stand up on it's own too feet.

John Taylor: Did you say that Penelope Keith one about the MP was one of yours

Jimmy Gilbert: Yes. It's done very well. There are six, that is John Howard Davies, it had nothing to do with me at all because I gave up being head of comedy a year ago and I am now back producing programmes again. I am employed by Thames as executive producer, either setting up programmes and then producing them. I'm not directing although last year I had to direct French Fields in France which I loved doing because the director was ill, and it was the full B picture bit were you literally had to take over the next day with full unit. It was lovely it all came back as if it was yesterday.

John Taylor: Would you go back to directing because this was your original ambition wasn't it

Jimmy Gilbert: I don't know. I don't know. I sometimes feel that especially, John Howard Davis and myself have had curiously parallel careers because when I was a producer he was pa, when I was an executive producer he was a producer and when I became head of comedy he became an executive producer and when I was head of light entertainment he became head of comedy and then I went over to Thames and became head of comedy and he followed and became a producer. And then I've gone form being head of comedy back to producing and he's Controller, we just followed each other for the last 20, 25 years, I shall probably end up as a bad actor again,